

POETIC EXPRESSIONS OF QUEER LOVE: CHALLENGES AND REWARDS

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## CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

### Poetic Expressions of Queer Love: Challenges and Rewards

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Queer poetry is one of the first recordable artistic expressions of lesbian love, and one of the most iconic. Through poetry I work through discovering my own sexuality, what that looks and feels like, and the feelings that come along with it through the process of realizing these feelings and acting on them, or not. Using examples from notable queer poets, known lesbian poets specifically, I find inspiration in expression, form, and how I can also express myself in different ways. Throughout I challenge myself with more obvious forms of expression and queer love, and what that calls for in vulnerability, and reckoning within. In my research and creative process I discovered further why these poets and poems are so important, why I feel called to write in this way, and ways in which creativity is the solution in creating a queer life. Freedom of expression leads to representation, and the feeling of being seen and known is even more important when it has historically been dangerous or even illegal for queer people to express their love in public, and even in private. Queer love poetry celebrates the light that has made it through, and the people who have made it possible for words like these to be publicized and expressed freely.

## Introduction

Poetry is the foundation for lesbian literature, and the most common way we can locate women expressing love for one another in a romantic way in recorded history. I use the term lesbian throughout this paper as a reference to the genre of poetry that I am specifically working off of, and what most historical poetry that involved women-loving-women relationships or female/female relationships were categorized as, even if it was not necessarily written by someone who defined themselves as a lesbian. Lesbian poetry emerged quietly because having a voice and expression as a queer person was not approved of. They had to create their own ways of publishing and dispersing their poetry whether in zines, gay magazines and papers, and started to publish small books that were sold independently. Lesbian poetry survived because of its need to be seen, and as a use of expression that couldn't be done anywhere else. Elly Bulkin discusses this beginning, "In reading lesbian poetry —and in teaching it— we need first of all a clear understanding of the background of silence and denial and oppression out of which a vital, visible lesbian poetry has stubbornly emerged. This background is important because it is at the same time not very far behind us and still present" (Bulkin, pg 6). Bulkin wrote this in 1978, a time when it completely rang true. Now in 2021, although there is still denial, some forms of oppression still trying to manifest, the queer community is not as silenced, and has been able to emerge from being completely hidden. Lesbian poetry still feels vital to the community because of its way of explicit representation, and that it is not created just to appease the community, or trying to make queerness fit into a heteronormative-acceptable box. I think Lesbian poetry still emerges despite, and keeps its importance because it is created out of pure expression, and not created for anyone else's acceptance or gaze.

## 1

**Coming out**

And just like that  
A wave of wonder crashed in front of my eyes  
The slightest smile strewn across my face  
I almost felt dizzy

It didn't begin to compare to the hard shell melting off my heart asking  
What took you so long?  
Like coming home again  
to myself

Wet eyes  
Shaky hands  
A freedom I have not felt  
since birth

Wondering how  
Wondering when  
Wondering why you've been here all along and we are just now meeting for the first time

Feeling lucky I'm feeling it now  
Even better than before  
With all the doors open  
What more could i ask for

This first poem, although not expressing love for another women directly, is an immediate reaction of mine when I realized I can in fact love a woman, and know it is okay. It was an expression of excitement, relief, and all of the feelings that come with a huge part of your life making sense. In this particular poem, no form was initially followed, as it was because of this moment that I realized poetry and writing is the easiest way for me to express myself, as it is the first mode of expression I turn to when I have large moments of reckoning. One line I think about often is, "Wondering why you've been here all along and we are just now meeting for the first time." This was me talking to myself at 24 years old, wondering how it just occurred to me that I was not straight or heterosexual. Personally I can look back and think of moments in my life when I questioned my own sexuality, but brushed it to the side due to lack of education on the subject, denial that I'm just supposed to be normal and that's for other people but not me, and coming from a catholic school background and being told that it is not natural or accepted there. It makes sense now, and there is a relief that I came to a place in my life where I could fully question, explore, and allow myself to be who I am.

The title of this first poem is "Coming Out," which was named just after writing it. Instead of coming out, it was more like coming home to myself, and there was no "coming out of the closet" considering I didn't know my sexuality was anything but heteronormative, and there was no hiding. As I read a vast array of Lesbian poetry, I got excited most by the poetry that did not confine itself to the box of heteronormative standards, but found its way to the light of what the lesbian experience truly is, and how it affects their life as a whole.

2

**A Continuation of Closure**

The hands of the clock tick nonstop  
I lie awake dreaming of our next encounter  
If only my feeling, clear as your thoughts  
The hands of the clock tick nonstop  
Your letter (must have) caught in the mail box  
My mind, heart, your words my greatest tormentor  
The hands of the clock tick, nonstop  
I lie awake, dreaming of our next encounter

**It wasn't Love**

So I've never been in love before.  
I convinced myself but I was mistaken,  
As my heart just opened like a door.  
So, I've never been in love before.  
But now? I've found someone who I adore  
So much, full where I was vacant  
So? I've never been in love before  
I convinced myself, but I was mistaken.

**Knowing**

I should have known it was you,  
Who else could it be?  
That, my love, felt long overdue.  
I should have known. It was you!  
A woman who has melted me like fondue;  
Friend from a dream, a lover unforeseen.  
I should have known. It was you,  
Who else? Could it be?



**Waking up**

Walking on her avenue  
was all a dream,  
seeing her like deja vu  
walking on her avenue.  
Clinging together like spring morning dew;  
neither of us wanted to be  
walking on. Her avenue  
was all a dream.

**Ghazal**

Tracing a familiar path on this cool autumn day, one step then another  
Soft winds keeping the bright leaves at bay, one step then another

The emotions are strong, but relaxed in interactions  
Thinking about what you said last May, one step then another

Clouds providing comfort for the storms that reside inside  
Memories too strong that won't go away, one step then another

The bridge here is long, can't help but stare  
At the wide space between, where we used to lay, one step then another

Trudging to a favorite spot to be alone  
Yet it feels emptier upon arrival today, one step then another

The cold concrete terrace hugs the stones by  
Water slipping out like the words you would never say, one step then another

Hearing the birds chirp flying beside  
Laughing children coming outside to play, one step then another

Healing what was torn open once again  
New life is a reminder all will be okay, one step then another

The sidewalk veers in different directions  
But body takes over with what it knows as legs replay, one step then another

Finding the way out of the park and the storm  
Knowing that these dues, no longer have to pay, one step then another

And here I am knowing the steps all along  
Through nature I danced this fragile ballet, one step then another

**Haiku**

Some days I feel you  
Miles apart does nothing  
For a yearning heart

This group of poetry reacts to strict form including the first four poems following the triolet form, one ghazal, and the last, haiku. When diving into poetry last fall and beginning my writing, form is where I learned to be able to formulate poetry in a clear and exciting way. Through form, every rhyme, accent, and punctuation matters, and can change the tone and words in the smallest and largest of ways. My challenge for these was not only the use of the poem as a form of expression, but what I could do with it following such strict form. In the first four poems I follow the triolet form which uses repetition multiple times, and a specific rhyme scheme. By playing and experimenting with the ways in which the words could be arranged and punctuation changed, it creates a dynamic with the poetry that allows it to move forward. In expression of love, heartbreak, and longing that all seem to go together easily, we see how this limited form can still express enough to understand all that needs to be said, or not.

In the ghazal form, named as such, there is more space and time, but also more repetition. The Poetry Foundation describes the form: “The ghazal is a form of amatory poem or ode, originating in Arabic poetry. A ghazal may be understood as a poetic expression of both the pain of loss or separation and the beauty of love in spite of that pain” (“Ghazal”). Through this writing I thought of my usual walk through Central Park, and the survival to just keep moving through the pain, and finding the ways in which love lives and blooms. I feel that this form was most appropriate for this because it gives the chance to see the feelings, but without losing the momentum of moving forward and looking up. This form, although hardest to begin, felt most satisfying in the end when I could feel it moving past where I even thought it might go.

The last poem, a haiku, is a favorite of mine to read and experiment with. I left this one without punctuation because it leaves it open to be read in a myriad of ways which I find

exciting. Here it is about the experience of distance, yearning, and time passing by. Although a haiku could be seen as simple to write compared to other forms, I think there are many ways to think about them. The challenge is to not let the brief poem sit in one place, but also let it expand and have feeling beyond the three lines. I've written many haikus over the past year, but staying with the theme of love and all that comes with it in its many forms, I found this one expressive in a way that lined up with the rest.

In Lesbian Poetry there is many variations of form, its use, and rejection of form as well. Marilyn Hacker in "Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons," utilizes the Shakespearean sonnet form and takes the reader through the beginning, middle, and end of a relationship. Through this format the reader finds a tie throughout the book, and experiences all the ways in which she is able to express her different forms of love while staying within the confines of the sonnet form. Using a classic poetic form to express love, not as this forbidden thing, but as how it is unfiltered and true is beautiful to see, especially in queer literature. Throughout her book, Hacker is explicit about her lover being a woman, and how it is what lies beyond lust that is the scary part. In a lot of lesbian literature that was published for entertainment, the relationships between the women mostly resided in lust, as genuine love was never at the forefront. Hacker changes that at the beginning of the book with "[Didn't Sappho say her guts clutched up like this?]"(pg. 12) where she references Sappho, talks about the excitement of her body as she looks towards another woman, and then describes how this attraction moves even further beyond that initial point into something deeper. I think that this poem is well known in Lesbian poetry for not only its explicitness, that I'll explore later in section four, but also for its feelings of genuine excitement in love written by a lesbian for lesbians.

## 3

**Star: reimagining us**

Twinkle twinkle little star  
Can you believe where we are  
High above the earth so far  
No one around, free to be who we are

Twinkle twinkle little star  
Blue and purple and pink and black  
Speckles brightly just to see  
Your bright eyes staring back at me

Twinkle twinkle little star  
The space feels infinite, yet daunting it's not  
Here we are, worry's far away  
Like a small child, finally let out to play

Twinkle twinkle little star  
I've never seen your smile so big so proud  
You in all your glory, taking up all of space  
I'm so happy you're here, I rather be no other place

Twinkle twinkle little star  
How I wonder how you are  
Here on earth, the times are trying  
But I envision us there, in space flying

**spark**

You signed the card off  
“Your unrequited lover,”  
Which raised more questions for myself  
About how I truly felt  
That I didn’t know I was hiding

**fizzle**

You sparked in me something no one else did  
Something I didn’t know how to access for so long  
You knew the password before I did  
And then left the door ajar  
I’m sorry that what was inside scared you

**If you're reading this**

One day

These words will not be hidden

But published on pages

So public

I couldn't hide

Even if I wanted to

I actually don't want to hide anymore



For the first poem, “Star: Reimagining Us”, I was listening to the lullaby and was imagining a world so free, it could only be in space. As I researched I learned this tune started out as a poem titled, “The Star” written by Ann Taylor and Jane Taylor. It is interesting to read the poem, and see how the simple repetitions from this poem evolved into a song. As I have been learning about poetry form, there is excitement in repetition and how it can evolve, and has peaked my interest. Songwriting has become much more than lyrics, but a study on human emotions divulged into form that makes the feelings clearer and easier to understand, and adding these words in addition to a catchy tune never hurts anyone.

Reimagining the world as something greater and freer than it is can be a common way to promote survival, and the first step to actually making the world something greater and freer than it is currently. In the article “Queer Love” by David M. Halperin, he mentions this idea of how a truly free, queer world is possible but not in the constraints of current heteronormativity and capitalism. Halperin discusses, “Queer life and queer love entail new modes of conduct; if they are required to replicate heterosexual styles of life in order to achieve some modicum of legitimacy, they cannot realize their full creative or practical potential, which is to respond in all specificity to Foucault's "question of existence: how is it possible for men to be together?"(401) This thought process applies to all queer people and queer culture as a whole. Being accepted as a queer person in society only if you subscribe to the heteronormative standards of what love should look like is not freedom or liberation. Replicating heterosexuality in tradition for legitimacy and approval takes away the new traditions and lifestyle that could be created by the homosexual lifestyle living freely. Heteronormative behaviors is what the world at large knows and approves of, and anything different becomes a threat, a joke, or dangerous, although that is

what the homosexual lifestyle calls for if not forced into the confines of what a relationship should be, which is set through the heteronormative gaze. There is an infinite power in loving authentically, and different ways of living that come with it. I believe that Halperin is questioning the heteronormative mode that queer people have been subscribed to, and know that there is much more outside of that.

For the second three poems I lean more to the idea of “tumblr poetry” with a response. “Tumblr poetry” although not having a strict definition, is a shorter form of poetry that could be easily published on social media and taken in by the masses. Usually this form is more accessible because it usually includes simple terminology, and expressions that are easy to digest, consume, and relate to. The way the fifth line of each poem becomes a response makes it feel not included in the first four lines, but promotes the honesty in the feelings of the poem. For this style I was inspired by bisexual poet Amanda Lovelace who some would consider writes in the genre of “tumblr poetry”. So far she has had multiple poetry series, and one specifically reimagining fairytales that project into her own life, or that she reimagines in the way she would like to see it, such as the title of her first book in the series “The Princess Saves Herself In This One”(2016).

In “Star: Reimagining Us”, it evolves from being a poem the reader may assume is about a star from the first line, but is actually about the person the narrator is talking to in the poem. The subject of the poem that the narrator is talking to is referenced with terms such as “we” or “your” so the reader does not have specified pronouns or relationships told to them. In queer poetry this can be an option to not be determined as an explicitly queer author, and be more acceptable to the public as a whole. By not defining an intended audience or a defined sexuality, the author may open up their readership to become larger to the world as a whole, but less

specific. In Lesbian poetry, especially early lesbian poetry, there is a lot of general pronouns, or coding. Bulkin discusses this idea with Susan Sherman's early poetry works, "I spoke of the form of denial in Sherman's early love poetry: her use of the ambiguous pronoun "you" and the absence of specifically female sexual imagery; instead, in the early and late sixties, she described her subject subtly\* through gentle images of grass, of rain, of "how the earth opens its body Almost/as an act of grace."(Bulkin 8) This is extremely common in lesbian poetry, and was done as a way for survival, and to, in some ways, not be "outed" to the public. It is important to note while reading Sherman's poetry today that we should take into account her identity as a lesbian. Some question whether or not the authors sexual identity matters when reading their poetry, as some students who had expressed, "The fact of the poets' lesbianism was not, they insisted, sufficiently important for us to have stressed it"(Bulkin 12). Yet she goes on to explain further how stripping the author of their sexuality to make the reader comfortable strips them of their identity. It takes away the deepest intentions and meanings of the poetry. Most commonly Bulkin found that students who avoided the topic of lesbianism in her women's studies classes were operating from a place of fear and internalized homophobia. They could easily identify the similarities between their feelings and that used in lesbian poetry, but refused to see the differences identified as well.

Through reading lesbian poetry we see the identification of love and sexuality, as I have been focusing on throughout my research, but Bulkin brings up, "Like their lives, their poetry is amazingly diverse. Their poems "belie a simple sexual definition of lesbianism....The poetry expresses [the many sides of their lives]—growing up, sisterhood, sexuality, family, motherhood, work, dying. Myth. Racism. Old age, war, ritual....They convey both private joy and pain and

humor, and a larger context of racial, economic, and social inequality"(9). We see not only the relations between two women and how it was seen as a threat socially, but the political implications of two women being together, as well as economically. With the gender pay gap still being an issue, it makes it harder for a relationship involving two women to flourish financially than it is to have a man within the relationship. These women who were writing a lot of the bigger lesbian poetry did not just write about love, but of their struggles involving all the other ways they identify as well, whether that be racially or culturally.

Nowadays it is less dangerous to be known as anything other than straight in most areas around the globe, which means authors are more free to discuss their sexuality openly if they so choose. People of all sexualities can enjoy queer love poetry because it does reside in similar ideas of love. I think that although heterosexual people can relate and enjoy queer poetry, it was not necessarily created for them, but more for representation of queer love that we still do not see enough of. Over recent years we have seen queer love emerging more and more in popular literature, and it matters now more than ever that we keep pushing and seeing that change. Representation matters in modes of self-expression. I can relate and enjoy love poems by a myriad of authors who are not like me in gender and identity, but there is something different about the feeling of being able to fully identify with a creator. I hope that others who do not identify the same way I do can enjoy my poetry, but I also hope it finds those who are looking for representation, that they can see themselves in me and feel comforted in some way. In the final section of my poetry I play with the ideas of coding with nature, and teetering on the edge of explicit within different poetic forms.

4

**Storm**

Thunder makes me feel a rumbling from miles away (like your presence)

Wind blows through my hair (like I imagine your fingers will)

Lightening strikes the same place twice (like our presence in each others lives)

Rain makes me wet (like my lips thinking about yours)

And all I can do is stand outside looking insane (drinking you up, taking you in)

(Obvious) to others, I'm not the same as I was before.

**Her beauty**

How could I not fall in love with a friend  
Who i was told to spend all my time with,  
But not touch— atleast not like that  
A woman who's power shone in all her glory  
And I was supposed to still be looking at a man?  
Her curves make me want to graze every inch of her with my tongue,  
But I'm only supposed to use that for prayers men created.  
But how can he be upset by my desires,  
When I see her beauty in the same way he does.  
How could I not?

**Land of you**

To navigate a body just like mine, but different  
Tracing the hills and valleys, pausing on her peaks  
Staring into her eyes, I find my power in hers to come.

**rebirth**

From the part of a woman  
Who can birth new life into this world  
Birthed new life  
Into me



**Speak**

I never felt power  
Like this before  
Knowing my tongue  
Could have you speak such words

In this final collection of five poems I wanted to experiment with coding, the obvious, and being very blunt with the sexuality in discussion. Even at times when sexuality could be questioned, pronouns become even more important, and it would also make people turn and see who the author is, and how they identify. Some inspiration for this final section was Pat Parker, including, but not limited to her poem, "My lover is a woman." It is clear that her lover is a woman, and in a lot of her poetry she makes no apologies, and it is obvious to the reader who her subject is. We see this in works of other notable lesbian writers such as Audre Lorde in "Love Poem" and Elsa Gidlow in her poem, "For the Goddess Too Well Known." There are many other lesbian poets who do this as well. Some of my earlier poetry was not as explicit and I wanted to challenge myself to do so. In the same way after I first recognized my sexuality, I could easily identify myself as gay, but could hardly utter the phrase, "I'm gay." I wanted to then make the pronouns clear, so I could be seen clearer and have more intention with what I was writing and conveying through my poetry. I wanted my readers to know what I was talking about, and so others who felt the same could relate and enjoy. One thing about reading lesbian poetry as a lesbian, is that it makes me feel excited that I am not alone. Other people have felt the same excitement, the same feelings, and the same desires I have. Although the world today is more open, there are still limits, so to be able to read lesbian poetry from decades ago that explicitly states these desires and acts of love is exciting to read, and to feel a part of.

One thing that I do appreciate about lesbian love poetry specifically is the identifications of what makes lesbian love so great. What I write about in "Her beauty" was being a friend with the person I am in love with first, which can also happen in heterosexual relationships, but I feel like has been more common for me in my own lesbian relationship. There is a sense of sameness,

that we both navigate the world as females, we both deal with a lot of the same body rhythms, and there is that sense that we are truly moving through this world together. There is also no definition of who is responsible for what in the relationship following patriarchal standards, and so we both have the freedom to choose what and how we do things. We are both equals in the relationship and it always feels empowering individually to be able to have more choice. In my poem, "Land of you" I start with the line, "To navigate a body just like mine," because there is something special in being able to acknowledge not only the beauty in others, but having it be similar to my own, where I can fully appreciate and feel empowered in my own body as well. Overall, there is a lot of differences in any type of relationship between two individuals, but there is a celebration of something unique, even if it is not obvious, in a relationship with two women, and it can come through in lesbian poetry if the reader lets it.

Although not all lesbians throughout history could scream about their sexuality from the rooftops, they found ways to make space, however small or large. With each section I toyed with how obvious or not to be, but the common theme is self-representation without censoring myself. I think it is also interesting to acknowledge the balance of lived identity and the textual self-representation, and how that was a gift to some who could be textually explicit, as well as live in a community that was free, but as we know that was not a given to all. The artists who were able to express themselves fully allowed for louder voices who helped the community not only on paper, but in the streets as well when protesting and fighting for their rights as queer people.

Lesbian poetry has such a broad range, and when it comes to the way love is shown, we see the myriad of ways it can be done. Lesbian poetry and queer poetry as a whole is extremely important because we find queer representation where it could not be found for a long time.

Poetry was one of the first modes of artistic expression that became more normalized in the use of queer love. There are more ambiguous starts to lesbian love poetry in Sappho (630-570 BC), the speculation of Emily Dickinson (1830-1866), and much more in between who were never identified or confirmed because it was dangerous to be gay, and not as normalized in the public eye. We see the growth in the way poetry became a way of expressing lesbian and queer love, and how famous some of the authors and writers came to be who wrote and discussed these topics more in the public eye, such as Audre Lorde and Pat Parker. Discussing traditional poetry, we can see the way it was reframed by lesbian poet, Marilyn Hacker, using Shakespeare's sonnet form to tell a story of her own queer love. Lesbian love poetry is great in general, and to be able to know what these women and people went through to be able to express their love publicly in the form of writing is even more admirable. These poems did not have to be publicized, but it was important for everyone, but especially the queer community as a whole, to have leaders who reached others who identified as they did to let them know that they are seen, they are safe, and that it is more than okay to have a love like they did.

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