

# **An Exploration of Biersure in Literature**

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## 1. Background

Although our culture is making great progress toward rejecting binary thinking, many people persist in thinking exclusively of sexuality as either heterosexual or homosexual. As a person who identifies as bisexual, I've encountered acts of prejudice, misunderstanding, and erasure. Popular perceptions of bisexuals view us as stereotypically jealous, greedy, indecisive, and dangerous. In short, "bisexuality" carries some heavy emotional baggage.

I want to unpack bisexuality's baggage. I want to crank open that rusted chest and pull out the ratty clothes, unmatched socks, pressed shirts, and ball gowns. I want to understand its complications and complexities, and I want to understand why it is so frequently erased. The complex nature of bisexuality makes it a great subject for long-term study, both for what it says about bisexuals' identities and for what it reveals about hidden attitudes within our culture. Through this study, I hope to give visibility to an identity that is largely ignored, criticized, and misunderstood.

## 2. Methods

In order to understand the attitudes of bisexuality in literature, I did etymological research on the term "bisexual" and then moved on to historical and cultural research. I was guided by professors in the Sociology and Women's and Gender Studies departments as well as Katharine Kittredge, my thesis advisor.

I found extensive material on heterosexuality and homosexuality but few direct discussions of bisexuals. I primarily worked with historical texts in order to gauge the cultural response. I studied experts in the field of sexology, such as Sigmund Freud, Magnus Hirschfeld, Alfred Kinsey, and Charlotte Woolf. I did further research on scholars in the field of sexuality studies, including Robyn Ochs, Shiri Eisner, and Gayle Rubin, and grounded my literary interpretations in their theories. I seek to bring together all these sources to create the first coherent narrative of bisexuality.

### 3. Results

The history of the word “bisexuality” reveals its complicated connotations. The word was first used in Botany to describe an organism with male and female characteristics, or “hermaphrodite.” Even when the word refers to human sexuality, it still carries a remnant of this definition; perceptions of bisexuality circa the 1950s and 1960s view a bisexual as one who assumes both a man and a woman’s role in sexual desire and activity. The works of Freud, Kinsey, and Woolf reflect beliefs that bisexuality is a form of homosexuality, or alternatively, that everybody is inherently bisexual, but due to societal pressures, becomes either heterosexual or homosexual.

As I researched the history of bisexuality, I noticed trends within popular culture in each decade. The ’70s presented a celebration of bisexuality, as pop stars like David Bowie and Elton John proclaimed their bisexuality, and articles in *Time* and *Newsweek* declared bisexuality to be in vogue. The ’80s saw a surge of bisexuality in science fiction and fantasy novels, where alternate sexualities were more acceptable, “exotic” aspects of worlds removed from reality. Texts from the ’90s often used bisexuality as an indicator of character flaws; the bisexual was portrayed as troubled, untrustworthy, jealous, or immoral. Finally, I examined how literary texts either reflect or complicate the public perception of bisexuality at the time.

### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

Understanding these trends/ideas and recognizing their origins promotes acceptance. Attitudes regarding bisexuality from decades ago still influence contemporary popular culture and popular media today. Comparisons between new media, such as the film *Call Me By Your Name* (based on the novel by Andre Aciman), and classic works of literature, such as *Giovanni’s Room* by James Baldwin, are relevant and noteworthy. Moving beyond literature, an understanding of the historical ideas surrounding bisexuality helps explain its under-representation and misrepresentation in both academic discussion and popular circles, contributing to its erasure.

Proper representation matters. Literature helps readers develop their own identities, and accurate, diverse representation across genres allows young, developing minds to conceptualize their desires. Empathetic representation in literature helps readers become more compassionate and accepting of different ideologies and presentations.

I believe that this study can have significant impact, as a deep understanding of bisexuality in literature is missing in the discourse of sexuality studies. Not only will my work promote acceptance and understanding, but it will combat the prejudices and stereotypes that lead to the erasure of bisexuality.

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