

Queer Poetics and The Rereading of Traditional Verse Through the Perspective of Modern Identity

Lt Dr.S. Nithya¹

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Languages, Karpagam Academy of Higher Education, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. E-mail: snithyache@gmail.com, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5143-2661>

Abstract: This paper analyzes the use of queer poetics in the rereading of traditional poetry using works by Shakespeare, Dickinson, and Whitman. Queer poetics becomes a challenge to the heteronormative readings of classical texts by disclosing non-normative desires, fluid identities, and gender and sexual subversion. The paper illustrates that queer readings bring new insights that challenge conventional understandings of love, intimacy, and gender through case studies on Sonnet 18, the love poems by Dickinson and Leaves of Grass. Queer poetics rediscovers the ambiguities and nuances of human desire and identity which are frequently ignored in traditional interpretations by refusing to apply fixed identities. This method recontextualizes classical texts in a more inclusive literary culture, where marginalized voices and points of view can come out. The article further examines how queer poetics influenced a modern approach to literary criticism, as well as how it helped to transform literary criticism by making it more diverse and inclusive. Further studies can also deepen the scope of queer poetics to other literary traditions outside of the West and how it could be used in the future to discuss other forms of themes, including power and politics, in classical poetry. In the end, queer poetics can provide a shifting, changing model of reinterpreting classical literature, supporting a more participatory interpretation of literary texts and their cultural relevance.

Key Words: queer poetics, traditional poetry, shakespeare, dickinson, whitman, literary criticism

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Introduction

Queer poetics is a critical approach that can be used to reconsider classical poetry. As an interdisciplinary discipline, queer poetics introduces a critical perspective within which classical poetry, which is often bound by the heteronormative ideology, can be reassessed (Björklund & Dahl, 2018; Ponce, 2012). This method of literary analysis using queer theory breaks the norms of the narratives of gender, sexuality, and identity that typically dominate literary analysis (Jen & Pacey, 2021). Such recontextualization makes it possible to reveal the presence of repressed or suppressed voices in the work of tradition, especially non-normative gender and sexualities.

This paper aims primarily to discuss how queer poetics can be used to make alternative readings of traditionally based poetry. This paper will re-read the work of canonical poets in Shakespeare, Dickinson, and Whitman and discuss how these poems, which are believed to be based on traditional themes of love and gender roles, might actually be based on mobile, non-normative identities and desires. In this way, the paper aims to show how queer identities today as queer can reconsider these ancient texts.

Classical poetry is usually interpreted in a conventional way; the possibility of queer reading is ignored (Wennergren, 2018). The use of queer theory in these works has been sparse, and most of the layers of

meaning have not been addressed (Dickinson & Toomey, 2017). The purpose of this paper is to fill this gap through the application of queer poetics to classical works and through the provision of new interpretations that disrupt heteronormative interpretations of love, identity, and gender (Guy-Bray et al., 2016).

This paper aims to demonstrate that queer poetics can be used to provide a new view on conventional poetry and make readers rethink classical literature in a new way of queer identities. The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the abundance and richness of queer poetics in literary analysis and how it can transform perspective on the past.

Research Questions:

- How does queer poetics challenge the traditional interpretations of classical poetry?
- In what ways can modern queer identities offer new readings of poems once considered to be representative of heterosexual norms?
- What impact does the queer reading of traditional verse have on the understanding of canonical literature?

This paper follows the following structure: Section II will summarize the available literature on the subject of queer theory and its application to literary studies. Section III explains what queer poetics is and what the analysis frame will be. In Section IV, there are case studies, where particular works by Shakespeare, Dickinson, and Whitman are analyzed using queer poetics. Section V describes how queer readings have influenced the literary tradition and the implications it has on the study of literature in general. Lastly, the Section VI ends with some thoughts on the relevance of queer poetics and recommendations about future studies in this area.

Literature Review

Queer theory is a critical approach that developed in the 1990s mainly under the influence of scholars such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michel Foucault (Kruger, 2016). It confronts the concept of fixed identities and sexualities, with fluidity, performativity, and the social construction of gender and desire. Queer theory offers a perspective of how texts are reconsidered in the study of literature, especially in the manner in which they tackle gender, sexuality and identity (Aburrow, 2016). In its turn, the queer theory has been used by scholars more and more to investigate marginalized voices, dismantle normative readings, and challenge heteronormative frameworks of classical literature (Weiss, 2022; Leonard, 2012).

The major developments in the field were the work of Sedgwick on the "Epistemology of the Closet" which questions the concealed and frequently repressed manifestations of sexuality in literature and Butler with Gender Trouble that deconstruct binary gender categories.

Applying queer theory to traditional poetry is a fairly recent phenomenon in literary criticism (Benediktsdóttir, 2022). Pioneering queer interpretation of canonical texts, including poetry of Shakespeare and Dickinson, has drawn attention to the ways that the writings of these authors could reflect non-normative views of desire, intimacy, and identity (Mitchell, 2013). As an example, Shakespeare has been reinterpreted by a number of critics as a homoerotic desire in the sonnets, especially in regard to the fair youth of the poems. Queer readings of Emily Dickinson have also emerged as a response to her poetry, which is traditionally read as the utterances of solitary desire or heterosexual love, but also with regard to her relationships with women as well as the indeterminacy of her emotional expression (Milani, 2013; Ilmonen, 2019).

Other contributions in this direction have been studies of *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman, in which the glorification of physicality and male bonding have since been read as a queer story of intimacy and love between men. Based on these readings, one might conclude that traditional poems can be reimagined as convoluted, ambiguous, and non-binary identities, instead of a singular, heteronormative expression.

Queer theory and modern identity have enlarged the prospects of the reinterpretation of classical texts (Newman, 2015). The modern-day understanding of identity, such as gender fluidity, bisexuality, and the rejection of the gender binary, carries far-reaching consequences in terms of the interpretation of the traditional poetry. As the fluidity of identity has increasingly been acknowledged, literary critics have begun to perceive contemporary queer identity as a means of rereading previously discussed texts that were previously interpreted in binary terms of gender normativity (Ranger, 2019; Schweitzer, 2021; Geissinger, 2015).

This change is also indicative of larger societal shifts, in which queer identities become more visible and accepted. New gender identities and sexualities are becoming more and more accepted, which means that more and more ways of reading literature become possible that were not available in previous decades, thereby contributing more and more inclusive readings to the discipline of literary studies (Armengol, 2019). In this section, examine how contemporary queer identities, and in particular, identities that challenge binary representations of gender and sexuality offer a fresh paradigm of understanding traditional verse.

Although there has been a considerable scholarship on queer readings of traditional texts, most of the emphasis has been on more recognizable texts or poets in a Western canon. The literature on how queer poetics can be applied to non-Western literature and to the work of less renowned poets is still missing. Moreover, the most evident themes of love and desire have been addressed in queer readings, yet it is possible to investigate how queer poetics could be utilized to address other issues such as power, politics and social norms in poetry. It is the aim of this paper to address these gaps by extending the scope of queer readings to cover a wider group of poets as well as by examining how queer poetics can rewrite different thematic concerns in classical poetry (Hansen, 2019).

Queer Poetics: Defining the Framework

Defining Queer Poetics

Queer poetics refers to a methodological practice involving applying the knowledge of queer theory to read literature (and especially poetry) through the prism of gender, sexuality and identity. On the most fundamental level, queer poetics is a challenge to the binary (heterosexual/homosexual), male/female, but it is more about the flexibility and performativity of identity. In contrast to other literary strategies that might attempt to impose definite meanings or readings, queer poetics accept ambiguity, fluidity and challenging of normativity. This paradigm shifts the concept of sexualities and identities as fixed and stable categories and rather perceives them as dynamic, complex, and constantly changing. It enables the investigation of numerous, usually conflicting, identities in a single text. Queer poetics in the traditional poetry context allows the re-analysis of such topics as love, desire, and the body, revealing the hidden meanings that question the heteronormative interpretation.

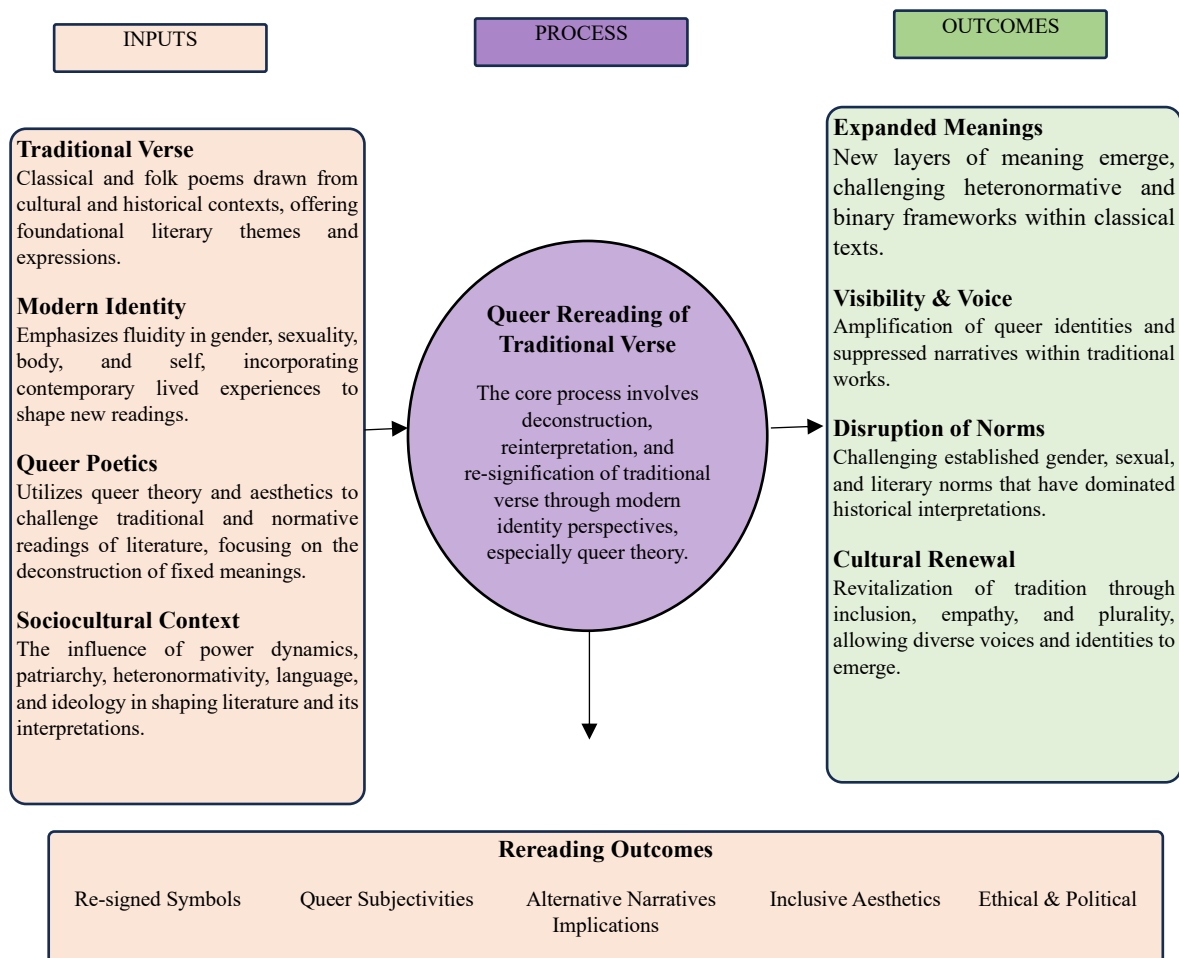


Figure 1: Framework of Queer Poetics in Literary Criticism

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the interaction of queer poetics with traditional poetry. Fluidity, norm subversion, intersectionality, and rejection of binary construction are the key components of queer poetics that are projected onto particular objects of literary analysis, including gender, sexuality, desire, and identity. The flow indicates how queer readings are capable of opening up new ways of interpreting old works of literature that challenge normal literary conventions and that are multifaceted.

Key Principles of Queer Poetics

Several key principles underpin the practice of queer poetics. These include:

Subversion of Norms: Queer poetics tend to undermine traditional expectations of gender, sexuality, and relationships, and attempt to disrupt and deconstruct societal norms.

- **Fluidity and Ambiguity:** Queer poetics embraces fluidity as opposed to adhering to fixed identities. It highlights that individual and relational identity is a process and not a fixed state.
- **Binary Constructs: Rejection:** The most important aspect of the queer poetics is the rejection of binary gender and sexual categories. This strategy emphasizes the necessity to adopt a range of identities and experiences, which challenge strict categories.
- **Intersectionality:** Queer poetics does not work on gender and sexuality alone but it is involved in their interplay with race, class, disability and other identity markers. This makes the interpretation of texts richer by placing identity into the larger context of social and historical contexts.

Queer Poetics as a Literary Methodology

Queer poetics as a methodology is concerned with reading poetry beyond the surface level of the work to explore the non-normative sexualities and identities that the work may be revealing. This method takes the step further by finding queer characters or relations in texts. It also aims to reveal the challenge of queer readings to traditional power systems inherent in the text, like patriarchy, colonialism, or classism. To take an example, a queer reading of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 may not just simply apply the expressions of love in the poem as homoerotic but also examine how the expression of eternalizing love in a poem challenges the traditional patriarchal idea of masculine and feminine desire.

Reinterpreting Gender, Desire, and Love in Traditional Verse

Queer poetics enables the re-formulation of classical themes in poetry, especially love, desire, and gender. In the face of traditional readings in which expressions of love in poems such as those in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* are perceived as an expression of heterosexual desire, queer poetics might perceive such expressions as a symbol of a more expansive, less rigid conception of human relations. To give the example of Whitman praising physical intimacy between men, it could be interpreted as both homoerotic and an appeal to redefine love outside of rigid gender roles and identities.

In the same spirit, queer poetics can provide fresh interpretations of gender in classical texts. The poems of Dickinson, which have been interpreted as being a projection of repressed, heteronormative desires, may be viewed in a queer sense to see how she subverts the conventional gender roles of Victorian society and exposes the other forms of desire and intimacy that contested the inflexible gender norms of her era.

Queer Poetics and Literary Tradition

Queer poetics is not the desire to destroy or deny traditional poetry but to enrich and improve it with the help of a new perspective. It is an approach to recover the texts of canonical poets by reading them as multi-dimensional articulations of identity. Quite the opposite, queer poetics shows how classical works may be brought to echo with the contemporary queer sensibility and the contemporary concept of identity. In this way, traditional verse is regarded as an organism that breathes and develops and can address the issues of contemporary life and preserve the historical and cultural values.

Case Studies: Queer Readings of Traditional Verse

Case Study 1: Shakespeare's Sonnets

Sonnet 18 by Shakespeare (Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?) is also typically interpreted in the perspective of idealized heterosexual love. Nevertheless, the homoerotic tone in the sonnet beckons a greater examination of the homoeroticism in the sonnet. The gender roles can be transcended by the fact that the fair youth to whom most of the sonnets by Shakespeare are dedicated can be viewed as a desire. A queer reading of this, as well as other sonnets, breaks the heterosexuality of love and presents the possibility of exploring same sex desire and the uncertainty of love, identity, and beauty of the early modern era.

- ✚ Analysis: A queer reading questions the notion of a rigid, heterosexual identity of Shakespeare and the fluidity of gender and sexuality in his work. This discussion indicates that the sonnets, which are commonly interpreted as platonic or heterosexual love poems, have queer subtextual messages that indicate that Shakespeare explores the idea of fluidity and non-normativity in his relationships.

Case Study 2: Emily Dickinson's Love Poems

One of the most promising sources of queer poetics is Emily Dickinson, who is reputed to have been a rather reclusive poet with limited concern about external social constructs. A lot of her poems, which have always been understood to be about unrequited heterosexual love or longing, can be perceived in a new light through a queer lens. The words of affection, intimacy, and longing are expressed in the poetry written by Dickinson, and they imply relationships not within the traditional heterosexual construct.

- ✚ Analysis: Dickinson challenges conventional gender roles in her poems, particularly those that revolve around a strong emotional attachment to other women. Queer poetics can be used to reconsider the works of Dickinson as a reflection of non-binary love and identity and can provide new information about the emotional world of the poet by accepting the ambiguity and personal nature of her poetry.

Case Study 3: Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* can be touted as a hymn to the male body and close friendship between men. A queer reading of this text underlines the way Whitman articulates homoerotic desire and poses a challenge to the standardized concept of masculinity. The exaltation of physical contact and emotional closeness of men by Whitman suggests a reassessment of how gender and sexuality are expressed through poetry.

- ✚ Analysis: Whitman can be considered a radical act of queering the body and intimacy. The manner in which he blends physical affection with spiritual communion breaks the conventional differences between love, sexuality, and friendship. An analysis of queer poetics highlights the relevance of non-heteronormative relationships in the work of Whitman and also repositions Whitman as a pioneer of queer visibility in literature.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Queer Readings in Traditional Poems

Poet	Poem	Queer Elements	Traditional Reading	Queer Interpretation
William Shakespeare	Sonnet 18	Homoerotic desire expressed towards the "fair youth"	Love as idealized heterosexual affection	Desire transcends heteronormative frameworks, homoerotic longing in platonic love
Emily Dickinson	I Cannot Live With You	Intense emotional bond with another woman, ambiguous love	Expression of unrequited love, likely heterosexual	Queer affection, questioning gender roles and norms
Walt Whitman	Leaves of Grass	Celebration of male physicality, homoeroticism, intimate male bonding	Traditional view of male friendship and brotherhood	Radical queering of male intimacy and bodily affection, disrupting fixed gender categories

Table 1 gives a comparative review of queer readings of the traditional poems by Shakespeare, Dickinson, and Whitman. The table compares the traditional understanding of the readings of these works with queer readings that question gender and sexuality and uncover fluid identities, non-binary relationships, and subversive desire.

Impact of Queer Poetics on Literary Tradition

Reinterpreting Classical Literature

Queer poetics essentially transforms the reading of traditional poetry, but it is no longer confined to limited interpretations of gender, sexuality, and identity. Rather than following the traditional structures, queer poetics provides a more open and flowing system that uncovers subtler, frequently marginalizing meanings. Questioning normative interpretations of desire and identity, queer poetics opens up the possibility of exploring themes that had been ignored in classic texts. This approach to rereading does not take away the historical and cultural contexts of these texts, but instead offers some alternative readings, which appeal to the contemporary notions of fluid and complex identities. It reveals the voices that have long been suppressed in literary criticism, especially those pertaining to non-heteronormative desires and identities.

Disrupting Dominant Narratives

Queer poetics questions the heterosexual narratives prevalent in the analysis of traditional poems, which have been dominant before. Classical literature such as Sonnet 18 by Shakespeare, the poetry of Dickinson, and the Leaves of Grass by Whitman have been interpreted through a heteronormative perspective. A queer reading challenges this conventional methodology by bringing out the homoerotic desires, the queer relationships, and non-binary gender identities, and provides a totally different way of looking at these works. As an example, the sonnets written by Shakespeare could be read as a case of homoerotic desire, not necessarily idealized heterosexual affection, and the explicitly intimate male relationships of Whitman undermine the conventional view of male friendship.

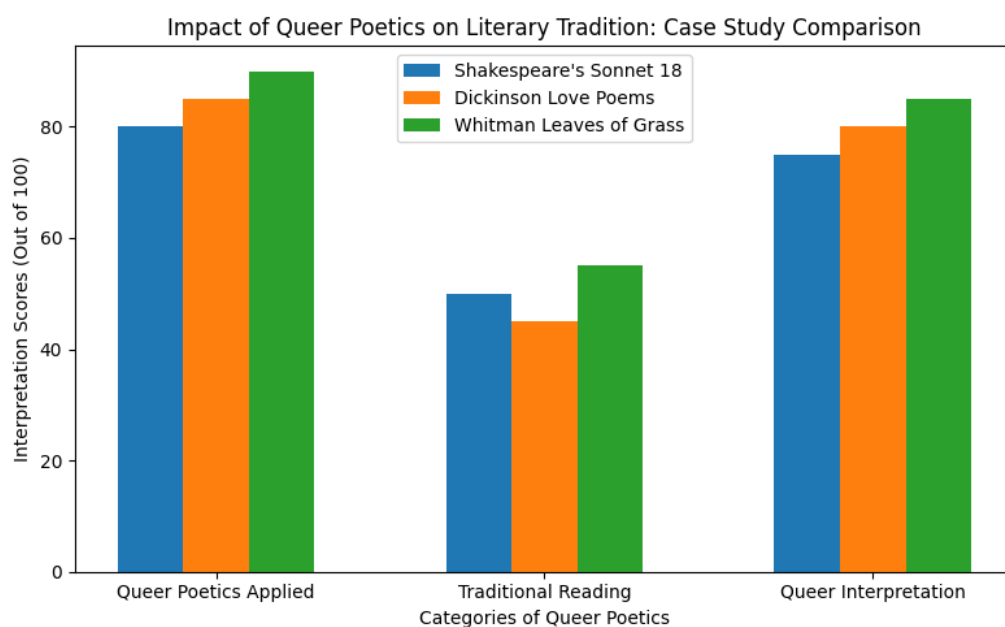


Figure 2: Comparison of Queer Poetics and Traditional Readings in Classic Poetry

The interpretation of queer poetics, as compared to traditional readings, of three classical texts, Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, Dickinson's Love Poems, and Whitman's Leaves of Grass, is presented in Figure 2. The diagram brings out the point of view of how queer poetics can provide a more subtle perspective and unearth more obscured themes of fluid identities, non-normative desires, and a subversion of heteronormative structures. By comparison, traditional readings are inclined to follow traditional,

frequently heterosexual readings. The fact that the queer interpretation scores are higher is a pointer to the more informative information that queer poetics creates in these texts, which is more inclusive.

Expanding the Literary Canon

The diversity of the literary canon is one of the key contributions of queer poetics. Historically, heteronormative interpretations have relegated non-heteronormative voices in literature. Using queer poetics on traditional texts, researchers have an opportunity to repossess these texts and remake them in order to incorporate various manifestations of love, desire and identity. It is a way to expand the definition of great literature and make a more encompassing view of literary history. It accentuates that the canon is not a certainty but can be changed to represent more human experiences.

Influence on Contemporary Literary Criticism

The influence of queer poetics can be observed not only in traditional literature but also in modern literary criticism. With the increasing tolerance of queer sexualities and gender in society, the role of queer poetics in the reading of modern literature persists. The focus on fluidity, ambiguity, and the denouncing of strict identity categories has resulted in a more inclusive approach to reading contemporary texts. Academics are utilizing queer theory more and more to reposition contemporary works, questioning standardized accounts and adopting the more multifaceted view of human identity. This has helped to continue the process of changing the literary studies to be more representative of the diverse, multifaceted world.

Interdisciplinary Influence

Queer poetics is also not simply limited to the field of literary studies. Its ideals have affected various fields, such as feminist theory, studies of post-colonialism, and psychoanalytic criticism. These queer poetical uses of interdisciplinary applications have not only defied normal standards in their respective fields, but also challenged scholars to include a wider range of perspectives and challenge standard assumptions. Such a wide reach demonstrates the importance of queer poetics to not only transform literary criticism but to also help transform the other academic disciplines.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the radicalizing effects of queer poetics on the re-reading of classical poetry, with reference to Shakespeare, Dickinson, and Whitman. Queer poetics questions the heteronormative ways of reading classical literature, in which it is possible to identify non-normative desires, fluid identities, and subversion of gender and sexual norms. Case studies were used to show how queer interpretations of Sonnet 18 by Shakespeare, love poems by Dickinson, and *Leaves of Grass* by Whitman provide new ways of looking at love, intimacy, and gender to challenge the conventional interpretations. These works, which have conventionally been interpreted in a heterosexual way, have been found to be richer once analyzed through the prism of queer theory, which embraces the ambiguous, the fluid and the abandonment of fixed identities. This method enables the recognition and glorification of marginalized voices, especially those that are connected to non-heteronormative desires and identities, in the literary canon. Moreover, queer poetics not only redefines the perception of single poems but also adds to a more general and inclusive perception of literary tradition. The queer poetics breaks the limits of classical literary analysis by taking into account the complexity of identity and desire and proposes a more inclusive approach to reading historical literature. The application of queer poetics to non-Western literary traditions and the possibility of its use in discussing other issues, including power, politics, and authority, in classical poetry can be

explored in future work. Finally, queer poetics provides a powerful and necessary prism through which modern and ancient literature may be re-read and interpreted, allowing to see literary works and cultural values in a more diverse and enriching way.

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