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# Bury Your Gays: History, Usage, and Context



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## 1. Abstract

*Bury Your Gays* is a literary trope that has appeared in media across genre since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Works using the trope will feature a same-gender couple and with one of the lovers dying and the other realizing they were never actually gay, often running into the arms of a heterosexual partner. This trope was originally used as a way for gay authors to write about gay characters without coming under fire for breaking laws and social mandates against the “endorsement” of homosexuality. However, *Bury Your Gays* persists today in a time and social context in which it is no longer necessary to give gay characters and stories bad endings in order to be published.

Previous scholarship on this trope has focused on a specific genre or time period, such as Lesbian Pulp or the Production Code Era during Hollywood’s Golden Age. This paper, however, is interested in tracking the trope’s usage across genre and time period. It begins with an overview of how queer characters have been portrayed in various genres and the conventions, such as queer coding, that have been (and still are) used to portray those characters and why those conventions were/are employed by creators. In total, eight narratives—2 novels, 2 plays, 2 films, and 2 television shows—are examined using the critical lens New Historicism, taking into account especially the historical and social context in which a given work was produced. Primary sources—such as the text itself, interviews, and introductions and forewords written by the original creators—are used alongside secondary sources (reviews, previous scholarly analysis, etc.) and given equal weight in the analysis of these works and the use of *Bury Your Gays* therein.

## 2. Introduction

*Bury Your Gays* is a literary trope which originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, gained traction in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and which persists in modern media. The pattern of this trope’s usage states that in a narrative work (novels especially), which features a same-gender romantic couple, one of the lovers must die or otherwise be destroyed by the end of the

story. Many instances of this trope draw a direct correlation between the couple confessing their feelings for one another, kissing, having sex for the first time and the character’s death; they often die mere moments or pages after their relationship is confirmed for the audience. The surviving lover will then go through a process of re-acclimation whereby they realize that their attraction amounted to an experiment or temporary lapse in judgement—or even insanity, as homosexuality was classified as a mental illness until 1974—and they then fall into the arms of a heterosexual partner to live happily ever after and lead a normal, straight life (McConnaughy).

Originally, *Bury Your Gays* (also called *Dead Lesbian Syndrome* due to the disproportionate amount of female characters who fall victim to the trope) was “put in place” as it were to allow LGBTQ+ authors to tell stories which featured characters like them without risking social backlash, breaking laws regarding “promoting” homosexuality, or the loss of their career and that of their publisher (Healey). The trope has continued to appear in novels, plays, films, and television series throughout the past one hundred plus years; it persists in western media in modern times, even though many laws against homosexuality have been abolished despite the formation of the LGBTQ+ rights movement and despite changing social attitudes towards homosexuality and the LGBTQ+ community in general. In short, *Bury Your Gays* is no longer necessary, and its implementation is no longer the refuge it once was.

Previous scholarship concerning *Bury Your Gays*’ usage focuses on a specific genre or subgenre, on a specific time period, culture, or historical context. The usage (and perhaps misuse) of the trope is discussed in “Who’s Lying? the Issue of Lesbianism in Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*” by Carol S. Tufts, which specifically scrutinizes the play as a work that uses Lesbianism as the metatextual villain. Historical and social context is explored in “From Cold War Lesbian Pulp...” by Michelle Ann Abate. She discusses the differences between two works by lesbian pulp and young adult fiction author Marijane Meaker, focusing on the social context in which these two (quite similar)

works were being produced. Yvonne Keller also focused on lesbian pulp fiction in “‘Was it Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife so Passionately’ . . .,” specifically on the connection between media representation and the formation of Lesbian identities.

Indeed, there is a connection: Sarah C. Gomillion and Tracy A. Giuliano’s 2011 study, “The Influence of Media Role Models on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity,” consists of both a survey and an extensive interview process of GLB adults. They concluded that there is a direct link between media representation of the LGBT community and a majority of individuals’ process of self-acceptance and self-actualization as queer people. Amber B. Raley and Jennifer L. Lucas’ work, “Stereotype or Success? Prime-Time Television’s Portrayals of Gay Male, Lesbian, and Bisexual Characters” took a deep look at the 2001 TV season. Raley and Lucas used the guidelines set by Cedric C. Clark’s 1969 editorial, “Evolutionary Stages of Minorities in the Mass Media” for examining minority representation in mainstream media. They concluded that depictions of the LGBT community had not, at that point in time, progressed beyond the “Ridicule” (or stereotyping) phase.

Recently, because of an influx of gay characters dying on television since the 2016 TV season—an influx which seemingly began with the death of Commander Lexa on CW Network’s young adult drama *The 100*—many people and institutions have begun tallying up television death tolls for gay characters, including *Variety*, *The Mary Sue*, and The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, or GLAAD. The recently-launched #LBGTfansdeservebetter website and campaign was founded on the principle that media representation of queer characters is not only lacking but by and large being handled irresponsibly by a majority of television creators.

These works draw attention to and examine the issues surrounding *Bury Your Gays* and other homophobic or LGBT-negative tropes have focused on specific genres and time periods. The trope’s usage and development across a 125-year period spanning from late 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian novels to 2016 science fiction television series is examined herein. Special attention is paid to the historical and social context surrounding each text and the way in which the trope is used as well as whether it is being used by queer or straight authors.

Each of the examined texts are separated into specific subheadings depending on *how* specifically *Bury Your Gays* is used in their primary storyline: As Refuge, As Catharsis, As Exploitation, and As Spectacle. This is done for the sake of both organization and to give the reader a better understanding of the purpose of this paper; that is to examine this trope’s usage if that usage changes from era to era and creator to creator.

The critical lens New Historicism is used to examine these texts and to answer specific questions about them and *Bury Your Gays* itself. New Historicism is an area of critical theory which focuses not only on the texts that one is examining but the social and historical context in which those texts were created and viewed. New Historicism connects the fictional with real history and real people, which is the most important aspect of any project that examines the usage of literary tropes by virtue of the nature of tropes themselves; tropes are patterns in fiction which arise from various circumstances.

The context in which those patterns are formed cannot be separated from the tropes themselves and must be acknowledged in the study of them. This means that I take into account both secondary and primary sources—such as reviews and interviews. The last essential piece of New Historicism that needs to be discussed here is its acknowledgement that true objectivity does not exist. My scholarly analysis of these texts as well as their use as examples here are not only colored by my own readings of them but indeed comprised mostly of those readings (Tyson 286-287).

The texts examined are:

- *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde (1890)
- *Spring Fire*, Vin Packer (1956)
- *RENT*, Jonathan Larson (1996)
- *The Children’s Hour*, Lillian Hellman (1934)
- *The Fox*, dir. Mark Rydell (1967)
- *A Single Man*, dir. Tom For (2009)
- *Executive Suite*, dir. Charles D. Dubin (1976)
- *Siberia*, Matthew Arnold (2013)
- *The 100*, Jason Rothenburg (2014)

The following questions will be asked and answered by taking a close look at the above works as well as the context in which they were produced. However, some background on how queer characters have been represented in various media is needed prior to discussion of specific works.

- Why are gay characters consistently killed off in narrative?
- Do gay authors also do this to their characters/ have they in the past? Why?
- Does the author being queer change the context in which those deaths are happening?
- What about social climates?
- Surely gay characters have received varied treatments in narrative in the past as compared to now; what exactly has changed about those treatments?

### 3. Background

The Criminal Amendment Act of 1885 outlawed “committing acts of gross indecency with male persons” (Section 11). Decency laws like this were largely informed by the medical world’s preoccupation with homosexuality as not something a person *was* but rather what a person *did*. Same-gender sex was described as “perverse acts” by many psychologists, and often viewed as the result of a lack of “proper” sexual stimulation (at least in the case of men who were thought to be largely out of control of their own sexual urges). Nevermind that many of the gay and bisexual “patients” that these psychologists examined often spoke of their same-gender attraction as a matter of piece of their personal identity (Burgette 627-628).

Engaging or promoting “perverse acts” was illegal in Victorian Era Great Britain. The United States had similar laws but those varied—and still do despite such laws being ruled unconstitutional in 2003—by state (Stern). Thus, any author who included positive portrayals of homosexuality in their work could result in an author being accused of “endorsing” homosexuality. The punishment for their crime of indecency could include being thrown in jail or fined, having their work pulped and career destroyed, and often their publishing house being put under investigation or even closed. Positive portrayals of homosexuality—or any “abnormal sexual behavior” including bisexuality, transgender characters, or

even asexuality—included the portrayal of homosexuality as anything other than undesirable.

That meant that gay characters were *required* to be framed in a negative manner. If they as characters did not display traits that the audience should seek to reject in themselves and in others, then their sexuality would be directly connected to negative plot points or circumstances. In works where a given character's sexuality was not explicitly stated, their behavior and characteristics would often be *coded* as gay. Coding is a process by which an author uses description or a character's actions to signal to the audience that a character is part of a certain group, shares characteristics with important figures of legend or real life, or is serving as a direct analogy to someone or something else (Russo 59).

One famous example of queer coding can be seen in the final act of *Hamlet* when Horatio describes Hamlet as "sweet"; Shakespeare is invoking a queer social code that existed in Elizabethan England. Real queer people living during the time would use the word "sweet" to describe themselves, specifically gay men. Describing another man as "sweet" likely would not have attracted the unwanted attention of any straight people overhearing a conversation or watching a play. By having Horatio use "sweet," Shakespeare was signaling to any queer people in his audience the exact nature of his relationship with Hamlet, or at the very least, Horatio's feeling toward his friend (Masten 70-71).

Queer coding has also been quite prevalent through the history of Hollywood and television. The biggest difference, though, in queer-coding in a majority of novels and theater and queer coding in a majority of film and television is that queer coding on screen, especially after the Great Depression, is not there for representation or freedom for creators—it is there for the spectacle (Benshoff 25). Effeminate male and masculine female characters were extremely popular in the first films with sound simply because of the way those stereotypes sounded; lisping, mincing "pansies" and gruff "bitches" were easy to direct and play on screen (26).

When the Great Depression happened and theater attendance went down catastrophically, movie studios reacted by pushing the boundaries of what was considered decent. Films that promised

provocative or devious characters and storylines were worth customers spending what little spare money they had on a day at the theater. Once again, these films often placed their queer or queer-coded characters in a villainous or undesirable light; films like *Sign of The Cross* in 1933 and *Queen Christina* a year later featured placed lesbian characters in opposition to traditional Christian values (Benshoff 27-28).

Those Christian themes were largely in place so that studios could, at the very least, appear to be operating within the prevue of the Production Code put in place in 1930 to keep Hollywood films from "corrupting" the general populace, especially children. It was not until 1933—arguably in reaction to the way *Sign of The Cross* mixed Christian themes with "abnormal" sexuality and frank violence—that the Production Code Administration was put in place to enforce the Code's standards (Benshoff 29). That enforcement deeply affected films that were actually trying to portray positive queer representation (as flawed and uninformed as that representation may have been). This was especially true for films that were adapting material with queer characters or storylines. In those cases, creators would often "downgrade" their productions' queerness to being queer *coded* instead of explicitly queer. For example, Peter Lorre's character in *The Maltese Falcon*, Joel Cairo, was explicitly gay in the novel on which the film is based, but director John Huston instead worked with Lorre to code the character as queer through the way Cairo interacted with his walking stick and other phallic objects in the film (Benshoff 30-31).

Understanding how gay representation worked and has transformed over the past 125 years is key to understanding how *Bury Your Gays* specifically has changed—that is, how it has gone from something queer creators can use to skirt oppressive societal standards and laws to something that is used to exploit queer characters and storylines for a straight audience. Now that that background has been established, two narratives featuring queer characters written for queer audiences for queer characters will be examined to understand how authors use *Bury Your Gays* starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until about the 1950s.

#### 4. Bury Your Gays as Refuge

Oscar Wilde was a playwright, magazine editor, and self-proclaimed aestheticist living in London in the 1890's when he published his first and only novel, first

as a set of short stories in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, and then as a re-edited novel: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The re-printed version is the one that was given in evidence against Wilde in his 1895 court case against the 9<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Queensbury. Wilde was suing Queensberry for libel after the latter sent him a calling card at the Albebarle Club addressed to "Oscar Wilde, ponce and somdomite"; this card—misspelled as it was—essentially accused Wilde of being an effeminate and sexually active gay man (McKenna 342). Queensberry had likely gotten wind of Wilde's relationship with his son, Alfred "Bosie" Douglas, and was retaliating in the fashion of a proper English gentleman. Late in the trial, Queensberry's lawyer accused the titular character of *Dorian Gray* of sodomy claiming that if the character was guilty of such crimes than Wilde himself almost certainly was as well (362-363).

When coding characters, writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had a sort of "freedom" to describe male characters as attractive through another male character's eyes in very specific circumstances. Both male characters had to be alone when the description was happening, and they had to be outside (Austen 15). Nature during the Victorian period represented the antithesis of civilized society; nature was characterized both in narrative and real life as being untamed and indeed untamable. When a male character was described as attractive by a male narrator while the male character being described was outside, that male character became just as strangely alluring as nature itself. Such descriptions often lingered on and eventuated the virility of "manly beauty" of their subjects. Male characters described in this manner were likely not being queer coded, but male characters described as attractive through the eyes of male characters while both of those characters were indoors were coded as queer (16).

When the titular character of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is first described, it is by another male character: Basil Hallward. Hallward is speaking to his friend Lord Wotton on the latter's garden patio. They are outside as Hallward insists repeatedly to Lord Henry that Dorian Gray is a masterpiece to behold; an incredible specimen of God's work. They both agree that Hallward is "... nothing like [Dorian Gray]" because Hallward is too plain-looking (Wilde 5). Throughout the novel, Hallward becomes more and more infatuated with Gray, something which,

depending on one's reading, either speaks to the inexplicable allure and temptation of debauchery that Gray exuded, or that Hallward's romantic and sexual attraction to Gray himself was allowing Hallward's judgement to become clouded.

Either way, Gray's lecherous nature was brought to court as evidence against Wilde by opposing counsel Edward Carson as evidence of Wilde's own depravity. Wilde's lawyer, Sir Edward Clarke, defended the novel and Wilde's portrayal of Gray stating that Wilde was doing nothing but "[describing] the passions and vices of life" and not promoting Gray's lifestyle. Nevertheless, the linchpin in Carson's defense ended up being his cross-examination of Wilde. Carson entered into evidence a letter that Wilde had written to the *Scotts Observer* explaining that readers of *Dorian Gray* were free to project their own sins and misgivings onto the title character. He then questioned Wilde on the nature of the "yellow book" which Gray is seen carrying with him for much of the novel, asking if he had any particular volume in mind. The author admitted that the book was based from *A Rebours*, a decadent French novel that went against several standards of Victorian society (Mckenna 362-363).

Wilde's fate was essentially sealed when he admitted on the stand that one of the sins of which Gray was guilty was sodomy, but to top it all off, he gave several ambiguous answers to questions about his "loving friendship" with an unnamed person whom it is safe to assume was his lover Bosie (McKenna 364). Wilde lost the case, his reputation, and much of his estate, eventually being forced to sell the rights to his work in order to get by. He spent two years in prison and was no longer allowed access to his two sons. His health rapidly declined, and Wilde died in November of 1900.

Looking at *Dorian Gray* and Oscar Wilde's trial has answered the first question on the above list. Do queer authors kill off their gay characters in the same ways that straight authors do? Yes. And no. Straight authors using *Bury Your Gays* will do so for the shock value, whether or not the story itself or other pressures demand it. Queer authors use the trope either because it actually serves the story, or because they *have to* under threat of law or social stigma. This idea can be proven by answering another question on the list: Does the trope's usage change depending on historical and social context?

This question can be addressed by examining a seminal work of gay literature: *Spring Fire* by Marijane Meaker, under the pseudonym Vin Packer. *Spring Fire* is widely considered the first work of lesbian pulp, a subgenre of pulp fiction which centers around lesbian themes and contexts (Foote 178). *Spring Fire* launched not only a subgenre but an entire movement of [LGBTQ+] fans of said subgenre flocking to what should ostensibly be said stories: the conventions of the pulp novels dictated that the characters had tragic endings. Main characters died, went insane, and their stories were generally meant to leave a bittersweet taste in the reader's mouth.

*Spring Fire* is the story of Susan "Mitch" Mitchel, a 17-year-old girl just starting college and looking to pledge a sorority at Cranston University. Mitch is described as a studious, quiet girl with an athletic build and a grassroots naivety that would usually discount her in the eyes of the top sororities at Cranston. She is sought out by Epsilon Epsilon Epsilon ("Tri Ep") because of her father's wealth and prominence in the community. There, she meets Leda Taylor, a more traditionally beautiful and feminine older student who "has many ideas that [some of the sorority] don't agree with" (Meaker 23). That particular piece of dialogue, delivered by Tri Eps's prim and proper president Marsha Holmes, is queer coding for "this character likes girls."

The two of them are assigned as roommates and quickly develop feeling for each other. Leda suggests that two of them, in order to stay in Tri Ep and avoid ridicule, continue going on public dates with men and keep their love for each other a secret. Their relationship is loving and supportive, playful and curious. Then, by the end of the book their relationship is outed, Leda is suddenly hospitalized for a nervous breakdown, and Mitch moves on, realizing that she never actually loved Leda (158-160). On top of being a sad story, the marketing for the book itself was eroticized and overblown with its first cover featuring two women in nighties looking sullen on an unmade bed (an incredibly suggestive image in the 1950s). Even the title—as Vin Packer explained in the introduction of the 2004 reprint—was designed by her editor to instill in the reader the idea that this story was about unbridled eroticism rather than a young girl's first love.

Why did so many lesbian and bisexual women flock to this book (the first printing alone sold nearly 1.5 million copies),

write fan mail to Packer thanking her for representation, and go on to prop up an entire subgenre? In the context of the mid-twentieth century, when homosexuality was still classified as a mental illness and seen as a social aberration, seemingly-negative lesbian representation *being written* by a lesbian became a social and cultural refuge for lesbians living in a time when they were surrounded by the idea that their very existence was wrong. And it did that for several reasons, the chief of which being that lesbian readers understood what pulp was and what the cultural climate was; they knew the marketing was a product of the times and that the ending was nonsense, as Packer said in that same introduction: "Lesbian readers were able to look past the cover: to find themselves between the pages. We always found ourselves."

What if a book like *Spring Fire* had been written in a different time and in a different context? What if *Spring Fire* had been written decades later, when the general social attitude toward homosexuality and lesbian literature was better (not good necessarily, but *better*)? Vin Packer gave us the answer to that question in 1994 with *Deliver Us From Evie*: the story of a traditionally feminine girl named Evie with "disagreeable ideas" (i.e., being unapologetically gay), her love affair with rich socialite Patsy, and the absolute havoc that wreaks on their small Missouri farm town. Every character, plot point, and even certain passages of *Evie* mirror almost perfectly the event of *Spring Fire* right down to the specific brand of homophobia Evie and Patsy must deal with from townfolk and Evie's family specifically: their prejudice is not 90s prejudice. It is from the 50s (Abate 233).

*Deliver Us From Evie* is set up from the very beginning to be a mirror and an answer to not only *Spring Fire* itself but the context and culture that surrounded *Spring Fire* and was effected by it (Abate 234). Marijane Meaker took a work which had homophobia woven into it against her wishes as an author and as a queer person and used it as the jumping off point for a novel in which every homophobic character, by the end, *changes their views* on homosexuality and Evie and Patsy's relationship. In *Deliver Us From Evie* Meaker is taking back the stories that she and people like her were denied the right to tell due to forces beyond their control. She was able to do so largely because the social context in which she was writing had changed, and the historical context that

she herself and queer authors had created changed starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In contrast, straight creators will often use *Bury Your Gays* to as a tool for exploitation or for the perceived shock value that queerness's depiction can have for straight audiences.

## 5. Bury Your Gays as Exploitation

Lillian Hellman's landmark 1934 play *The Children's Hour* is loosely based on a real court case from 1810 (Faderman 16). In the play as in real life, two teachers at an all-girls boarding school are falsely accused of being lovers by a troublemaking student. The fictional Karen Wright and Martha Dobie founded their school in an old farmhouse and stand to lose everything because of this accusation. The student, Mary Tilford, has been scolded several times by Karen and Martha and is out for revenge. She enlists other students in crafting the story of Karen and Martha's affair and reports it to her grandmother who had been one of the school's chief investors (Hellman 196-201). Karen and Martha's reputations are ruined, and parents begin pulling their children from the school. They retaliate by suing the Tilfords for libel, only for Martha to confess privately to Karen that she was indeed in love with her. Karen cruelly dismisses her feelings and Martha commits suicide off stage (231-232). Pages later, Mrs. Tilford arrives to announce that Mary's deception has been found out and that the whole affair had been for nothing (235).

New York theater critic Eric Bentley spoke of the 1954 revival in his collection *The Dramatic Event*, saying that the kind of theatre Hellman wrote was that which treated characters less like people and more like symbols (74). This is less a story about two women being targeted as it is an allegory for what can happen when witch hunt culture and mob mentality go too far; and, given Martha's confession at the end of the play, it *could* be read as an allegory for how homophobia can hurt people and ruin lives. Martha and Karen's accusers are framed as the villains of the piece. Thus, subtextually, homophobia could be framed as villainous as well. At first, *The Children's Hour* appears to be using homophobia and homophobic characters as villains in much the same way *Please Deliver Us From Evie*.

However, the timing of Martha's confession, as well as the callous way in which Karen treats her after the confession and shortly after her death—saying to Mrs. Tilford “We're not going to suffer anymore, Martha is dead” (235)—would seem to

disprove any notion that this play is trying to speak to its audience about the dangers of lesbophobia. Instead, Martha's queerness and her suicide would seem to shift the blame for the events of the play away from the Tilfords and the rest of the accusing families and onto Martha for being gay.

Mary's accusations against her teachers are inspired by and based on an argument she overheard between Martha and Karen's fiancé Joe wherein Martha is complaining about how unfocused and irritable Karen can become when Joe visits the school (192). Mary presents this information to her grandmother as if Martha is desperately jealous of Joe. In light of Martha's confession, it can be inferred that she *was indeed* jealous that Joe was marrying Karen and she wasn't. On top of that, the girls retrieve a copy of French novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* to help in concocting their story. *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is the story of a married couple both falling in love with the same woman, the titular crossdressing swordswoman. The book has been a cult classic since its release and audiences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would have recognized the title, if not for its popularity than for its infamy (Castle 402). These details can be read as foreshadowing for Martha's confession.

*The Children's Hour* uses the *idea* of queerness to make its main characters suffer. Then, instead of villainizing the homophobia and rashness of those accusing them, proves the accusers right about one of their victims. That victim is then summarily killed off and the surviving victim blames her for all that the two of them suffered while she was still alive. What's more, the play is *not* doing this to keep in line with the historical events that inspired it: When the real case ended, the women walked away with a modest settlement after suing their accusers for libel but would no longer be allowed to teach in Edinburgh. However, neither of them committed suicide and there is nothing to suggest that either of them were gay (Faderman 292-293).

The idea of a story which takes subject matter that is, for lack of a better term, queer-adjacent and amplifies or places its queerness in the spotlight in order to punish that queerness or otherwise cast it in a negative light is not unique to *The Children's Hour* or indeed to theater at all. The 1968 film *The Fox*, directed by Mark Rydell, does much the same thing. It is based on a 1923 novel by DH Lawrence of

the same name. The story centers around Jill Banford and Ellen March who are two unmarried women in their late twenties who run a farm together.

In the novel, the pair can be read as queer-coded; their relationship even mirrors a “traditional” heterosexual couple. Banford is more masculine than March, and March is portrayed as feminine and fragile. The two of them are very close and rely on each other for companionship as well as work around the farm. The film takes this queer coding and makes it much more explicit with the two of them confessing romantic feelings for each other and sharing a sex scene toward the end of the film. Otherwise, the plot remains the same as in the novel. However, much of the symbolism of the novel is changed as is Banford and March's competency around the farm.

It is these differences that fundamentally change the underlying themes and message of *The Fox*. The novel is about the honest struggle of two women against societal pressures of traditionalism and male-centric society. The *film* is about the folly of that struggle and the dangers of homosexuality. It accomplished this through the explicit depiction of Banford and March as lovers. Many films based on queer or queer-coded works were prone to censoring their queer storylines—such as the *Maltese Falcon* mentioned above or in any number of adaptations of Tennessee Williams' plays (Noriega, 35). *The Fox* debuted one year before the Production Code era ended in 1969 and was one of a number of films bending the Hays regulations so far that the Production Code Administration had all but given up (Benshoff 93-94).

The film and novel both tell the story of Jill Banford and Ellen March, who live on a farm raising chicken and are plagued by a fox attacking their coops. Then, a man—Henry in the novel, Paul in the film—enters their lives and kills the fox. He then attempts to seduce March, the more feminine of the two, and is rebuffed. He insists on helping the two to fell a dead oak tree and in the process Banford is crushed beneath the tree and dies (95-97).

The first drastic divergence the film made from the novel is the symbolism surrounding the fox itself. In the novel, it is connected to the male presence, Henry, and although he kills it in both versions, in the novel this is symbolized as cementing his invasion of Banford and March's home:

But to March he was the fox. Whether it was the thrusting forward of his head, or the glisten of fine whitish hairs on the ruddy cheek-bones, or the bright, keen eyes, that can never be said: [Henry] was to her the fox, and she could not see him otherwise. (Lawrence 20-21).

The fox's presence on the farm—the one place where Banford and March can be safe from the masculine world—and its resistance to the women's attempts to capture or kill it represents the presence of men in the "real world" outside of their farm. Henry doesn't destroy the threat of misogyny when he kills the fox, he replaces it and amplifies its power. Earlier in the story, the women sell off a cow before it calves, and this decision to distance themselves from the maternal and domestic is framed as making their lives much easier (2). Whether or not Banford and March's relationship is read as romantic, the "message" of the novel is one of societal pressures and compulsory heterosexuality ruining what is otherwise a healthy and productive relationship and life.

Conversely, in the film, Banford and March are portrayed as naïve and largely unsuccessful; their farm is failing and March constantly worries that they'll lose it. At least some of this failure is blamed on the fox, which once again raids their coops. This time, however, the animal does not represent masculinity or traditionalism; it is there to serve as a symbol of Banford and March's romantic feelings for each other. In fact, Banford is shown to be close to figuring out a way to kill it, in contrast to her resigned hopelessness in the novel.

Then, Paul arrives and "takes over" as it were, doing chores around the farm far better than the two women could and eventually kills the fox. He then immediately sleeps with March and demands she run away with him. She refuses and instead there is a tender scene between her and March in which they confess their love for each other. After Banford is killed in the tree felling scene, March is forced to sell the farm and accept Paul's proposal. On the very last page of the book and in the very last scene of the film, Paul insists that March will be happier in her new life and she asks, dejectedly, "Shall I?"

## 6. Bury Your Gays as Catharsis

The 1996 Broadway rock opera *RENT* is largely considered a landmark of both the

genre and wider world of musical theater as well as writer and composer Jonathan Larson's magnum opus. It is the story of the residents of a fictional apartment building on the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> Street and Avenue B during the winter of 1989-1990. It stars, among others, bisexual Maureen Johnson and her gay girlfriend Joanne Jefferson, transgender drag performer Angel Dumott Schunard, and Mimi Marquez and Roger Davis, who are both HIV positive. By the end of the show, Rodger's girlfriend has committed suicide after being diagnosed with HIV (Larson 16), Angel has died suddenly of complications from AIDS (113-114), Mimi has had a near death experience either due to the virus or exposure from living on the streets (137).

In 1989, Larson was recruited to help write the show that would become *RENT* by Billy Aronson, who had been looking to put on a modern adaptation of Puccini's *La Bohème*. The two of them eventually split and ended the project after penning the early versions of several *RENT* numbers (Tommasini). In 1990, Allan S. Gordon, a dear friend of Larson's, tested HIV positive and was diagnosed with AIDS. Larson went to work writing a "rock monologue" in the form of a show that would eventually become low key rock musical *tick, tick... BOOM* as an honor and a catharsis for Gordon and everyone suffering during the AIDS crisis (Hoffman). Tragedy would keep striking Larson's community and friend group; Victoria Leacock Hoffman wrote in the introduction of the 2008 edition of *RENT*:

The grim reality that four of our best friends had been infected with HIV, and three of them had developed AIDS, changed everything in our lives. ... That fall, Jonathan asked Billy Aronson for permission to proceed with *RENT* on his own. Permission was granted. And from that time on, Jonathan threw himself into *RENT*, a canvas large enough to honor his friends and to raise awareness about AIDS and the social injustices he saw every day. As he would proclaim in his song, "La Vie Boheme," "the opposite of war isn't peace, it's creation."

*RENT*'s existence is peppered with controversy, and its reception both inside the LGBTQ+ community and out has been mixed at best. Accusations of plagiarism, tokenism, and even a kind of "fake," performative representation have been bandied about for years (Bernstein 60). Kathy Lay wrote in 1998 in the *Journal*

*of Feminist Family Therapy* that *RENT*'s portrayal of classism, homophobia, and AIDS-related trauma as reductionist did a disservice to those suffering in real life (92). Sarah Taylor Ellis decried the show's "No day but today" message as stagnating, holding its character and the LGBTQ+ community in place, and stuck in tragedy (198).

Given all of these misgivings, is it fair to say that *RENT* is on the same level as *The Children's Hour* or any other work that seeks to want to profit off the suffering of gay people? Is its use of *Bury Your Gays* just as egregious and irresponsible, especially given its subject matter and setting? Short answer: no. Long answer: In the same way that *Deliver Us From Evie* answers *Spring Fire* and other works that had homophobia forced on them by staunchly refusing to give its queer characters anything less than happiness, *RENT* answers that homophobia itself; it cries out in agony at the real pain caused by violence and neglect endured by the LGBTQ+ community during the AIDS crisis. *RENT*'s characters are not props meant to make audience members sad because of a sad queer existence. The characters are gay and trans people screaming about how their community was dying and no one seemed to care. Angel does not die because she needs to or else *RENT* cannot be put on, or because Larson wanted an empty twist. Angel dies because in the 1980s and 90s in New York, *people were dying*.

If *RENT* is a story that uses *Bury Your Gays* as catharsis, *A Single Man* is one that uses the trope as truth. Written and directed by Tom Ford and starring Colin Firth, the 2009 film is based on the 1962 novel of the same name by Christopher Isherwood. The film and novel are both centered on George Falconer who is a college professor living in Britain in the early 1960s. George's partner of 16 years, Jim, recently died in a car accident and George feels as though his life has lost purpose without him. The story follows George through a single day; eight months after Jim's death, George goes through the motions of his routine, teaching class and spending time with his best friend Charley, played by Julianne Moore. Toward the end of the film, George comes to the conclusion that he is able to live on without Jim and that he willing to try. He then suffers a heart attack and dies in his sleep.

The novel is extremely introspective, taking place mostly in George's head through first

person narration, but the film borrows many elements from Ford's own life to flesh out the story. The film not only centers on George's grief but also the queer struggle of grieving one's partner—an unfortunate but *normal* event in the life of any adult in a long-term relationship—in an era and culture that was constantly erasing and invalidating queer experience (Thompson). George was unable to attend Jim's funeral because he "wasn't family." He is only really allowed to grieve openly in Charley's company, and she makes it clear that she does not see George and Jim's relationship as being something real and worthy of respect.

Tom Ford wanted those elements in the film not only to stay true to the source materials and the era in which it is set, but to keep from divorcing it from its queerness. That is something that can and does happen when a queer story is *about* something more universal like mourning a loved one (Weintraub). *A Single Man* is a very queer story, but it is not a story about *being* queer, or one in which queerness or the queer struggle drives the plot. In an interview with Emanuel Levy two months after the film's premier, Tom Ford had this to say about the film's underlying themes: "The movie is about loss and loneliness. It could be the same story if it was George's wife, instead of his partner, who had died. This is a love story and one man's search for meaning in his life. The theme is universal."

Like *RENT*, *A Single Man* can appear as though it is falling into the same tired storytelling patterns of portraying queerness as something sad or as punishing that queerness within the narrative. However, what it is actually doing is telling a story of grief and deep love through a queer lens. This film is much less *Bury Your Gays* as it is *Bury Your Dead*.

## 7. Bury Your Gays as Spectacle

Often the only way in which *Bury Your Gays* is used in television narratives is for shock value especially in dramas and especially to bump up network ratings. Unlike the previously discussed works, the final few narratives examined here are those wherein *Bury Your Gays*—and often the depiction of gay characters themselves—is used almost explicitly to draw in and shock audiences. In fact, the first overt depiction of a same-gender attracted character on television is also the first instance of *Bury Your Gays* on TV.

That instance occurred during the only

season of short-lived soap opera *Executive Suite* in 1976. Patricia Smith's character Leona Galt was given a three-episode guest appearance alongside Geraldine Brooks as Julie Solkin. The two of them are portrayed as close friends and in Season 1 episode 10 "The Sound of Silence," Julie confesses to Leona that she is a lesbian and in love with her. Both of their husbands become suspicious that the two of them are having an affair. Then, in the next episode, "What Are Patterns For?" Leona confesses that she may be developing feelings for Julie as well. She is upset and confused by this and darts across a street to get away from Julie and clear her head. Julie follows and is immediately hit by a car and dies.

The 2013 drama *Siberia* centered on the cast of a scripted reality TV show which was scripted in the sense that the actors were indeed playing fictional characters in a fictional setting, rather than fictionalized versions of themselves in real settings. The characters' chance at a large cash prize is upended somewhat when the crew and host of said reality show suddenly evacuate, leaving them to fend for themselves in the Siberian tundra, often against mysterious supernatural elements. As the series progressed, contestants Annie and Natalie grew closer and eventually became romantically involved in Episode 4. The next episode—less than two in-universe days—Annie finds a note from Natalie explaining that she was leaving the show to make up with her ex-boyfriend. Her body was discovered several episodes later. Annie was later killed in the series finale.

Both of these TV deaths have several very important things in common: the length of the "relationship's" story arch, in-universe timing of the death, and real-world timing of the reveal. Both couples' storylines together were incredibly short, lasting about three episodes each, and the characters who died were killed off very close to the confession and kiss. The most important similarity between them may be that these events aired during Sweeps Week which is a period during which network television ratings are catalogued and scored.

Like the "edgy" content pushed into films as discussed above, dramatic, controversial, or shocking things will often be written into shows during February, April, and November to bump up ratings in time for Sweeps. This can mean a big wedding for the lead couple or a celebrity guest star; these kinds of ratings stunts have even given birth to the trope Sweeps Week

Lesbian Kiss, wherein two female characters will kiss on screen often for no other reason than to shock the viewer and draw in a larger audience (Rocha "How Does Sweeps Week Work"). These are both examples of queer characters being killed off for shock and awe.

Both the *Sweeps Week Lesbian Kiss* and queer characters being killed off in TV narratives for shock value feature heavily on the CW Network's science fiction drama *The 100*. Based on the Kass Morgan Young Adult novel series of the same name, *The 100* premiered in spring 2014. Developed for television by screenwriter and director Jason Rothenberg, *The 100* centers on a group of 100 juvenile delinquents sent back to Earth by citizens of an orbital space station 97 years after a nuclear event was thought to have wiped out life on the planet. The 100 children are led by 16-year-old Clarke Griffin, played by Eliza Taylor, and are tasked with scouting out a place for their families back on the station to re-colonize Earth.

During their mission, the "Sky People" as they come to be called, encounter the last vestiges of humanity in the form of a tribal groups living in small city-states across the continent, collectively referred to as "Grounders." Clarke gains the Grounders' favor as well as the idea of the leader and military strategist of the Tree People Clan, Lexa kom Trikru, played by Alycia Debnam-Carey. Lexa and Clarke soon develop feelings for each other and kiss for the first time in season 2 episode 14, "Bodyguard of Lies." The episode premiered during February Sweeps Week 2015 and did indeed bring in more viewers as LGBTQ+ fans clamored to the show for its nuanced and thoughtful betrayal of a same-gender couple (Swift).

Clarke and Lexa consummated their relationship in a love scene in the season 3 episode "Thirteen" on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016. In the very next scene, Lexa is killed by a stray bullet meant to kill Clarke and destroy the alliance between the Sky People and the Grounders. Fan backlash against the episode was immediate. #LGBTfansdeservebetter began trending and quickly metastasized into the website [LGBTfansdeservebetter.com](http://LGBTfansdeservebetter.com) which tracks gay and lesbian deaths as well as the use of other harmful, anti-LGBTQ+ tropes on television. Outraged fans also raised over \$115,000 for the Trevor project—a nonprofit that provides support and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ+



youth—in memory of Lexa and in protest of the continuously-worsening pattern of LGBTQ+ deaths on television (Davies).

Showrunner Jason Rothenberg responded to the backlash on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016 in a blogpost entitled “The Life and Death of Lexa.” He explains that while he was unaware of the existence of *Bury Your Gays* as a trope on television and within the science fiction genre, he does regret having caused fans of *The 100* such distress:

The thinking behind having the ultimate tragedy follow the ultimate joy was to heighten the drama and underscore the universal fragility of life. But the end result became something else entirely—the perpetuation of the disturbing “Bury Your Gays” trope. Our aggressive promotion of the episode, and of this relationship, only fueled a feeling of betrayal. While I now understand why this criticism came our way, it leaves me heartbroken. I promise you burying, baiting or hurting anyone was never our intention. It’s not who I am.

Rothenberg also explains that the decision to kill off Lexa came partially due to Alycia Debnam-Carey possibly not being available to shoot the next season. Actors not being available for future episodes is a reason very commonly cited for killing off characters—queer and otherwise—and is often used to explain away the use of *Bury Your Gays* by showrunners and fans alike (Jusino ). Javier Grillo-Marxuach, who wrote “Thirteen,” appeared at the ATX Television Festival in Austin, Texas on a panel with writers from other shows that feature LGBTQ+ characters and themes such as Showtime’s *Shameless* and MTV’s *Faking it*. Grillo-Marxuach spoke about his responsibility as writer, saying, “I think the failure was to recognize the cultural impact that would have on the context of the show ... The systemic failure to recognize it as an event of the magnitude that it had [outside the show] is the real subject of discussion [of this conversation].”

Carter Covington, creator of *Faking It*, a dramedy about two girls “faking” a same-gender relationship for attention in high school, lauded Grillo-Marxuach and *The 100* for featuring Clarke and Lexa’s relationship at all. He defended the choice to end Clarke and Lexa’s relationship tragically because of the impact it had on the show and on fans—as evidenced by the backlash and the size of the crowd watching the panel—saying “This is storytelling” (Wagmeister).

However, this defense of *Bury Your Gays*’ use as something thought-provoking or moving for the audience falls flat when one considers the history of this trope as a tool for exploitation or spectacle by straight creators. Lexa’s death does not make *The 100* safer to produce as in *Spring Fire*, nor does it serve a cathartic purpose as in *RENT*. It is only there to shock the viewer and provoke a visceral response in the moment in addition to adding one more name to a growing list of LGBTQ+ characters killed off on television. The fact is that there are ways to write characters out of narratives—and there are other ways to write compelling, impactful narratives—that do not involve falling into tired, harmful storytelling patterns.

## 8. Conclusion

As the above has endeavored to show, the literary trope *Bury Your Gays* has been in continuous use in various forms of media across various genres for approximately 125 years. It originated as a tool for queer authors to write queer narratives without facing negative consequences associated with the “endorsement” of homosexuality. Then, as social climates in the west changed to become more accepting of LGBTQ+ people and identities, *Bury Your Gays* as a refuge for queer authors and audiences fell into obsolescence.

The reasons for queer characters being killed off through the invocation of the *Bury Your Gays* trope vary both by time period and depending on who is writing the narrative. Queer authors working from the end of the nineteenth century up until the middle of the twentieth century kill off their queer characters as a point of safety. They are protecting themselves, their publishers, and readers from laws and social mandates against the “endorsement” of homosexuality; this is what was happening with the queer death and erasure in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Spring Fire*.

Queer authors using the trope in more contemporary periods do so only when the death of a queer character will serve both the narrative and the greater context surrounding that narrative, as seen in *RENT* and *A Single Man*. Conversely, straight creators invoke the trope either to symbolically punish queerness in their narratives—*The Children’s Hour*, *The Fox*—or as shock value for their [straight] audiences—*Siberia*, *Executive Suite*. Straight authors using the trope as spectacle often use the trope irresponsibly. They do so claiming ignorance to not only the

existence of the trope itself but also to its negative effects, as seen with *The 100*.

One of the goals of this paper is to understand the way that the usage of *Bury Your Gays* in narrative changes depending on the context in which it is used. There are ways to kill off queer characters—or any characters—in narrative without invoking harmful and tired plot devices. That is, to do so in ways which serve the narrative and the greater context which surrounds it. The lack of awareness with which modern straight authors seem to use this trope is concerning; it is any creator’s responsibility to understand the context into which their work will fit once it has been released. Thus, this paper strives to allow creators writing queer characters and queer narratives a deeper understanding of the history of this particular trope then they perhaps would have had otherwise.

In terms of further study in critical theory, it is this author’s hope that this paper illuminates a need for the history of literary tropes to be closely examined as *Bury Your Gays* is herein. Tropes are patterns in narratives that can span across genre and often continue to be used in various forms of narrative long after their original conception. It is important that creators be aware of these patterns and that they not be allowed to become “givens” in their genres, especially when their history and usage proves they are harmful to the larger context in which they exist.

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