

A Comparative Study on the Representation of LGBTQ Characters in the Victorian and Contemporary British Literature

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1. Introduction

Literature has long served as a mirror reflecting social attitudes towards sexuality and gender identity (Upendra & Sanjay, 2024). This study delves into the contrasting portrayals of LGBTQ characters in Victorian and contemporary British literature. The Victorian era, characterized by rigid social norms and religious conservatism, often relegated LGBTQ identities to the shadows. Literary representations were scarce, veiled in coded language, or presented as tragic figures facing ostracization and punishment. In contrast, contemporary British literature reflects a more progressive social landscape. LGBTQ characters are increasingly visible, with narratives exploring diverse sexualities and gender identities (Izienicki, 2022).

While a significant number of research exists on the representation of LGBTQ characters in both Victorian and contemporary British literature, a crucial gap remains in comprehensively analyzing the comparison between LGBTQ characters across these eras. Studies have meticulously explored the coded language and veiled desires present in Victorian works like “The Picture of Dorian Gray” by Oscar Wilde (1890) whereas contemporary British literature boasts a vibrant exploration of LGBTQ experiences, as seen in works by Alan Hollinghurst and Sarah Waters. However, a comparative analysis that delves into the transformation of LGBTQ identities and societal attitudes between these periods is often lacking (Schall & Kauffmann, 2003). The main objectives of this study are:

- To examine how LGBTQ characters are portrayed in Victorian literature compared to contemporary British literature.
- To identify the specific aspects of LGBTQ representation that differ or remain consistent across the two eras.
- To explore how the representation of LGBTQ characters reflects and critique the societal attitudes towards LGBTQ identities in both Victorian and contemporary British literature.

2. Materials and Methods

To analyze the representation of LGBTQ characters, this study employs a comparative approach examining works from Victorian and contemporary British Literature.

- Population and Sampling:

Table 1. The list of novels

Victorian Novels (1837-1901)	Contemporary British Novels (21 st Century)
Teleny (1893) – Anonymous; attribute to Oscar Wilde	Shuggie Bain (2020) – Douglas Stuart
The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890) – Oscar Wilde	Milkman (2018) – Ann Burns
Carmilla (1872) – Sheridan Le Fanu	Girl, Woman, Other (2019) – Bernardine Evaristo

The study aimed to establish a comparative analysis between Victorian and contemporary representations of LGBTQ characters in British literature. The novels were selected under purposive sampling method. Three Victorian novels were chosen based on their critical acclaim and potential to reflect the social and cultural attitudes of the era towards LGBTQ identities. Also, three contemporary British novels were selected to provide a contrasting perspective and

explore how representations of LGBTQ characters evolved in the selected two literary landscapes. The selection process considered:

- Publication date – prioritizing novels published during Victorian era and 21st century to reflect the changing social landscape and increased openness towards LGBTQ themes.
 - Authorial recognition – prioritizing novels by established Victorian and 21st century authors whose works have been recognized for their social commentary or exploration of relevant themes.
 - Critical reception – choosing novels recognized for their literary merit and contribution to the British literature.
- Data collection method: The data gathering was done by employing a close reading methodology across both Victorian and contemporary British novels.
 - Data analysis procedure: The findings of the study have been analyzed by using the qualitative method which is appropriate for the nature of the study.
 - Theoretical Framework: In analyzing the collected data, queer theory of Lauretic (1990), an Italian - American feminist and theorist was used as a guiding model for the study.

3. Results and Discussion

Victorian and contemporary British queer novels offer vastly different perspectives on LGBTQ identities. While Victorian novels offer a glimpse into a hidden world, contemporary novels explore a broader spectrum of stories with greater social and legal acceptance. This study offers key differences between Victorian and contemporary British queer novels under four main breakdowns:

1. Portrayal of sexuality
2. Social context
3. Narrative focus
4. Writing style

Table 2. Findings and discussion

Key Differences	Victorian Novels	Contemporary British Novels
Portrayal of Sexuality	Homosexuality was illegal and socially taboo. Coded language, veiled desires, and tragic endings were common. Characters might be ostracized, imprisoned, or even driven to madness (Teleny, 1893).	Open exploration of sexuality is the norm. relationships, both happy and difficult, are depicted realistically. Stories explore a wider range of identities beyond just gay or lesbian (Shuggie Bain, 2020).
Social context	The rigid social structure heavily influenced narratives. Characters might have to choose between societal expectations and their true desires. Fear of exposure and legal consequences played a major role (Teleny, 1893).	Greater social acceptance of LGBTQ identities allows for stories with broader themes. Coming-of-age narratives, self-discovery, and navigating relationships in a more open world are common themes (Milkman, 2018).
Narrative Focus	Often focused on the secrecy and danger surrounding same-sex attraction. Plots might revolve around maintaining appearances or facing the consequences of being discovered (The Picture of Dorian Gray, 1890).	Explore a wider range of themes beyond just the struggle for acceptance. Characters might deal with internal conflicts, family dynamics, or navigating relationships in a more open world (Girl, Woman, Other, 2019).
Writing Style	Victorian writers use more veiled language and symbolism due to censorship and societal restrictions. Gothic elements and	Free use of language allows for more explicit portrayal of relationships. Explicit language allows writers to describe

social commentary were often interwoven (Carmilla, 1872).	emotions, physical intimacy, and power dynamics in relationships with grater details. This can create a more realistic and intense reading experience (Shuggie Bain, 2020).
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5. Conclusion

This study on the representation of LGBTQ characters in the Victorian and contemporary British literature reveals significant difference under for main points; portrayal of sexuality, social context, narrative focus, and writing style. Victorian literature, constrained by societal norms, often presented these identities through coded language, veiled desires, or tragic narratives. In contrast, contemporary British literature offers a wider spectrum of LGBTQ experiences, with characters navigating love, self-discovery, and societal challenges with more openness and agency. Further, exploration of LGBTQ representation could involve by examining several other areas of literature and different periods. Also, by comparing British portrayals with those in other cultures, further studies can identify how literature within different contexts shape LGBTQ identities.

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7. Keywords

Contemporary British Literature, LGBTQ Characters, Novel Genre, Victorian Literature

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