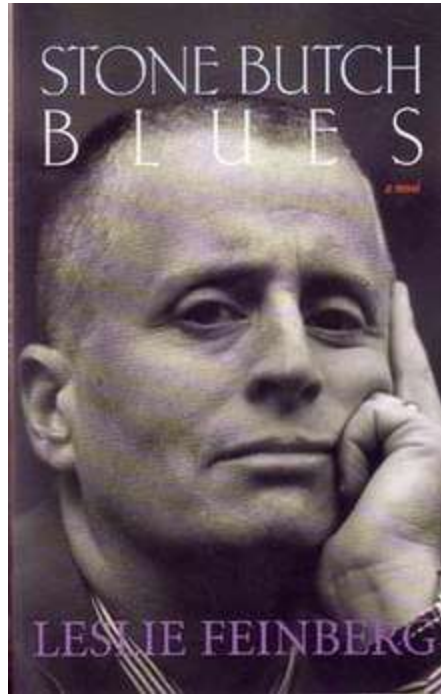


## A Queer Reading in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*

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Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stone\\_Butch\\_Blues](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stone_Butch_Blues)

### Abstract

The novel *Stone Butch Blues* addresses the theme of prejudice and persecution faced by members of the LGBTQ community in Post-War America. It also expands upon the Queer theory. The protagonist of the novel, Jess Goldberg is born into a working class, traditional, Jewish American family. Although born female, Jess is never able to reconcile herself into society's definition of a proper girl. In her earliest memories, Jess Goldberg felt different from other girls her age. She despised dresses and all the things that girls played with. Even when it came to dress, Jess was inclined to dress like a boy. She envisions her future, and in that future, she does not see herself resembling the typical, socially-accepted woman. And as a result, even as a very young girl, Jess faced a lot of persecution and prejudice; not just from kids her own age but from adults as well. Instead of trying to understand her, they tried force her to fit in. And as she develops into a teenager, she realizes that she will never be the same as the rest of the girls and she doesn't want to be; all she wants is for society to accept her for who she is. The novel is about the search to find one's own identity, particularly when that identity runs counter to what society says is acceptable. It also depicts the struggles in the life of a person who decides to transcend gender; it also highlights the courage of the human soul to face adversity and survive. And in the end, the author

conveys an important message; that lives goal is to channel one's own struggle to achieve a purpose that is greater than oneself. A purpose that brings a higher meaning to existence.

**Keywords:** Queer, alienation, binary, homosexuals, Stone Butch Blues

### **Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues***

The term 'Queer Theory' was coined by Italian feminist Teresa de Lauretis for a conference held in the University of California, Santa Cruz and it first emerged in the early 1990's. It is a critical study of queerness, or the departure from the archetypal norms when it comes to gender and sexuality. Queer theory details on the theoretical and fundamental details of queerness. While Gay and Lesbian studies focus only on what is natural in terms of homosexual behavior. Queer theory is a more expansive study which focuses on any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories; in other words, the Queer theory focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire.

### **Queer Theory**

Although queerness is generally associated with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual subjects, the analytic framework of queerness also includes topics such as cross-dressing, intersex bodies and identities, gender corrective surgery, and gender ambiguity. The theory, in addition to studying queerness, attempts to debunk the norms of dual polarity sexes, sex-gender constraints, gender-correlative sexuality, and absolute sexual stability. It attempts to act as a guide in understating queerness, dispelling myths surrounding queerness and reconstructing the norms and taxonomies of queerness.

Queer theory has now entered the mainstream of world literature. Authors all over the world are creating literature based on the queer theory. Most of them are biographical and autobiographical accounts of queer people, their lives, their struggles and more often than not, the persecution and prejudice with which society treated them. Authors all over the world are now producing literature that is aimed at improving the awareness of the general public about the LGBTQ community. Each author, of course, has their own take on queer theory, and therefore these texts are each highly unique and varied.

### **Queer Literature in America**

Among the nations of the world, America is the frontrunner when it comes to Queer literature. American literature was much faster to accept the queer theory and literature based on it than the rest of the world. As of today, American literature is the single largest source of queer literature around the world. Queer theory has made a huge impact in America: several states in the US have legalised same sex marriage as of late. The LGBTQ community is respected in America and Queer Literature is more popular there than anywhere else in the world. As a result of the larger and more appreciative audience available to them, American queer theorists have produced a lot of ground-breaking literature based on the queer theory.

American authors have come to see queer literature as a part of mainstream American literature, and as a result, they have blended the theme of queer theory into other socially relevant topics such as racism, politics, and economics among others. As a result, queer literature in

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America has undergone a change from pure queer theory to a blend of related social topics, all coming down to the same point of freedom of individual expression and the right of every person to determine one's own identity and live with it without having to fear social repercussions.

### ***Stone Butch Blues***

The novel *Stone Butch Blues* presents a radical approach towards the Queer theory. The author tries to communicate the fact that any member of the Queer community, be they lesbian, gay, transgender or any other identity that refuses to conform to societal norms of gender and sexuality is socially crippled by the prejudice and misconception directed at them by the general public. The novel details how the social crippling and alienation begins from a very young age. The protagonist of the novel, Jess is used to being gawked at for her appearance. Even as a child, Jess was more than once asked Are you a boy or a girl? by unassuming adults. Jess is not free from being misunderstood even in her own home. Her parents are among the main causes for the ostracizing and social crippling of Jess. "I'm sick of people asking me if she's a boy or a girl. Jess overhears her mother saying this. Such instances result in Jess becoming introverted, scared, and in general, socially crippled.

### **Emotional Drama**

The novel also delves into the emotional trauma associated with being queer in that time and age. Her classmates alienate her, and she is the constant butt of bullying. "Brian says you're a girl, but I think you're a sissy boy", taunts one of Jess's classmates (*SBB* 17). He then proceeds to rape Jess along with his friends. The emotional scarring that is left as a result of such an incident is detailed in the novel. As a result of the incident, Jess decides that it is time to leave her parents' home and find a life of her own. But this is not so easy, as social ostracism is not the only hurdle that a queer person had to face during those days. The novel details how her nature as a Butch lesbian not only earns her social alienation; it also causes serious economic and legal problems. Employment was extremely hard to come by; nobody wanted to employ queer people. Jess struggles to find employment, and when she finally does, it does no justice to her abilities or passions. The approach of the novel clearly displays the author's disdain for the discriminative social setup.

### **Legal Status**

Besides the economic difficulties, Jess's identity also threw her legal status into jeopardy. Homosexuality was deemed illegal and taboo back then; and the brutality unleashed upon the Queer community by the police was nothing short of inhuman. The author details the violent nature of the treatment of the Queer community at the hands of the authorities; they are raped and tortured. And it does not stop there. The novel details how being queer affects one's personal, romantic and sexual life. Within the Queer community, Jess identifies as 'butch'. A butch is a lesbian and/or a transgender person who assumes a masculine identity. And butches are usually found to be linked with femmes, who are feminine lesbians. Like most other butches, Jess also wishes for the love of a femme and an authentic life as a butch, a life without having to fear anyone. The novel describes the emotional and sexual intricacies of the Butch-Femme relationship. The author approaches the relationship with great detail; she describes the nature of the attachment between a homosexual couple; the root of the desires of a homosexual person. The novel helps us gain an understanding of the life and lifestyle of the Queer community in general and homosexuals in particular.

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## **The Question Raised**

The author tries to answer the question of why a homosexual would rather be with mother homosexual than a heterosexual person. According to the author, the point of interest for one homosexual in another is the queering of general heterosexual practices into their own versions; this alteration, or the act of personally deconstructing age old accepted sexual practices into whatever suits one's desires and needs is exactly what a homosexual person finds emotional and sexual attachment in.

## **Body and Identity**

In the novel, the difference between Jess's body and the Jess's identity is what arouses Angie, who is the first person with whom Jess has a consensual sexual relationship. The transformative change that Jess undergoes when she suppresses her female identity and wears male clothes and a masculine character is what captures Angie's attention. And the author makes it clear that this is the driving force behind homosexual love; the act of disregarding the natural accepted setup and transcending sexual and gender-related boundaries to shape a life that gives one happiness.

## **Happiness**

And yet, happiness is not a thing that is easily found in Feinberg's signature novel; it is a work filled with poignancy and suffering. Young Jess quickly loses whatever solace she found within the LGBT community when she decided to start using drugs to improve her masculinity and to pass off completely as a man. This is as a result of the gender rigidity of the society in the novel. In the novel, when Jess and Grant discuss the possibility of taking testosterone and other hormones to undergo the transition to a complete male from being a butch, Jess is intrigued by the idea. This is because Jess feels trapped. But unlike most transsexuals, Jess did not feel trapped by her body; she was happy with who she was. Jess says, "I don't feel like a man trapped in a woman's body" (SBB 159). Some introspection will reveal the dilemma faced by Jess. Jess does not want to undergo a gender transformation for her own sake; she merely wants to escape the persecution and prejudice that she has faced all her life as a lesbian transgender. Jess knows exactly who she is, and what she wants from her life. Jess is being forced to give up her identity and live a life that she does not like for the sake of society. This is true for almost every human being, and it is true for Jess as well. Having to give up one's own identity to fit into society is one of the most painful experiences a person can have. And this experience was even more painful for Jess because the people that Jess identified with condemned her decision to undergo a gender transformation with the help of hormones.

## **Irony in the Novel**

And here is the irony in the novel; the very people who are persecuted by the general public for being gender indeterminate and having different sexualities decided to ostracize a member of their community for deciding to change her gender. They do not understand Jess's pain or her struggles. They merely judge her for her life choices. Just like the general public judges them for their life choices. This is typical of the nature of human beings; we are quick to criticise others and yet fail to notice even the most grievous mistakes committed by ourselves. The very same LGBT community that ostracised less for her decision to take hormones to undergo gender transformation

criticise the general public for mistreating them on the basis of gender and sexuality. Feinberg illustrates that in today's world, justice and fairness are nothing but fairy tales.

### **Problems Faced by Jess**

Despite the persecution and judgement she faces, Jess decides to go ahead with her decision to undergo an identity change with the help of humans. Jess moves to a new city and with the help of testosterone, male clothing and a deep voice, manages to live amongst the society as a heterosexual male. Jess lived her life in hiding; not by physically hiding in any particular place, but by concealing her true identity beneath drugs and disguise. Jess tries her best to live her life as an ordinary man; she even tries to have romantic relationships with a waitress named Annie. Her relationship with Annie is based on deceit and subterfuge. Jess hides her true identity from Annie and presents herself as a normal man. While indulging in sexual relations, Jess takes care not to reveal her true identity to Annie with the help of the dark and a little sleight of hand.

At one point of time, the character of Jess undergoes a pivotal moment. This is the moment that she decides to accept herself. Jess realises that all her life, she has been striving to achieve something that she does not need; she has been trying to transform herself into someone that she is not. She finds within herself the courage to identify who she truly is and stick with that identity. She understands that she can never be either male or female according to the normative underpinnings of society. She understands that however hard she tries, she will never be accepted by the society as normal. But more importantly, she understands that this does not need to cause her unhappiness. She decides to transcend the concept of bilateral gendering and identify as a person who exists in the grey area between genders. She realises that she will never truly be a "she"; she decides to stay transgender. And this is the decision that would go on to change her life.

### **Courage Needed to Find and Establish One's Identity**

The author, through this narrative, attempts to underline courage that is needed to find one's true identity, especially when this identity is one that goes against all social norms and practices. It displays the will power that is necessary to fight for a cause that is not widely accepted and even seen as a joke. The author is trying to make people understand the power of will that is necessary to stick with your decision that you think is right but even when the whole world is against you. The novel is a testament to the courage and determination of all the LGBTQ people in the world; it helps in educating us about the hardships that they undergo in a society that is not willing to accept them.

The author also has a message of sorts for her LGBTQ readers; she tries to let them know that they are not alone, and they do not have to fight alone. The author urges them to not hide or attempt to fit in to the restrictive society; she encourages them to be proud of themselves and to fear no one.

### **To Conclude**

In the end, there is no happy ending for Jess; much like real life, where there are precious few happy endings. The author tries to communicate the message that Jess's mistake was in trying to normalise herself; she failed to embrace her identity and therefore, had to go through a lot of suffering for no reason at all. Towards the end of the novel, Jess realises what she should have

realised years ago. She understands that the only acceptance she really needs is her own; what the society thinks is not important. Upon realising this, Jess embraces her identity as a Trans lesbian. She spends the rest of her days as an activist fighting for LGBTQ rights and she finally finds her purpose in life. And she realises that finding purpose in one's life is far more important than finding happiness.

The novel *Stone Butch Blues* is a powerful and inspiring novel that can be enjoyed by anyone, but for a person who can identify with the protagonist, this novel can be life changing. It can inspire a transgender or a homosexual person to come out in front of the world and live a life that is true to who they are, without having to hide anything. And that is what makes this book a truly great one.

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