

Understanding Queer Identity

For most of the 20th century, the word 'queer' was used to humiliate and degrade people who were known, or believed to be gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. Prior to the 1990s, the term was primarily used by people who identified as straight, although some members of the greater GLBT community used it as a form of self-deprecation, or to remind each other of their reduced status in society. Though 'queer' now carries a far more positive meaning, most people over thirty remember it as a vile and offensive word, evoking painful emotions not easily forgotten.

'Queer' is believed to have German roots, originally meaning oblique or off-centre. It crossed into the English language during the 16th century, describing something that was *strange, peculiar or unknown*.

At the turn of the 20th century, gay men living in New York used it as a code word, meaning *unknown*. However, under this association, the word became a synonym for *immoral, shameful or perverted*.

In 1969, author Paul Goodman published, *The Politics of Being Queer*, having a huge impact on the gay liberation movement. The meaning of 'queer' began to shift.

In 1990, four victims of anti-gay violence founded 'Queer Nation', an organization that popularized the slogan, "*We're here, we're queer, get used to it!*" Though 'Queer Nation' no longer exists, the message lives on.

During the same period, academic scholars introduced 'Queer Theory', challenging the idea that sexual orientation and gender identity can be neatly categorized with fixed labels (gay, straight, transsexual, etc.). It proposed a spectrum of individuality that includes not only sexual identity, but also humanist work, such as literature, art, music, etc. To be queer, is to have the freedom and pride of self-creation, independent of the expectations or limitations of society.

Over the past fifteen years, many who identify as GLBT have embraced the word 'queer' as a self-affirming umbrella term, inclusive of all people who don't fit social norms. Because of its gender-neutrality and implication of social non-conformity, many see 'queer' as a term that is both positive and empowering. However, not everyone in the GLBT community is eager to self-identify as 'queer'. Some still associate it with the emotional pain and degradation of the past, and others are not comfortable ascribing to an identity without boundaries. But for some, reclaiming this word has helped them set aside some of the pain of their youth.