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Tragic Ways of Killing a Lesbian: a Synchronic Analysis

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Abstract

Following an increase in queer characters over the last few decades, representation of the

LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, etc.) community on television has

become a particularly rich field of inquiry for interdisciplinary scholars. One area of interest, the

death of contemporary lesbian characters, remains fairly underdeveloped. This thesis attempts to

identify structural patterns in the deaths of lesbian characters by subjecting their narrative arcs to

structural analysis, specifically a method of linguistic analysis developed by the Swiss linguist

Ferdinand de Saussure. I identify structural patterns in the deaths of 6 lesbian characters which

took place between the years 2013-2017, as they relate to narrative context, and extract meaning

from those patterns. The stability of patterns' features across the sample will be questioned,

specifically how they relate to "the closet" originally discussed in Sedgwick (1990) and Joyrich's

(2009) work.

Keywords: structural analysis

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Context

Since the murder of *The 100*'s recurring lesbian character, Lexa, in 2016, the death of

lesbian characters has become a trope of ongoing conversation in the public sphere via social

media platforms (Waggoner, 2017). The circumstances surrounding Lexa's death triggered

outrage among the LGBTQ+ community, not unlike Tara's death in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

(DeKnight, 2002; Waggoner, 2017). Waggoner witnessed this phenomenon first-hand while

examining fan response to television shows. Social media campaigns using the

"#BuryYourGays" and "#LGBTFansDeserveBetter" in Twitter posts, which directly targeted the

writers and producer of *The 100*, went viral (rapidly circulating online) almost immediately after

the fatal episode was aired (Waggoner, 2017; see also "Fans revolt after gay TV character killed

off", 2016). This campaign gained so much attention that Waggoner recommends online

activism as a form of advocacy in the digital age (p. 1889).

Fan response on social media highlighted an otherwise overlooked fact: 2016 proved

particularly fatal for lesbian and bisexual women ("All Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Women on

TV 2016-2017", 2016), "with at least 12 characters killed since the beginning of 2016" (GLAAD

[Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation], 2016, p. 7). The non-profit, LGBT Fans Deserve

Better, reported in 2017 that 61 lesbian characters, of the 288 who leave their respective shows

between the years 1976-2016, die. This means that roughly 20% of all dead lesbian characters

represented over a 40 year period on broadcast, cable, premium, and streaming services died in

2016.

GLAAD (2017) believes that "Bury Your Gays" is still a "decades-long trend" (p. 6). In their 2018-2019 edition of *Where We Are on TV*, they claim that "programming has yet to catch up" to the number of lesbian characters represented in the years prior (p.8). Over the last two decades, the amount of lesbian characters on television has increased dramatically: 27 in the 1990's, 104 in the 2000's, and 207 between 2010-2016. This is seen by organizations like GLAAD as a potential positive for the LGBTQ+ community. Yet, as Joyrich (2009) reminds us, more representation does not mean better representation. When looking at the onscreen deaths of lesbian women, one must thoroughly seek out and reflect on the work done by chains of signifiers which constitute a larger system of television, that of "the closet". However passively this system is constructed, it still influences those who are conditioned to accept it. So, where are we *truly* on TV?

Introduction

In the passages that follow, I identify structural patterns in the deaths of 6 lesbian characters which took place between the years 2013-2017, as they relate to narrative context, and extract meaning from those patterns. The stability of patterns' features across the sample will be questioned, specifically how they relate to "the closet" originally discussed in Sedgwick (1990) and Joyrich's (2009) work. This will be conducted using a Saussurean method of analysis.

Linguistic Systems and Gender Representation

The French social and political historian, Nicole Loraux examined the relationships between Athens' complex civic framework, which excluded women from the rights of citizenship (Monoson, 1997, p. 302), and its representation in drama, which was the only place for Athenian women in the public sphere (p. 303). In an early publication (1981/1994), Loraux

introduces classical Athenian women in comedy and tragedy as a line of inquiry. A (1997)

review of Loraux's (1981/1994) text summarizes one of her most critical arguments: the only

way women could integrate themselves "into the civic body" (Monoson, p. 303) was to become

symbols in narrative performance. Four years after Loraux's original assertion, she details the

tragic construction of suicide, sacrifice, and briefly murder, dissecting definitive Athenian texts

in what is one of the most compact works of scholarship she ever produced (1985/1991). To do

so, she carefully examines the choice of weapons, the importance of virginity, and the regions of

the body harmed (p. v).

Gender absolutely determines representation in Greek tragedy, for Loraux. Man's death

is heroic (p. 7); it is by the sword, "the emblem of a man's demise" (p. 11), that a worthy

Athenian earns a lengthy funeral oration, such as the one delivered by Pericles (p. 1). If he is not

wounded in battle, man is still in control of his own death (p. 14), often through suicide by sword

(p. 12). In rare cases, women die this way, however their deaths are still controlled by men.

Loraux examines the rare case of the Jocasta of Euripides. Jocasta stabbed herself with the same

sword that had killed her sons (p. 14-15). If not for the specific circumstances of her loss, Loraux

writes that a more "feminine" instrument of suicide would have been the rope, the weapon of

choice for many women in tragedy (p. 10), despite hanging being an "irredeemable dishonor" in

Athenian society (p. 9). This paradoxical relationship between the honor of masculine suicide

and the dishonor of feminine suicide is the first of many that Loraux points to as being

particularly harmful to the Athenian woman's agency.

Loraux similarly argues that the sexuality of a woman determines her death. Virgin

women cannot control their own destinies, unlike their married counterparts (p. 31). They are

sacrificed, murdered in place of the more traditional domestic animal (p. 32). Most is left to the

audience's imagination; the bloody slice of the throat was not performed, it was verbally implied

(p. 33). The act of human sacrifice was similarly absent in the everyday life of Athenians,

beyond this imposed visualization during theatrical performance (p. 34). In tragedy, however,

while men fought wars, virgin women won them by sacrificing their pure bodies for the benefit

of the city (p. 35). Despite this, sexual purity is not responsible for the success of a sacrifice,

according to Loraux. The outcome is instead dependent on the erotic representation of a virgin's

"taming" (p. 65). She surrenders to a male executioner, who takes her virginity with a sacrificial

blade (p. 39). Loraux claims that by comparing her body to that of a domesticated animal, and

inserting the phallic knife into her flesh, the male Athenians take control of a female Athenian

who has yet to be possessed by a husband in marriage.

Ultimately, Loraux reminds us that "everything comes to us through words" (p. vii). The

"signifiers", words chosen by Athenian playwrights to evoke certain visualizations, overtly

indicate the specifics of a woman's death in tragedy, even the organ to be pierced (p. 49). If a

woman has yet to be sacrificed, Loraux indicates that the word *derē*, the front or surface of the

neck, is used exclusively in dialogue to identify the area of throat cutting (p. 50). If virgin blood

has indeed been spilt, then characters use the signifier *laimos*, Loraux translates to "gullet" (p.

51). The words represent the act: if the surface of a throat has already been pierced, then the

blade moves inward (p. 51).

How can we begin to look at Loraux's "signifiers" in tragic death as constituting a

system? Her close reading of speech in tragedy and its implications is directly linked to

Saussurean linguistic theory. De Saussure, a Swiss linguist whose posthumously released *Course*

in General Linguistics (1916/1983) laid the foundation for the Structuralist movement of the

twentieth century, describes language as "a social institution", and proposes "semiology" to

study signs congruently with social life (p. 15). A semiotician, according to de Saussure, would

define language as a system of signs. A sign, in this case, is a combination of signification and

symbol, concept and sound pattern, respectively (p. 67). For example, the Greeks' visual or

acoustic representation of the symbol: *derē*, our psychological impression of its sound (p. 66),

demands a specific conceptualization of sacrifice. De Saussure claims that the relationship

between the symbol and its meaning is arbitrary. Different sound patterns can represent the same

concept. This is not to suggest that the relationship is accidental. It can instead be understood as

conventional.

De Saussure argues that to have a functioning language the relationship between symbol

and signification in speech must be relatively fixed, otherwise language could not be

implemented in the public sphere. Those who share the same language "will reproduce…

approximately… the same signs linked to the same concepts" (p. 13), referred to as "social

crystallization". Language itself is passively registered by its native speaker, a physical reflex (p.

14). However, speech requires more active engagement. How "the speaker uses the code

provided by the language" and "the psycho-physical mechanisms which enable him to

externalise these combinations" (p. 14) demand some action on the part of the individual. So,

using de Saussure's theory, if we look at the structure of language as a system of signs, and that

system cannot be altered by a single individual's imposition of will other than to substitute whole

signs within it by means of speech, then language can only be understood in the collective. There

must be shared conventions in place, linguistic structures which make the language what it is.

The associations which make up a language are collectively agreed upon realities, (p. 15) according to de Saussure.

The connection between de Saussure's "sign" and Loraux's "signifier" is rooted in temporality. Because the linguistic sign is manifested during the act of physical or psychological speech, it must be linear (de Saussure, p. 70). It cannot occupy "more than one dimension simultaneously" (p. 70). Based on the social and narrative contexts of a tragedy, signifiers are placed on a linear timeline syntagmatically, or according to a prescribed syntax. Syntax is the mutually agreed upon structure of signs in a language (p. 13). De Saussure's theory of social crystallization suggests that the acceptance of a certain syntagmatic structure is a passive, socially reinforced act (p. 13). The syntax of Athenian tragic narrative ultimately controls the direction of a female character and the nature of her death, which Loraux describes as a contextually dependent "order prescribed for a killing" (p. 51). If, according to de Saussure, the collective agreement of a society determines a syntagmatic structure, then the gruesome representations of Athenian women in tragedy reflect the majority opinion in Athenian gender politics (Monoson, 1997, p. 303).

Furthermore, the signs chosen in speech, and expressed using syntagmatic guidelines, are at some level a product of one's beliefs. Speech demands physical and psychological efforts to externalize signs (de Saussure, p. 14). Moreover the associative relations which summon a sign or group of signs for the externalization of a particular system are what the unconscious mind of the language user decides is the most important. This is not to be overlooked. The selection of signs in a tragedy, regardless of its male author's conscious awareness of his efforts, suggests this core belief of classical Athens: a woman lacks citizenship and therefore agency. In the

opinion of Athenian men, women were "of Athenians" not Athenians themselves, as Monoson so deliberately summarizes. Loraux ultimately demonstrates this in her work, that women belonged to Athenian men in tragedy, even after death.

Saussurean Queer Theory

The representation of homosexual characters has also undergone Saussurean structural analysis. According to Joyrich's (2009) interpretations of Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), we develop our knowledge of sexual orientations, the significations, because of "the division imposed between heterosexuality and homosexuality" (Joyrich, p. 21). This idea works congruently with de Saussure. He states that the relationship between signs is differential (p. 113). The context of one sign against another in a sequence forms its meaning (p. 113). Homosexuality and heterosexuality can be "governed by a paradoxical principle" (p. 113) such as this, because they meet two of de Saussure's conditions. They are *dissimilar* in that they are opposites that can be exchanged paradigmatically, and *similar* in that they both represent a syntagm, sexual orientation (p. 113).

Joyrich's *Epistemology of the Console* (2009) focuses more closely on the gatekeepers of knowledge production: the television creators, censors, and their contexts (p. 23). Measures like the Motion Picture Production Code [MPPC], which was originally enacted to stifle representations of the supposedly perverse "aberrations" (p. 21) that were homosexual relationships from American films and television, produced a "lingering logic of the closet" (p. 22) even after it was abolished. Since the Code, homosexuality has become more frequent on the screen (Gross, 2001; Tropiano, 2002; Becker, 2006), and "the closet" more complicated. To build upon Sedgwick's binaries, particularly the "in" vs. "out", Joyrich suggests that broadcast

television viewers are often forced to infer, detect, or confer homosexuality (p. 28-29). These responsibilities on the part of the viewer are required, even if the character is "out", meaning that their homosexual identity is explicitly indicated in either dialogue or narrative. Joyrich writes that "homosexuality might be known, but not as sexuality" (p. 28), meaning that the signs which identify a character either overtly or covertly as homosexual would not include the actual act of sexuality or desire in practice. This is referred to by Joyrich as "desexualization" (p. 28). The signal "homosexual" may be heard and acknowledged on the part of the viewer, but that viewers signification of the signal "homosexual" is not in any way connected to the actual act of homosexuality, according to this analysis.

Two other representations of sexuality on television are undertaken by Joyrich, the "'knowing gay characters'" (p. 31) and the disclosing gay characters (p. 32-35). The knowing gay characters are fully "out" and "less conflicted" about their sexuality, as opposed to other closeted models. However, this, too, is a disadvantage for the homosexual character. Instead of being a problem to solve, they are the constant educator for viewers (p. 31). They become a commodity, a token, claims Joyrich. While "they may have power *within* their narrative words, they lack power *over* them, the ability to command narrative attention" (p. 31), which is only given to them when they are prompted to explain the hardships of homosexuality that then consume the viewers' signification of it. The disclosing gay character reveals their sexuality to the viewers, unlike the knowing gay character; however "the explicit announcement does not erase TV's implicit (sexual and spectatorial) contract" (p. 33). A character's suggestive disclosure of their sexuality, until the official disclosure is reached, creates a closet which should not have to otherwise exist. In this way, they bend to television's imposition (p. 33).

Furthermore, when a character hints at their possible homosexuality, those hints cause the signal "homosexual" to become "endleslly replaced and replacable" (p. 34) with puns and innuendos.

To Joyrich, television's "closet" is a system akin to de Saussure's "language". There is a particular syntagmatic structure present, thus a prescribed order and negative relationship between the signs "heterosexual" and "homosexual" as well as "in" and "out", which reinforce Sedgwick's earlier work. Joyrich states that the previous attempt to censor homosexuality from the screen in response to the general society-wide agreement on its immorality, the MPPC, solidified the binary relationships between those signs on television. Since the *official* deregulation of homosexuality, the following representations of homosexual characters have been desexualized, tokenized, closeted, or recloseted, echoing their previous exclusion from the screen (Joyrich, p. 28-35). Looking back to de Saussure, language systems cannot be altered by single individuals, just as one character "coming out" does not spare them from "the tropes by which television's treatment of gay subjects are managed" (Joyrich, p. 33). Therefore, Joyrich demonstrates that the increase of characters and representation on television does not by itself "explode the logic of the closet" (p. 40). This would require the dismantling of a deeply rooted system. A system that is still being called into question years after Joyrich's original publication.

Saussurean Methods of Analyses

De Saussure's (1916/1983) compiled lectures on linguistic theory define and explain two different methods of analysis: diachronic and synchronic. For the purpose of this thesis, I employ synchronic analysis on the texts in the following sample. However, it is equally important to know diachrony's place in the study of linguistics and why it is not applicable here.

Diachronic analysis is used when studying a language's evolution over time, often the entire lifespan of that language up to the current point of reference (p. 89). This method is a historical one, analyzing language in a non-grammatical fashion, as opposed to synchrony (p. 140). If we are to look at the lifespan of a single language, we will see that it consists of hundreds of years of ever-present developmental shifts (p. 139). The same cannot be said of lesbian representation in television. Lesbian women have only been regularly broadcast over the last 43 years (LGBT Fans Deserve Better), which is not enough to draw any diachronic conclusions. Moreover, if we are to uncover the working systems of a lesbian narrative which prescribes her closeting by means of death, then that analysis is inherently grammatical, by its having to do with syntax. Since grammar is necessary to determining the mechanisms by which a lesbian woman is killed, synchronic is a more appropriate method.

Synchronic analysis is the study of language within a specific moment, looking closely at "the logical and psychological connexions between co-existing items constituting a system, as perceived by the same collective consciousness" of a linguistic phenomenon (p. 98). There are two different kinds of relations that present themselves in the synchronic study of language, the Syntagmatic and the Associative (p. 121).
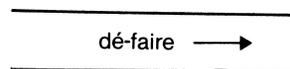
Figure 1. An example of Syntagmatic relations. (de Saussure, 1916/1983, p. 127)

Syntagmatic relations are linear patterns of interdependent elements arranged in a syntactical fashion and adhering to certain grammatical rules assigned collectively by those that use the language (p. 122). De Saussure depicts this relationship using the French verb *dé-faire*,

translated as "to undo" (*Figure 1*). In this example, the sign *dé-faire* is placed at the beginning of

a sequence according to an arrow, which determines its position in relation to other signs. If there

is an identifiable pattern present in the life of a lesbian character, or in their death, then this

pattern would be constructed syntagmatically, because each sign whose signal prompts a

particular conceptualization of homosexuality can be traced temporally along the narrative.
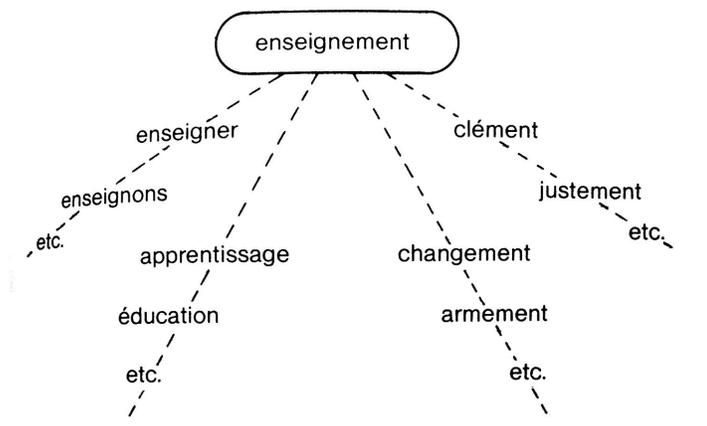
Figure 2. An example of Associative relations. (de Saussure, 1916/1983, p. 125)

Associative relations are connections that one automatically makes between a word, or its

components, and like counterparts (p. 121-125). De Saussure explains these connections as

branches shooting in a multitude of directions, implying an indeterminate order of possibilities

(*Figure 2*). Each ray represents a certain associative cluster, the left-most being conjugations of

the verb, *enseignement*, translated as "to teach" (p. 124). Then moving to the right, relations

formed between words with like significations and similar terminations (p. 124). Associative

relations would explain the stability of cross-text patterns in my period of study. Even if the

ways in which lesbian characters die are strikingly similar, it is understood that similarities are

coincidental, not conspiratorial. Before a sign can be placed in its qualifying segment of a

system, "we call upon associative groups" (p. 128) to select the sign perceived as the most

appropriate for that syntagma, which are "combinations based on sequentiality" (p. 121). The signs which present themselves in the syntagmatic, patterned, construction of a lesbian narrative are consequently what the writers of that narrative automatically perceive as the most appropriate.
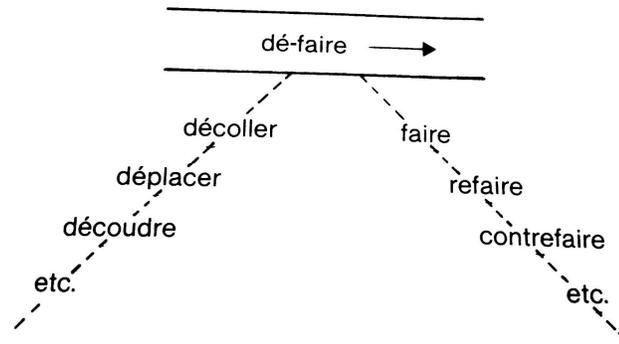

Figure 3. An example of both relations. (de Saussure 1916/1983, p. 127)

Syntagmatic and Associative relations work together in ways habitually and conventionally pre-established by the language users (p. 126). It is determined that *dé-faire* belongs at the beginning of this given syntagm based on its position in front of the arrow which points to the remainder of that sequence. However, *dé-faire* is not the only syntagma, or sign that could be used in that syntagm. It is simply the sign that an individual's automatic associations determined to be the best choice. Pictured are the other possible combinations which could have been chosen but were not, due to the context of the signs place in the syntagm. In this way, de Saussure describes language as a "dual system" (p. 128). I apply this dual relational system to narrative.

Methods

In order to develop a manageable sample size, I implemented the following constraints to all documented deaths of lesbian and bisexual characters on television available (Bernard, 2016):

1. The television show production must be based in the United States.

2. The character must identify as a lesbian woman.

3. The character must have a recurring role in the narrative.

4. The death must take place within the 2010-2019 window.

Information about each television show, made available by the production company, determined the location and year of production. The list of deaths made available by Bernard (2016) only recorded *recurring* lesbian and bisexual characters. These characters were cross-referenced with those in the LGBT Fans Deserve Better "Lesbian Archives", which confirmed whether or not the characters were, in fact, recurring. Finally, as a precaution, definitive sexual orientation of a character was established by identifying either the "coming out" story (when a character was forced to reveal their sexual orientation to family or peers), the verbally declared orientation, or the sex of chosen romantic partners during the character's time in the narrative. It is important, however, to mention that the chosen sex of romantic partners does not necessarily constitute a clear identification of sexual orientation. LGBT Fans Deserve Better (2017) found that 73 out of the 347 total lesbian characters had male love interests and only 46.5% of them had relationship story arcs with female love interests. This was taken into account when determining character orientation.

After constraints were applied, each remaining television show was assigned a consecutive number. 6 of these numbers were randomly selected from the range of available

shows using a random integer generator, to avoid confirmation bias. The generator did not allow

for repeating numbers. The 6 randomly selected shows are the final screening sample. It was

determined when the character became a part of the narrative, the entire length of their story was

viewed, and extensive observational notes were taken. In the following section, findings undergo

a cohesive, but by no means exhaustive, structural analysis, looking for patterns, and features of

those patterns, that produce a character's death. Patterns and features across the entire sample are

compared to identify similarities and stability. Potential social implications are also discussed.

Syntagmatic Relations

The *Figures* (*4-9*) below represent the linear, syntagmatic relations between identified

signs in the narratives of each lesbian character, explicitly or implicitly linked to her sexual

orientation. Each text, and subsequently each character, is motivated by these syntagms and the

resulting relationships between syntagmas. It bears repeating that these constructions of narrative

operate under the prescribed "grammatical" conventions that the collective of those who interact

in anyway with television as a medium actuate passively by means of social interaction (de

Saussure).

Heterosexual Love(rs)?

The early introduction of a heterosexual love interest immediately reinforces the

paridoxical relationship between the hetero- and the homo-, and epistemically so. Heterosexual

viewers can learn about homosexuality by identifying what it is not, in negative reference to

characters like themselves (Sedgwick). The relationship between the heterosexual and the

homosexual has traditionally functioned as parallel to the relationship between being "out" and

"in" (p. 22), as Joyrich recalls.

Shana

Linked to main characters by past sexual partners → Revealed as antagonist → Unrequited love of heterosexual character → Attempts murders in the name of love interest → Pushed over ledge by main protagonists
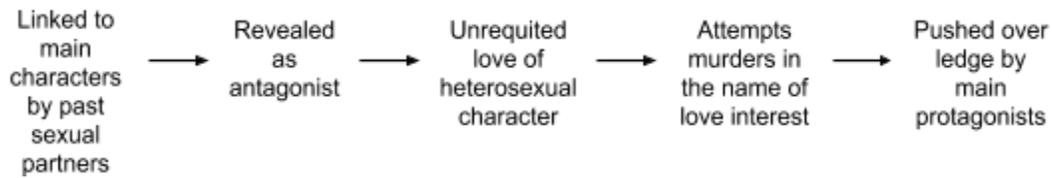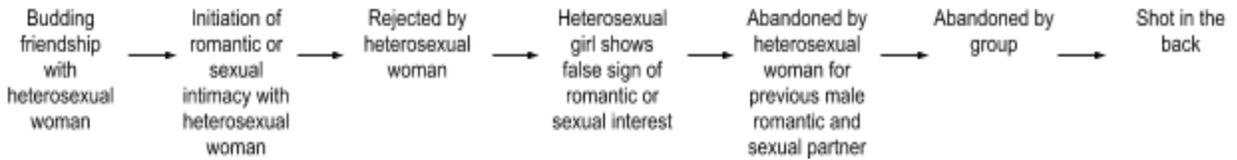
Figure 4. Shana of *Pretty Little Liars* (2011-2014).

The syntagms indicate that a rejection, abandonment, or severe emotional downturn follows the introduction of a heterosexual woman. While Shana is not overtly rejected, the main protagonists, who she attempts to murder, exclaim that Shana's heterosexual love interest would never love her back. This occurs immediately before one of them shoves Shana off a ledge to her death. So, what if these homosexual characters are "out", as were all of those in the sample? The question of why a character has these love interests, despite their being fully aware of the potential consequences for excessive romantic involvement (or investment, rather), can be answered by acknowledging the lingering "logic of the closet" (Joyrich, 2009, p. 40).

Assuming that the system of "out" and "in" has not been completely eradicated, given Joyrich's assertion that a change would necessitate the entire upheaval of that system by its users, heterosexual love interests are assigned to homosexual characters as a way to correct their "outness". By not allowing a homosexual character to act out a homosexual relationship on the screen, they are "desexualized" (Joyrich, p. 28) and thus steered back to the closet, satisfying the current system's order. Annie's case is particularly relevant here. After kissing her love interest, Natalie, and being rejected immediately after, the first closeting occurs. Natalie initiates intimacy next, claiming it is for Annie's emotional benefit. The following morning, Annie is abandoned for Natalie's ex-boyfriend. The viewers are deprived of a homosexual romantic or sexual

interaction for longer than a matter of seconds, and even that interaction is corrected by the

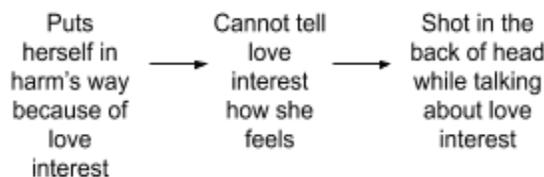heterosexual's return to a male partner.

Annie

Budding friendship with heterosexual woman → Initiation of romantic or sexual intimacy with heterosexual woman → Rejected by heterosexual woman → Heterosexual girl shows false sign of romantic or sexual interest → Abandoned by heterosexual woman for previous male romantic and sexual partner → Abandoned by group → Shot in the back

Figure 5. Annie of *Siberia* (2013)

Isolation

A lesbian character's isolation is a direct representation of her closeting (*Figure 6*).

Denise is too afraid to tell her love interest how she really feels. To heighten her own courage,

she offers to guide two other survivors of the undead virus to a store that might have much

needed supplies inside. Once there, she physically separates herself from the group, entering a

room she knows contains an undead threat. After surviving that encounter unscathed, she alone

attempts a more dangerous feat, removing an ice chest from a car with an undead creature inside.

This ice chest poses no immediate benefit to the group. To Denise, it is proof of her strength.

Before she can get away from the car, the undead grabs her. When the group hears her

struggling, they come to the rescue. Denise refuses their help, and eventually "kills" the undead,

right before it bites her.

Denise

Puts herself in harm's way because of love interest → Cannot tell love interest how she feels → Shot in the back of head while talking about love interest

Figure 6. Denise of *The Walking Dead* (2015)

In a speech just before her death, Denise tells the other survivalists that her reckless behavior was, in fact, empowering. It had helped her finally admit to loving another female character in their group. For Denise, being "out" is an overwhelming possibility, even if she is already comfortable with her own homosexuality. The choice to isolate is compelled when Denise is faced with the idea of performing a homosexual relationship in practice. While in a closet of her own making, she works through her insecurities, which take the physical form of an undead creature. When she returns to her companions, in each case, she is more comfortable with herself. Here, she practices the act of exiting the closet, of being "out", to prepare for a future homosexual interaction.
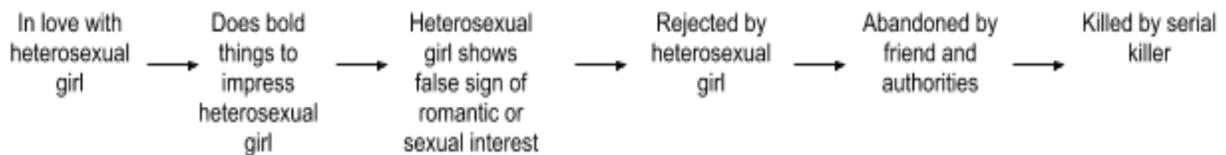
Bullet

In love with heterosexual girl → Does bold things to impress heterosexual girl → Heterosexual girl shows false sign of romantic or sexual interest → Rejected by heterosexual girl → Abandoned by friend and authorities → Killed by serial killer

Figure 7. Bullet of *The Killing* (2013)

Death is In

"Life" vs. "death" is another of the many binaries which can be respectively exchanged with the heterosexual and homosexual relationship (Joyrich, p. 21). As demonstrated, in cases where a heterosexual woman is involved in the sexual or romantic narrative of a lesbian character, negative consequences follow. Even after their initial rejection, Bullet is abandoned by a friend, Annie is abandoned by her group, and Poussey develops a dependency on substances. But, those are not the only consequences that necessitate discussion.
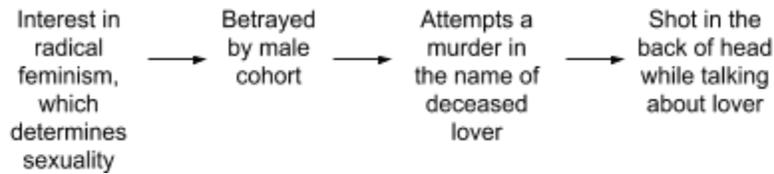
Bebe

| Interest in radical feminism, which determines sexuality | → | Betrayed by male cohort | → | Attempts a murder in the name of deceased lover | → | Shot in the back of head while talking about lover |

Figure 8. Bebe of *American Horror Story: Cult* (2017).

As a lesbian woman struggles between "in" and "out", she simultaneously advances within her prescribed narrative sequence towards the "appropriate" end: death. The narrative events which represent her closeting, such as a heterosexual love interest's rejection or a self-isolation, are often temporary or unsuccessful. Therefore, to satisfy the systemic binary and produce the desired "in" result, death is assigned as the ultimate "in". When this is the case, the lesbian character can no longer escape her closet. She is nailed in it. Although "out" lesbian characters are now more often represented on the screen, it appears, by the construction of narratives here, that a defiance of systemic heteronormative performance, or homosexual invisibility, are factors which contribute to their deaths.
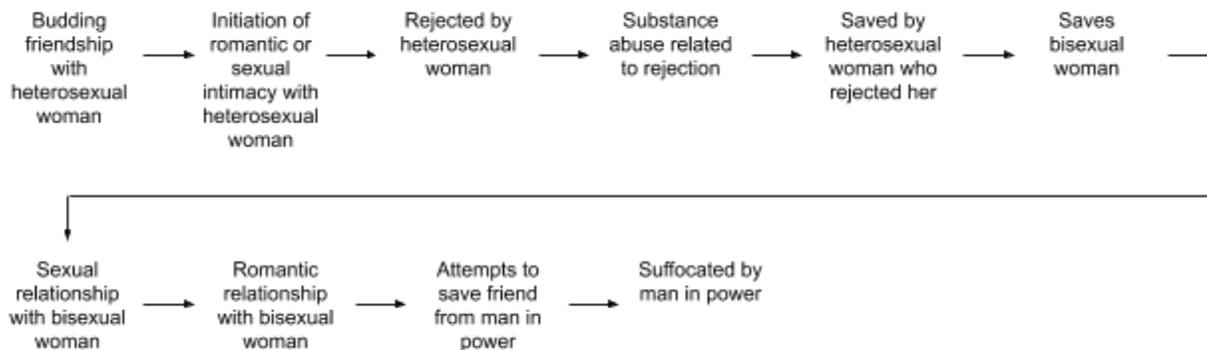
Poussey

| Budding friendship with heterosexual woman | → | Initiation of romantic or sexual intimacy with heterosexual woman | → | Rejected by heterosexual woman | → | Substance abuse related to rejection | → | Saved by heterosexual woman who rejected her | → | Saves bisexual woman |

| Sexual relationship with bisexual woman | → | Romantic relationship with bisexual woman | → | Attempts to save friend from man in power | → | Suffocated by man in power |

Figure 9. Poussey of *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2017)

<center>**Associative Relations**</center>

Now that the narrative construction of each character has been identified, and overarching structural patterns were discussed in relation to Joyrich and Sedgewick's closet, associative relations between texts will be identified.

Cross-text Patterns

The majority of characters had negative experiences with love interests, except for Bebe. Although, her love interest is deceased by the time of her death. A few characters, Bebe and Shana, use acts of physical aggression to perform their sexualities. Shana threatens violence to avenge her love interest. Bebe threatens a man, because he is a threat to her cause, which directly links to her radical sexual ideals. All of the lesbian characters experience an inability to cope. Whether they are rejected, abandoned, or turn to substances, the lesbian characters do not properly confront issues which overwhelm them.

The Murders

To look at the deaths of lesbian characters and their associative relations, one must recognize the commonalities that they share. If the deaths are the products of a common convention, then they should present similarly. In the case of these 6 texts, each lesbian woman was murdered. This associational connection allows one to make preliminary inferences about the representation of an "out" lesbian woman.

While the syntagms determine that the death of a lesbian woman should occur, to satisfy the "in" vs. "out", "heterosexual" vs. "homosexual", and "life" vs. "death" binaries, they do not

determine their own syntagmas, the way in which a lesbian woman dies. Syntagmas are paradigmatic; their signs can be exchanged for others with different signals or significations and still be intelligible to the language user (De Saussure). As long as signs satisfy the paradigms conditions, they are acceptable replacements (De Saussure). The murders of lesbian women are then, products of a collective automatic association, because they are shared.

Implications

In a time where television viewers are enamored with choice, the study of queer representation is vital. Audience fragmentation creates small groups, with niche interests, who gather around just one portion of multiple television channels and multiple streaming platforms (GLAAD 2018). This means that queer viewers will most likely be watching shows with queer characters, given the ability to choose (Joyrich, 2014). This thesis dissects patterns in the representation of lesbian women, and in doing so, points to a correlation between narrative systems and strict societal systems. As it stands, lesbian women are still struggling with their right to leave the closet. The structuring of their narrative constructions must drastically change, as a whole, before representation can truly be positive.

The introduction of this structural method of analysis to narrative is useful in determining the direction of equity in television. 2019 has been, empirically, a much better time for LGBTQ representation in comparison to years past (GLAAD, 2018). However, the construction of narratives broadcasted is a more accurate measure of where we are on TV.

Limitations

As a member of the LGBTQ community, I do have a stake in the results of this research. However, I believe that my personal interest in this topic pushed me to approach the work with

more respect, detail, and care. Using random selection to compile the sample is one way that I avoided imposing my own biases.

The research was limited in its scope and sample size. There are a vast amount of documented deaths (Bernard, 2016) and social and cultural significance that could have been analyzed. However, this kind of extensive research would be recommended as an area of future inquiry. One could apply synchronic analysis to the entire dataset and compare patterns across time periods, which would be a formidable, but likely rewarding, task.

I cannot attempt to account for all members of the LGBTQ community, or other marginalized groups, because prejudices across identities, races, ethnicities, etc. are not comparable. This could result in large structural differences among patterns. Future research on the representation of various groups using this method of analysis would be interesting both for advocacy and comparison.

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