

Social Construction and Acceptance of the Perverse in Literary Works and Social Media

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Abstract: Gender and sexuality have been discussed vigorously where equality is applied to anyone at any aspects possible. The issues have existed for good period of time as reflected in literary works across years, decades, even centuries. This research looked at two literary objects that span almost a century difference – Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Dolan’s film *Laurence Anyways* (2012) – and YouTube as social media platform. Qualitative approach is used in the goals of finding (1) the definition of the perverse and the normal, (2) the social construction and acceptance within literary works, and (3) the reflection in social media today. This research found the difference in social construction is due to shifts in timespan from the early 20th century and the early 21st century; but social approval is still sought by people then and now, through social media platforms.

1 INTRODUCTION

The discussion on gender and sexuality can be addressed as taboo by many, putting on weight on their religious identities, seeing gender and sexualities as values that are given and not growing or experiencing changes within a person. Meanwhile, in some cultures which are seen more open to these issues, the discussion is welcome and appreciated in many fictional works. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde in 1890 as one of the example of the exploration of gender and sexual identity in the late 19th century; the self-love Gray promotes narcissism and the possibility of having different depiction of how a man should be according to the society. This social construction will be the fundamental theory in looking at the two literary works and social media platform that will be used in this research that covers both sexes (male and female) and their social constructions.

The first literary work that is used is a novel entitled *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) written by Radclyffe Hall (1880-1943), an English author and poet. This novel is about a female main character named Stephen who grew up, or was brought up, in the boyish manner; having other female characters as love interests. This novel was banned for obscenity in 1928 yet was the only famous lesbian novel for

decades and became an international bestseller. This points out that the history of lesbianism has been scarce, unlike the history of male homosexuality that spans across centuries. The second work is a French film entitle *Laurence Anyways* (2012) directed by Xavier Dolan (b.1989). The story revolves around Laurence who introduced as having a happy, heterosexual relationship and a steady occupation as a teacher at a school in the beginning of the film, but then decided to live his life as a woman as his internal conflict. *Laurence Anyways* won many awards including one in Cannes Film Festival 2012 and Toronto Film Festival 2012.

Despite the different forms, the qualitative research is conducted through library and textual research. There are two research questions in looking at the perverse in literary works and social media: (1) the social construction and acceptance within literary works, and (2) the reflection in social media today. The theory of sexuality from Freud is used as the main understanding of normality in order to find the definition of perversion. The intrinsic elements of character and characterization are the sole focus on this research while looking at the time settings as the fundamental element to the ultimate research questions. The reason behind the choice to use two different forms of research objects is because each object serves different functions: the novel represents homosexuality, the film represents transgenderism,

and YouTube as ‘coming out’ platform. The goal is to find the social construction, struggles, and the changes, if any, between these objects. The function of this research are for the findings to show that the comparative approach is applicable by using different forms of objects in the field of literature serving as analytical data in the gender studies and the sustainability development of time-suited social construction for a more deserving social acceptance.

2 RESEARCH METHODS

This research is conducted by using qualitative approach where two literary works are analysed closely using textual and library research on their main characters’ perversion. Freud’s understanding of the norms and perverse are used in order to find social constructions that are built around them and the social acceptance they are sought from the society they live in. YouTube, as a social medium, is chosen as the platform of coming out, with the hypothesis that prolongs the social construction and social acceptance that have been depicted in the literary works; questioning whether the same construction and the act of seeking approval are still done in today’s society.

3 DISCUSSION

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Freud started off his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) by defining libido as the state of hunger in terms of sexual instinct and needs that human beings have. He proceeded to discuss its development that he stated that it is generally where the attraction to one sex upon the other that leads to sexual union (Freud, 1905). In regards to this, he introduced two technical terms: sexual object and sexual aim (Freud, 1905). The normal sexual aim involves the act of union of both genitals (a penis and a vagina) known as copulation (penetration of the penis into the vagina) that leads to a release of sexual tension (ejaculation/orgasm) and a temporary loss of libido afterwards (Freud, 1905). In short, this act is

defined by Kaye as coitus where a woman and a man have penetrative vaginal-penile intercourse and continue to do so until orgasm is achieved (Kaye, 2006). Freud leveled this to ‘a satisfaction analogous of the sating hunger’ in reference to the biological terms he stated earlier. Freud’s further explanation of normal is reflected from Plato’s *Symposium* where original human beings were cut up into halves: a man and a woman and how both unite again in search of love. He implied that being born male or female and in search of the opposite sex to unite in love is what being normal is. Thus, as Seidman summarized Freud’s view, normal is ‘genital-centered, intercourse-oriented heterosexuality based on love and monogamy’ (Seidman, 2006). These terms mean that the roles to sexual normality between two people must involve a penis that is being inserted into a vagina out of love, consensuality, and loyalty.

The deviations of this norm in regards to sexual object are called inversions and those in regards to sexual aim are called perversions. People of inversions are described as having ‘contrary sexual feelings’; the examples of inversions include homosexuality, bisexuality, and any other that do not cover heterosexual and monogamous traits. Meanwhile, the perversions are variety of sexual acts other than what Freud defined as normal. Some examples of perversions include homosexuality, anal coitus, and transgenderism. Yet, according to Freud, the most normal sexual process, once the principles are developed, may lead to deviations that described as perversion (Freud, 1910). Another kind of perversion is what commonly addressed as “trapped in one’s body”. K.H. Ulrich stated that there are people born in such position and taking an example of men who might be described as of ‘feminine soul enclosed in a male body’ (*anima muliebris in corpora virile inclusa*) (Carpenter, 1896). This deals with sexual identity where one was confused and often ‘not happy’ being in the body of the opposite sex. Other than this expression, there is also indeed the expression of ‘masculine soul enclosed in a female body’. The idea of ‘trapped’ seems frantic yet the expression suits many approach or experiences in the study of transgenderism.

3.1 The Social Construction & Social Acceptance in Literary Works

Seidman quoted Freud on how fluidity of sexual instinct leads to the belief of the ability of the society to shape its form and meaning; in particular, the family as formative social (Seidman, 2006). This means sexual instinct is adjustable in terms of how

the surroundings (family, society) are like. This highlights the upbringing environment of the individual; how they are raised, where they are raised, when they are raised, whom raised them. This suggests that the social construction starts from the internal environment, or on the other words, has already been applied to the individual from the early childhood of where they grow up. In *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), the unborn main character, Stephen, was always heavily expected to be a boy by the father and leaving the mother worried for there was a chance that their first child in her womb might be a girl. The importance of having male first child shows the strong patriarch model. Moreover, they expressed their male-traditional expectations on the unborn baby such as the wish to send 'him' abroad to study (Hall, 1928). Despite of having male posture, the traits are clear in childhood phase. She described as enjoying dressing up as a boy and stating "Yes, of course I'm a boy" followed by "I must be a boy, 'cause I feel exactly like one." Although Stephen could not tell what it was that she was feeling, the words 'queer' and 'different' are thrown behind her back. This gives the idea of what the society of the norm thinks about a child like Stephen.

If *The Well of Loneliness* portrayed 'a man trapped in a woman's body', the *Laurence Anyways* portrayed the other way around. Throughout the film, not only the audience can view a transformation of the main character's identity from male to female but also the changes he brought to himself and his surroundings. At the beginning of the film, Laurence started off as a 'normal' who, as a man, has a heterosexual relationship with a woman and does well in his job as a teacher. This social construction might be the cause of the emergent of the terms 'closet'. This idea of being inside a closet means to hide and not reveal their true gender/sexual identity. On the other hand, a person who comes out of this closet means they have let other people know that they are not what listed on the social construction. A person may be considered either closeted or coming out (of the closet) based on whatever the person declares or not (Rasmussen, 2004). Thus, this act of 'coming out of the closet' is the voice and independence of the individual. In her research done in the US, Rasmussen discovered that there are pressures experienced by closeted people to come out, including their racial and ethnic background, their family's religious affiliations, and financial matters (Rasmussen, 2004). This suggests the hardships to having to come out declaring one's true gender identity to the society.

Both Stephen and Laurence are on the same journey in seeking people's acceptance toward them.

Stephen's past heartbreaking relationships with women leave her careful and she takes everything slowly during her relationship with Mary. From this relationship, many social construction and acceptance are implied. There was one where Stephen and Mary were declined from a socialite party. Due to this kind of event, Stephen pushed Mary away to have heterosexual relationship with a man. At the end of the novel, Stephen's last plea showed her with to be acknowledged and accepted in the society. With Laurence, he dealt with three specific environment: his personal relationship, family matters, and work-related issue. His identity is confirmed when he told Frederique the truth how he is disgusted by his manly posture and male genital for he wanted to live the life of the woman he was born to be. At the end of the conversation, Laurence asked for her acceptance by asking her: 'Do you hate me?' (Dolan, 2012). Similar conversation he had with his mother, ending it with the question: 'Do you still love me?' (Dolan, 2012). The other forms of asking for acceptance came from the interviewer and the boy next door. Laurence noticed that the interviewer never made eye contacts and she asked for one. When asked if it is important, he analogised it with the importance of air to the lungs; while the boy next door to his new place blew a kiss and Laurence giggled happily (Dolan, 2012) suggesting his gender confirmations as a female is found attractive.

Literature has been showing the reflection of events in time. The difference between these two literary works spanning almost a century is that in the early 20th century, the social construction of the norm was too strong that perversion was seen as a disease and not welcomed; whereas in the early 21st century perversion is taken as newness that social acceptance of perverts is in mixed reviews. This difference leads to the conclusion that there are indeed shifts happening within those timespan in terms of the reaction, either rejection or acceptance, from the society toward perversion and the perverts.

3.2 Reflection in Social Media Today

YouTube is one of the biggest social media platforms where people can share videos with the duration upto 2 hours for the netizen (citizen of the internet) to watch. YouTube has four important features: share, like, comment, and subscribe. These feature let the information or in this case, videos, to travel fast. In regards to gender conformity and social acceptance, YouTube has been used as a tool for people to come out of the closet. According to the Huffington Post that summed a brief history of the "YouTube Coming

Out Videos” (Wong, 2017), the number of coming out videos uploaded to YouTube from 2006 to 2017 has increased drastically.

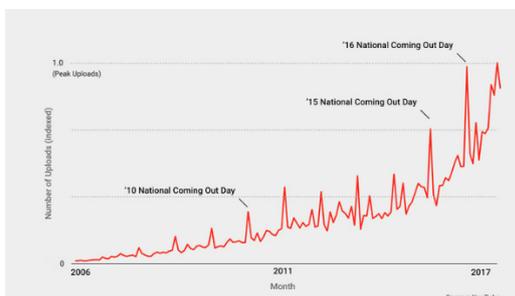


Figure 1: Number of coming out videos uploaded in 2006 – 2017 (Wong, 2017).

Nevertheless, within the top 10 videos the article listed of the famous come-out YouTubers, there are still expressions of looking for confirmation and acceptance from the people who are close to them first before letting the whole world know through the Internet. Some mentioned that they worked on their family and inner circle first before they break it to the people of the internet. This idea of sharing leads to the building of sense of belongings. In 2013, Troye Sivan explained why it is important to tell this on his video: “I feel like a lot of you guys are like real genuine friends of mine and I share everything with the Internet; I share every aspect of my life of the internet.” This implies the sense of belongings between a YouTuber to his/her subscribers and that the conformity should come from their close circles as well. Videos on YouTube are not one-way communication. YouTube also provides comment section for people to interact on each particular video. This is why on Ingrid Nielson’s coming out video (2015), she mentioned the importance of “having the conversation” in order to “seeking love and approval”.

There is indeed still some boundaries such as cultural and geographical backgrounds that some people have to deal with; either it is a privilege or under-privilege to find conformity from the world. What developed today is the understanding of equality that unravels borders among human beings. In 2014 Connor Franta’s coming out video, he stated this issue: “Race, gender, religion, sexuality, we are all people; and that’s it. We’re all people, we’re all equal.” The increasing of number of coming out videos for the last 10 years might be reaching its peak soon and ended to where people does not have to create a coming-out video or even to come out, thanks

to the fluidity of society in the reflection of time and events.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In the light of Freud’s view on the normal and the perverse, this essay tried to discuss two works and reflection in social media. Works like these make a crucial contribution to the literature and films specifically about the lives of trans and gender-nonconformity people (Collier, K. L., Bos, H. M. W., & Sandfort, 2012). My argument is to find whether how the normal and the perverse are contrasted in the works based on when it started, the relationships between characters, and the acceptance of the public. The wish to be treated as normal and not to be misjudged and misunderstood is depicted in Stephen’s last plea in this novel. Whereas Laurence, which the setting is assumed to be far more modern in comparison to that of *The Well of Loneliness*, is more straightforward by breaking the news and dressing up as a woman upright. The social construction are still strong within the two works, even so, both of the works still show the need of acceptance and conformity. The difference of social acceptance can be concluded as the result of shifts happen within the time span. These literary works spanning almost a century. The social construction of the norm was still strong that perversion was seen as a disease and not welcomed in the early 20th century; whereas in the early 21st century perversion is taken as newness that social acceptance of perverts is unpredictable as some people might be accepting, especially if they are closely related. The reflection in social media today, taking YouTube as coming-out platform, shows that the conformity and approval from the society are still wanted even though some claimed to have already worked on their inner circles before they broke it to the Internet. Furthermore, this act of has been showing great increment for the past 10 years; this means that the act of seeking approval has been the reward of the gender-nonconformists. This interrelation of time and cultural shifts is the core of the development of social construction and acceptance; whilst advancement of technology assures a more sustainable improvement.

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