

LGBTQ+ Terminology in Literature: Sexual Orientation

Students often encounter literature in college that involves LGBTQ+ individuals; however, they may struggle to discuss such individuals without sounding discriminatory. There is little discussion in classes regarding how students should address individuals of this community to best represent them. This handout outlines some of the common sexual orientations found in texts and identifies how to use the terms within literature. For the purposes of this handout, the term “sexual orientation” will only focus on identities that exhibit sexual attraction.

Defining Various Sexual Orientations

A person’s sexual orientation correlates to the emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction a person feels toward another individual(s). Here are a few of the most common ways people may identify their orientation.

- Bisexual:
 - a person who is attracted emotionally, romantically, or sexually to two or more genders or gender identities*
- Heterosexual:
 - a person who is attracted emotionally, romantically, or sexually to a person of the opposite sex, often referred to via the term *straight*
- Homosexual:
 - a person who is attracted emotionally, romantically, or sexually to a person of the same sex, often referred to via the term *gay* or *lesbian* since the term “homosexual” is often considered derogatory
- Pansexual:
 - a person who is attracted emotionally, romantically, or sexually to a person, regardless of their gender or gender identity*
- Questioning:
 - a person who is unsure of who they are attracted to emotionally, romantically, or sexually

*Neither bisexual nor pansexual orientations are truly restricted by the gender binary (male and female genders) and share similar definitions, so these individuals label themselves based on what they feel best identifies them.

Identifying Sexual Orientations in Texts

In Lois Tyson's book *Critical Theory Today*, she acknowledges that sexuality exists along a continuum of sexual possibilities, "and [it] has a will, a creativity, [and] an expressive need of its own" (321). Due to societal standards characters may feel in their lives, there is not always an explicit explanation of how they identify their sexuality. It is up to the reader to analyze and interpret underlying elements that may give them clues toward understanding a character's orientation.

Sample Paragraph 1

"I had to get myself definitely out of that tangle back home. I'd been writing letters once a week and signing them 'Love, Nick,' and all I could think of was how, when that certain girl played tennis, a faint mustache of perspiration appeared on her upper lip. Nevertheless there was a vague understanding that had to be tactfully broken off before I was free" (Fitzgerald 58).

Though this excerpt from *The Great Gatsby* does not explicitly explain Nick's sexuality, many readers assume that he is a heterosexual male due to his interest in the particular woman he recalls. However, a more in-depth analysis reveals that the "mustache of perspiration" does not seem to fit the "classical male heterosexual turn-on" (Tyson 336). If Nick recollects a more male-normative attribute in his love interest, the reader may begin to question if he truly is a heterosexual male. Perhaps there is a bit of flexibility in his sexuality that leans toward a gay undercurrent.

Discussing Relationship Ambiguity

Many texts do not include a specified orientation relating to characters' relationships with one another, but there can be instances of *homoerotic* or *homosocial* contexts. While homoerotic relationships "imply same-sex attraction," homosocial relationships relate to same-sex friendships "seen in female- or male-bonding activities" (Tyson 307).

Sample Paragraph 2

"I want a friend for my own counselor, / For my own counselor do I want a friend! / Even while he was having his dreams, / Shamhat was telling the dreams of Gilgamesh to Enkidu, / Each was drawn by love to the other" (Puchner, I. 292-296).

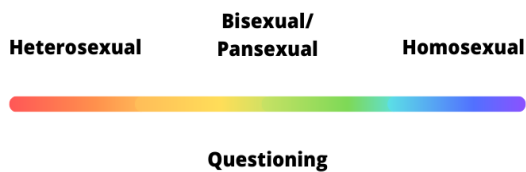
"They kissed each other and made friends" (II. 115).

"Enkidu will protect his friend, safeguard his companion, / Let him return, to be a grave husband" (III. 10-11).

“How can I be silent? How can I hold my peace? / My friend whom I loved is turned into clay!” (X. 58-59).

Though this text does not explicitly explain Gilgamesh and Enkidu’s relationship, many readers argue over whether they are two close friends or if they are two friends who are romantically in love. Both ways can be argued as long as the evidence and analysis effectively supports either argument. However, an in-depth look at how society viewed same-sex relationships at the time when *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was written may give clues toward deciphering the relationship between the characters. Identifying these types of relationships requires in-depth critical analysis and great understanding of the context of the text.

Reading a Sexual Orientation Spectrum



The visual to the left identifies the sexual orientations as a spectrum. The questioning orientation does not have a specific position within the spectrum since an individual in this orientation may find themselves anywhere along the spectrum.

Activity: Identifying Orientations

Read each definition carefully and identify which sexual orientation is being described.

1. A person who is attracted emotionally, romantically, or sexually to a person, regardless of their gender or gender identity.
2. A person who is attracted emotionally, romantically, or sexually to a person of the same sex.
3. A person who is unsure of who they are attracted to emotionally, romantically, or sexually.
4. A person who is attracted emotionally, romantically, or sexually to two or more genders or gender identities.
5. A person who is attracted emotionally, romantically, or sexually to a person of the opposite sex.

Answer Key for Activity

1. Pansexual
2. Homosexual (typically identifies as gay or lesbian)
3. Questioning
4. Bisexual
5. Heterosexual (typically identifies as straight)

References

- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*, edited by James L. W. West III, Scribner, 2018.
- Puchner, Martin, et. al. "The Epic of Gilgamesh." *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 93-145.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. 3rd ed., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015.