

In Greek mythology the death of heroes could give rise to flowers and other plants. Especially touching is the story of the lovers Calamus and Carpus. When the latter was accidentally drowned, Calamus, inconsolable in his grief, found solace in being changed to a reed. Then the beautiful youth Narcissus, having spurned the love of a nymph, was caused by the goddess Aphrodite to feel unquenchable love for himself. At length he gained relief by being turned into the flower that still bears his name. As noted, the ancient Greeks described the bloom of a teenaged boy as the *anthos*, "blossom, flower," a term which captures not only the rosy glow of youthful beauty but its transience.

In our society flowers, because of their delicacy and beauty, are most often given by a man to a woman. Flower names, such as Blossom, Camille, Daisy, Lily, and Petunia, are given only to women (though at one time they were assumed by gay men as "camp names"). The adjective florid means ornate and excessive; it can also describe an advanced stage of disease. Finally, flowers can be raised in hothouses to assume striking, even bizarre shapes and colors. They represent the triumph of culture over nature, a principle that also serves to buttress our society's stereotype of the homosexual.

See also **Color Symbolism**.

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FOLKLORE, GAY MALE

Traditional aspects of culture—learned behavior—that are generally passed on orally or by example instead of through writing are usually classified as folklore. All people, regardless of education and social status, have many types of folklore. Often this is divided into such broad categories as oral tradition, nonverbal communication, and material culture. Each of these concepts can be further broken down

into genres—specific types of folklore.

Homosexual men have developed a large number of traditions, including an argot (a form of language used by people who wish not to be understood by outsiders), jokes, legends, personal experience narratives, clothing and jewelry used as symbols, and a type of behavior known as "camp."

Language and Humor. The language used by some homosexual men is quite developed, and it is much more enduring than slang. The words and phrases cover a range of subjects; the largest group is made up of words used to describe various types of people. For example, **queen** is a standard term some homosexual men use to refer to themselves and others; it can be used derogatorily or as a term of endearment, a sort of affectionate insult. This term is frequently used in compounds, like "flaming queen"; "flaming" means "carrying on in a blatantly effeminate manner" and is probably derived from "flamboyant." Some gay expressions have entered the general vocabulary, most notably "to come out of the closet" and the word **gay** itself, as referring to sexual orientation. Such a colorful language commonly results in puns and other types of word play.

Humor is one of the hallmarks of the folklore of homosexual men. The most familiar genre of humor is the joke. The following riddling question shows how jokes can carry messages: "How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?—Only one, but the light bulb has to really want to change." The joke is based on the stereotype that homosexual people are mentally ill and in need of professional help, and that psychiatrists can "change" them, making them heterosexual. But the punch line carries the subject further, making the point that homosexual people are in control of their lives, and psychiatrists cannot "change" them. By implying that gays do not *want* to change, this joke offers a psychological victory over oppression.

Legends and Personal Narratives.

Homosexual men also tell legends—stories that are told as actual events; sometimes the tellers believe the stories, and in fact the event described in a legend may have taken place. After countless retellings, however, the legend has been associated with so many people, places, and times that any facts it may contain cannot be verified. Often the story is told as something that happened to a friend of a friend of the teller. A common legend told by homosexual men is the following:

"This really happened to a friend of a friend of mine in Chicago. He went into a tearoom [public rest room] and stuck his dick through the glory hole [a hole cut through the partition between two stalls]. The guy on the other side stuck a hatpin through it so he couldn't get out."

This legend is a cautionary tale, warning against anonymous and semipublic sexual acts. It is ironic that this story reveals a substantial amount of internalized homophobia; the theme of punishment for homosexual activity is quite clear.

Another type of story people tell is the personal experience narrative. Stories of this sort are not traditional in themselves, but the narrators have told them so often that they have taken on a traditional structure. The most familiar type of personal experience narrative among homosexual men is the **coming-out** story, in which a man describes revealing his homosexuality to someone (usually friends or family). Most gay men have more than one coming-out story, since one comes out to different people at different times.

Nonverbal Expressiveness. Nonverbal communication involves the use of **gestures, clothing, symbols, jewelry, and the like** to convey messages about oneself. For example, some homosexual men wear black leather to indicate an interest in sadomasochism; others may wear the same type of outfit to project a **macho** image. A gay man might wear a necklace with a pendant in the shape of the lower case

Greek letter **lambda**, a symbol of gay liberation. Another might wear a badge in the form of an inverted **pink triangle** as a symbol of the oppression to which homosexual men and women are subjected. (During the **Holocaust** the Nazis forced homosexual prisoners to wear inverted pink triangles. Many thousands of these men, like millions of Jews, ultimately died in the camps.)

Drag and Camp. Two types of gay men's folklore, drag and camp, combine verbal and nonverbal behavior. Drag, or female impersonation, although not practiced by most homosexual men, is widely associated with gays, and drag shows are a common form of entertainment in some **gay bars**.

Camp is widespread and widely misunderstood. Camp is an attitude, a style of humor, an approach to situations, people, and things. The camp point of view is assertively expressed through exaggeration and inversion, stressing form over content, deflating pomposity, mocking pretension, and subverting values. Sometimes (but certainly not always) camp behavior is **effeminate**. Like much gay humor, camp plays with stereotypes, carrying them to extremes, flouting heterosexual values. Camp can be solely playful, but often it is a serious medium, providing a weapon against oppression.

Camp is best understood through examples. In the spring of 1987, someone stomped several goslings to death in an Indianapolis neighborhood that has a large number of resident ducks and geese. Shortly thereafter, someone planted a small cross beside the canal where the goslings had been killed. Reminiscent of the crosses placed at the sites of fatal automobile accidents, the memorial in this case implied—contrary to most Christian theologues—that animals have souls and that the deaths of the goslings were the equivalent of human deaths.

Strategic Deployment of Folklore. Homosexual men demonstrate a variety of

strategies in their use of folklore. Humor is pervasive. Ambiguity is also common, allowing covert messages to be conveyed through the use of double meanings. If someone receiving a message takes offense, the sender can protest innocence by insisting that the receiver misunderstood. Since gay men were brought up in the heterosexual culture, they have a background from which they can draw double meanings.

In the following *double entendre*, the ambiguity is rather obvious. Feeling his attempt at finding a sexual partner for the evening to be futile, one man said, "Well, I guess I'll go home and do something constructive, like knit." Another man responded, "But you only have one needle." The first replied, "So I'll crochet." The exchange was spontaneous and the reactions were quick; nothing was laboriously thought out. The humor goes a bit deeper than it first appears, for it plays upon the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual male: both knitting and crocheting are associated with women. A man with only one needle (or penis) cannot engage in a cooperative endeavor like knitting, which requires two needles working together. Thus he must make do with the equipment at hand: having but one needle, he must crochet (masturbate). Since this encounter took place between two men, each of whom knew the other was homosexual, and because it occurred within a gay context, both intended meanings were clear to those who heard the exchange. The two men were simply engaging in a bit of word play. Had the men continued the conversation along similar lines, the double entendres could have been used to lay the basis for a sexual proposition.

Inversion is a third strategem used by homosexual men. In taking words like *faggot* that heterosexual people have used as tools of oppression and turning them into statements of pride and defiance, gay men state their refusal to be labeled as sick, immoral, and evil.

Conclusion. The folklore of homosexual men functions in many ways—as a means by which gays can identify and communicate with one another without other people's awareness, as a tool to help create a sense of "group" and belonging, and as a way of coping with and expressing conflict. Most of all, folklore helps homosexual men gain cultural competence, that is, to function as gay men with other gay men. As long as schools, families, churches, and other institutions fail to fulfill this role, folklore will continue to meet such needs.

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FOLKLORE, LESBIAN

Lesbian folklore is the collection, documentation, and analysis of the traditional cultural products and experiences of lesbians learned through face-to-face interaction and through observation and imitation. The following presentation utilizes examples of contemporary American lesbian folklore collected by the author from a cross-section of the Bloomington, Indiana lesbian-feminist community during the first half of 1988. Bloomington, a small Midwestern town and home of Indiana University, is a "gay mecca" because of the large homosexual population.

Bloomington lesbians belong to three lesbian communities: national, regional, and local. Within the local lesbian community diverse groups exist such as factory dykes, academic dykes, and bar dykes. It is within these informally struc-