

## Historian uncovers the historical origins of the insidious gay suicide stereotype

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A still image from the 1919 German film *Anders als die Andern* (Different from the Others) depicts a concert violinist who killed himself because of adverse publicity about his homosexual orientation. Stanford historian Samuel Clowes Huneke has traced the origins of the gay suicidal figure to Germany's early modern period.

From films to literature, the stereotype of the suicidal gay or lesbian

character is a common one in modern entertainment. In Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours*, for instance, there are three gay and lesbian suicides and attempted suicides. In the Netflix series, *House of Cards*, the only openly gay character kills himself after just a few episodes.

Research by Stanford doctoral candidate Samuel Clowes Huneke traces the roots of this detrimental and pervasive cliché to its surprising origins in modern Germany. Huneke has discovered that gay [suicide](#) is a historical phenomenon, one with a distinct and varied past.

"What my research shows is that a striking trend of gay suicide evolved in German culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries," he said.

Huneke, who is writing his dissertation on homosexuality in 20th-century Germany, is the first scholar in the field of modern German history to examine the relationship between suicide and gay identity. He is also the first to historicize gay suicide and trace the ways in which it pervades the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Through a close examination of German suicide notes, letters, diaries, medical records, gay literary magazines and novels, Huneke has identified clear connections between the suicide trope and the development of gay identity in modern Germany.

"In the late 1860s, just at the moment when the earliest texts on homosexuality began to appear, German doctors, activists, and writers also began to discuss and depict gay suicide with increasing frequency," Huneke said.

This phenomenon of linking homosexuality with suicide sparked the beginning of what Huneke sees as a trend in poetry, plays and novels in which suicide is a recurring theme.

Huneke said this group "pointed to a handful of gay suicides in order to claim that there was an epidemic of gay men killing themselves because of anti-sodomy laws and fear of exposure."

## **The dark side of gay identity**

According to Huneke, 1920s Berlin is commonly remembered as a sexually open, experimental culture, "a gay mecca."

Huneke explained that much of the historical scholarship on gay identity during this period focuses on the emancipation of gay people.

"It has been seen as a narrative of progress toward tolerance and acceptance of gay people. The scholarship tends not to look at the darker sides of gay identity and its creation," he said.

Huneke wants to fill this gap in the scholarship by examining the development of homosexuality from a different angle. His research uncovered unusually large numbers of poems, stories and novels where gay characters committed suicide, and their deaths were glorified.

For example, Huneke cited Klaus Mann, the first prominent German gay novelist in Western history, the son of famed writer Thomas Mann. Klaus Mann published in the 1920s, and his work treated homosexuality openly. Nevertheless, the suicide of gay characters recurs in most of Mann's books.

In his novel *Treffpunkt im Unendlichen* (Meeting-Point at Infinity, 1932), the unrequited love of a gay man for a heterosexual man leads the gay character to take his own life.

Huneke described how Mann chose to make the suicide appear romantic and gentle: The gay man committed suicide in the straight man's bed, in

what Mann describes as a wedding-night scene.

"It's seen as a romantic fulfillment of life," Huneke said, also pointing out that "instead of depicting something like suicide as a brutal, tragic act, it is depicted as a grand capstone to a miserable life. As if the best thing this character has done with his life is to kill himself."

Klaus Mann himself committed suicide in a hotel in Cannes in 1949.

Huneke also argues that the suicide trope crossed over into American culture in the early 20th century.

"When the Nazis took power in 1933, gay authors in Germany fled abroad, often to the United States, and may have taken the gay suicide trope with them," Huneke said.

Huneke also referenced the work of historian George Chauncey, who has noted that the early 1930s, when gay literature began appearing in the United States, "most ended with the death or suicide of the gay protagonist."

Huneke said that characterizing homosexuality as inextricably bound with suicide may have created ripple effects that have resulted in a greater incidence of suicide in Western LGBT communities today.

## **Reducing risk**

Huneke argues that the relationship between sexuality and suicide was constructed by Mann and many other authors.

"The emphasis on gay suicide in literary, medical and political literature ends up suggesting suicide as a reasonable option for gay men and gay women," Huneke said. His research challenges this method of depicting

suicide as a natural part of the human experience.

During his research, Huneke found suicide notes published in Weimar-era journals. Some of those notes use the same language used in literary works to describe suicide. This suggested to Huneke that the literature and discourse of the period were influential on real people's actions and decisions to commit suicide.

"Research into the causes of suicide has demonstrated that the more frequently someone is exposed to suicide, the more at risk they themselves are. So, is it any wonder that a community that has been bombarded with depictions of suicide should itself be more prone to it?" Huneke said.

Huneke said he hopes his work will convince the general public to take a more critical look at their own consumption of real and fictional portrayals of LGBT individuals.

"Discourse in general is extremely important in how minority groups reproduce their own identities," Huneke said. "The less that TV, film, and fiction rely on stereotype, the better it is for that community and for society at large."

Ultimately, Huneke said he believes that eliminating that stereotype in contemporary culture would not solve the problem by itself, but it would be a step in the right direction.

"The more realistic portrayals of [gay](#) characters that exist, the less likely it is that a teenager will see a romantically depicted suicide and think it is a reasonable solution to a difficult life," Huneke said.

Provided by Stanford University

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