

‘It is a beautiful experiment’: queer(y)ing the work of Alan Turing

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Abstract Alan Turing is known for both his mathematical creativity and genius and role in cryptography war efforts, and for his homosexuality, for which he was persecuted. Yet there is little work that brings these two parts of his life together. This paper deconstructs and moves beyond the extant stereotypes around perceived associations between gay men and creativity, to consider how Turing’s lived experience as a queer mathematician provides a rich seam of insight into the ways in which his life, relationships, and working environment shaped his work.

Keywords Alan Turing · Sexuality · Creativity · Mathematics · Computing

1 Introduction: Not answering the question

‘Turing/Must have been alluring/to be made a don/so early on’ – Clerihew written by Sherbourne school pupils, 1935.

Do you think there is a connection between him being gay and his creativity in mathematics?

- Email correspondence about presentation for UCLA symposium on Alan Turing, May 7th 2012.

The extraordinary breadth of Alan Turing’s work far exceeds his own too short life, including the cracking of the German Enigma ciphers, his design and development of universal machines and digital computers, and his conceptualisations around morphogenesis and artificial intelligence. Turing is also arguably one of history’s most

famous gay mathematicians, although the nature of this fame comes from his treatment by the UK government—despite his efforts in the war, Turing was prosecuted in 1952 for ‘gross indecency’ and subjected to hormone treatment. Two years later, at the age of 41, Turing killed himself.

There are few bodies of work that represents him in terms of both his capabilities and legacies of his work in technology and mathematics, and his sexuality; instead, most work focuses solely on one or the other. It took until 2009 for the then UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, to apologise for the way in which the government had treated Turing—both legally and pharmacologically—as ‘one of Britain’s most famous victims of homophobia’ but stopped short of a full pardon. The queerness of ‘Alan Turing, code-breaker of Bletchley Park’ has been invisibilised in public culture, with films such as ‘Enigma’ (2001) disavowing his gay identity by inventing a heterosexual love interest for the film version of Turing to develop a relationship with.

The question that opens this paper—an extended version of the talk given at the ‘Brainstorming Turing: Celebrating Alan Turing’ symposium held at UCLA on 25 May 2012—was offered as a means to begin considering the intersections between Turing’s life as an extraordinary mathematician and his life as an openly gay man. However, I choose not to answer it directly. Querying the sources of Turing’s creativity is valid and useful, carrying particular resonance in a time when there is ongoing discussion about the impact of the creative industries on the economy (UNCTAD 2010; Higgs et al. 2008) and of the importance of creative practice within science and technology more generally (e.g. Hemlin et al. 2004). There is accordingly an extensive, and growing, body of research that examines the roots of creativity—the production of novel and potentially useful

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