

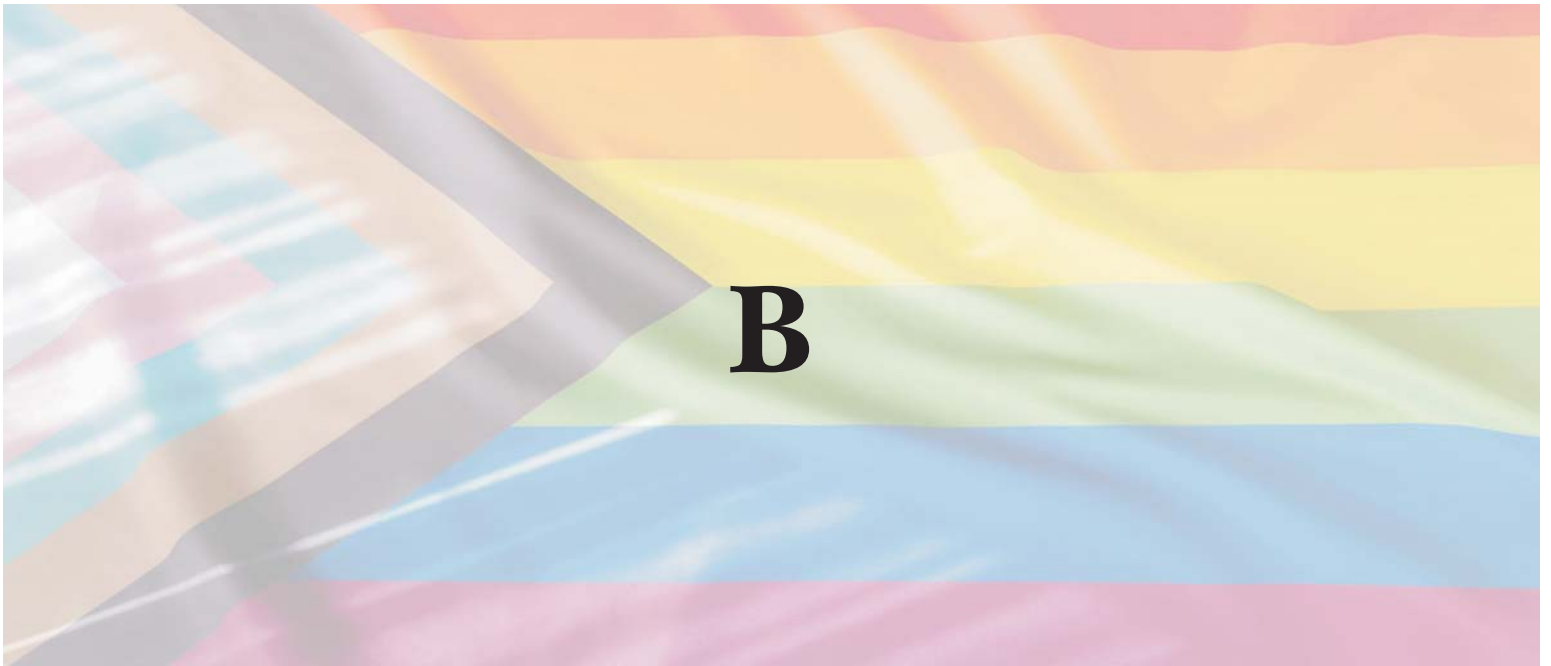
INTRODUCTION

Thirty years ago, a project this large would have been difficult to put together. Not only were there fewer open LGBTQ+ writers back then, but there were also—partly for that reason—many fewer texts, both primary and secondary, dealing with LGBTQ+ themes. In fact, the very term “LGBTQ+” had not yet been invented. The few scholarly works that did deal with literature of this sort tended to classify such literature as either simply “gay” or “lesbian,” with few (if any) complicating alternatives. Now, however, the situation has been reversed: not only have “bisexual,” “transsexual,” “transgender,” “queer,” and “questioning” been included in the common acronym, but the added “+” suggests numerous additional identities beyond the ones already mentioned. These include people who are intersexual, asexual, pansexual, two-spirit, or allies, to name just a few. Perhaps the list will lengthen even further, but for now “LGBTQ+” seems the most commonly used abbreviation.

Beginning especially in the 1990s, the loves that formerly dared not speak their names have become quite outspoken and very well recognized, and interest in the writers and writings associated with who one loves has grown exponentially as well. More and more authors identify as LGBTQ+, and more texts by such authors continually appear, as do more scholarly writings about those texts. Courses on LGBTQ+ writers and works are now commonly taught in colleges and even high schools; books on these topics are widely reviewed and frequently purchased; LGBTQ+ sections in bookstores are not uncommon; and references to the “LGBTQ+” community are now routine in the various media and in casual conversation.

Although several helpful reference books or sets dealing with LGBTQ+ literature already exist, this set is distinctive in a number of ways:

- It discusses writers’ LGBTQ+ works within the broader contexts of their larger careers, so that readers can see how their LGBTQ+ writings are either typical or atypical of their other works. Some of the writers included here (such as Elizabeth Bishop, Willa Cather, May Sarton, and many others) did not think of themselves as primarily “queer” writers and did not want to be “pigeon-holed” as such. Yet they nonetheless made important contributions to queer literature even if they were generally better known for other accomplishments.
- This set not only offers full essays on over 75 major writers (including an especially lengthy essay on Shakespeare) but also offers treatment of at least that many others in supplemental material spread throughout the set. These help provide additional contexts for the main essays, and that contextualization works in the opposite way as well. The full entry on Tony Kushner, for instance, is surrounded by additional material dealing with other recent LGBTQ+ plays and playwrights. Similarly, various entries dealing with major black writers are often supplemented by additional essays dealing with other African American authors of LGBTQ+ texts.
- This collection presents discussions of significant writers of LGBTQ+ literature not only from the distant past (such as Sappho, Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Katherine

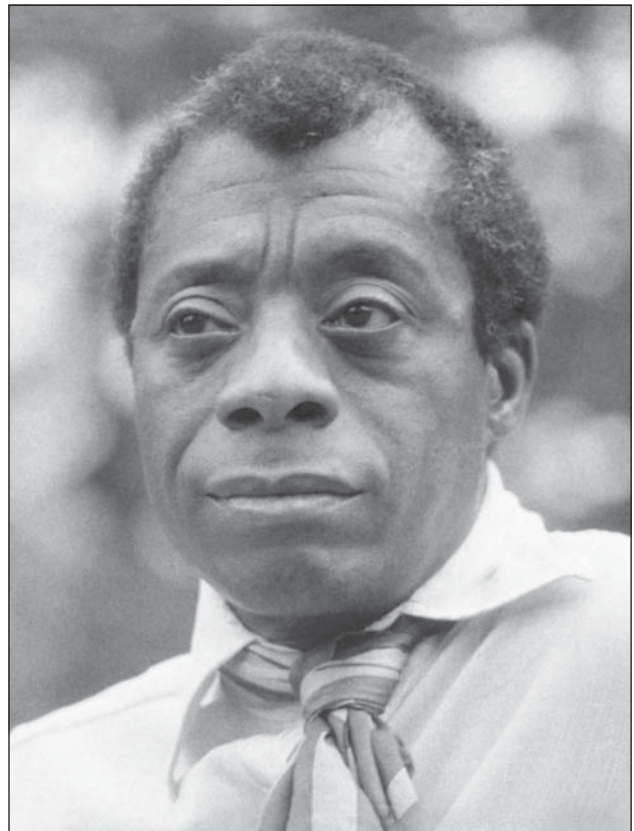


JAMES BALDWIN

James Baldwin is widely considered one of the very best writers of the twentieth century, both in the United States and abroad, to deal so often and so openly with homosexuality, especially as an African American author who broke with previous traditions of African American fiction by dealing with this topic (and with bisexuality).

Baldwin himself, as a black man who was also gay, suffered doubly from discrimination, some of it coming from other prominent blacks (such as Eldridge Cleaver, the civil rights activist) who felt either contempt for—or at least unease with—Baldwin’s homosexuality. Baldwin was excluded from the list of speakers at the landmark 1963 civil rights demonstration in Washington, DC, because some organizers thought his presence would reflect badly on the event. Before then, however, as a youth, he had already faced antigay prejudice from within his own family and local community, and even though he later wrote more and more openly about homosexual themes, for a time he tried to keep his own homosexuality hidden and sometimes rejected being labeled as “gay.” He took no very visible or active part in the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s (unlike his very open and vocal involvement in the black civil rights movement), and he spent much of his adult life in Europe, where he had fallen in love with a white European man, because he felt that Europe was a less racially and sexually prejudiced area than was the United States during

most of his lifetime. Cleaver’s harsh attacks on Baldwin only seemed to confirm the wisdom of Baldwin’s decision to live in Europe, where he had first relocated after the suicide of a gay friend in the



James Baldwin. Photo by Allan Warren, via Wikimedia Commons.

United States. Nevertheless, although Baldwin's treatment of homosexuality and bisexuality in his novels—and in occasional essays (e.g., “The Preservation of Innocence”) and short stories (e.g., “The Outing”)—damaged his reputation in the eyes of some, his courage in returning to those topics also eventually added to his stature in the eyes of others.

Homosexuality was already an important issue in Baldwin's early novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, although it is treated less emphatically there than in his landmark work *Giovanni's Room*, often considered one of the most important “gay” novels of the twentieth century. Baldwin was warned by his publisher that this new book would damage his career as a writer, but the author continued with it in any case. This book was one of the earliest and most open treatments of homosexual themes in American literature. It appeared not long after Gore Vidal's pathbreaking *The City and the Pillar*, although many critics consider Baldwin's book superior to Vidal's. Set in Europe, *Giovanni's Room* features white characters, including a conflicted American bisexual named David; the American woman (Hilda) he plans to marry; and the gay Italian (Giovanni) with whom David has a brief relationship. Although the book ends tragically (especially for Giovanni), it at first seems to offer at least the chance of happiness for the two men, although David—a complex character whom some readers grow to dislike—cannot bring himself to embrace Giovanni as openly and fully as he might wish. Some readers have disliked the book's depiction of certain unattractive aspects of gay life; others have condemned it for being “effeminophobic”; and some have called its apology for homosexuality mainly negative. Few critics, however, dispute the importance of the novel, and most have celebrated it for its memorable plot, its effective characterization, its realistic depiction of the issues with which it deals, its impressive style, and its rejection of sentimentality.

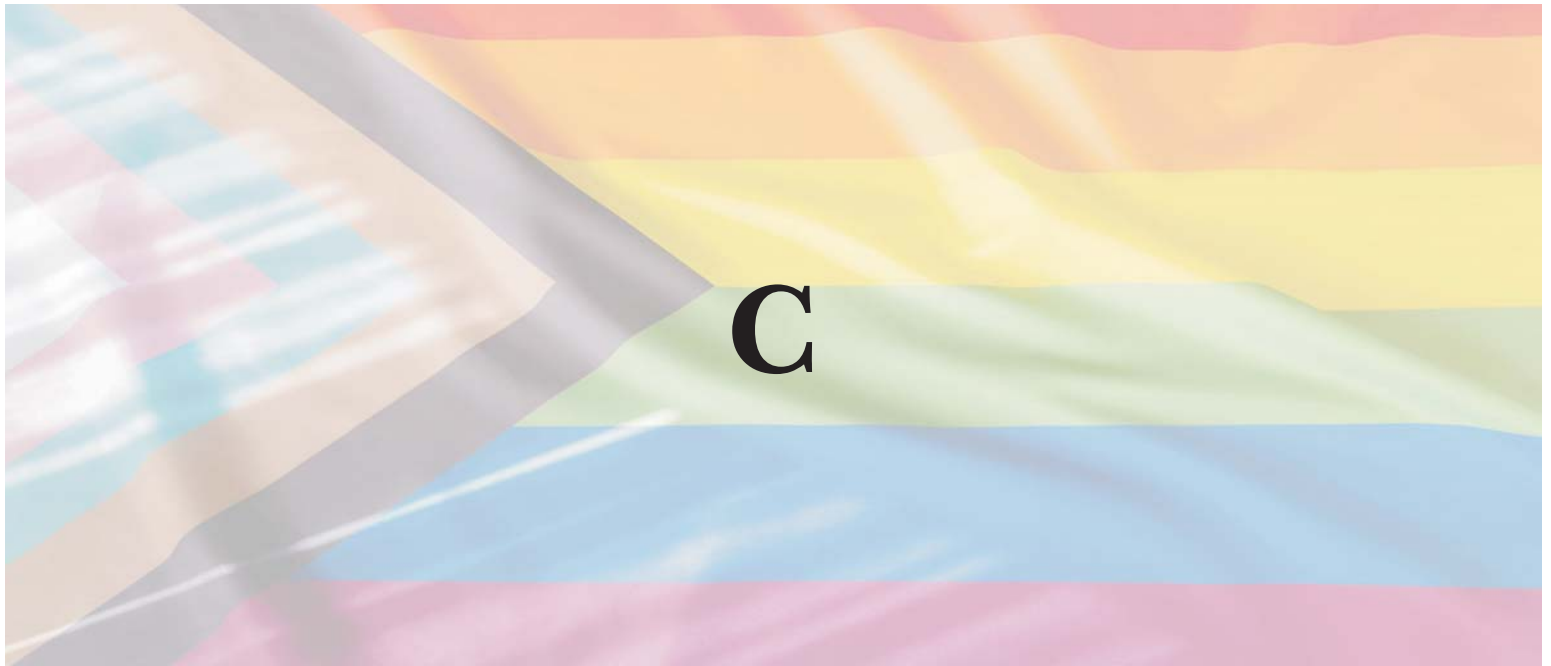
Baldwin's next major work dealing with gay and bisexual themes—a novel titled *Another Country*—has often been strongly praised. It has been commended for treating homosexuality as a valid, satisfying, even redemptive lifestyle rather than as a pathological condition; for subtly weaving together both racial and sexual protest; for its emphasis on the possibility of genuine love within a deliberately varied

group of non-straight characters; for its exploration of the sheer variety of possible sexual relationships; and for its relatively happy ending during an era when “gay” novels often concluded with a killing or a suicide. Some critics have called this work a masterpiece and have strongly defended it against occasional attacks.

Although homosexuality also appears as a topic in later novels by Baldwin, including *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and *Just Above My Head*, most of the critical attention devoted to this issue has focused on the earlier books already discussed above. An intriguing feature of much critical commentary dealing with Baldwin is how often his interest in bisexuality has been discussed (especially by David Bergman, Mark Lilly, and Marjorie Garber), the last of whom wrote that *Giovanni's Room* “resonates with the language of many of today's bisexuals, who insist that they fall in love with a person, not a gender,” although she thought that David, the apparently bisexual character, really did not like women very much, unlike Baldwin himself, whom she called a “strong supporter of communication between women and men.”

BIOGRAPHY

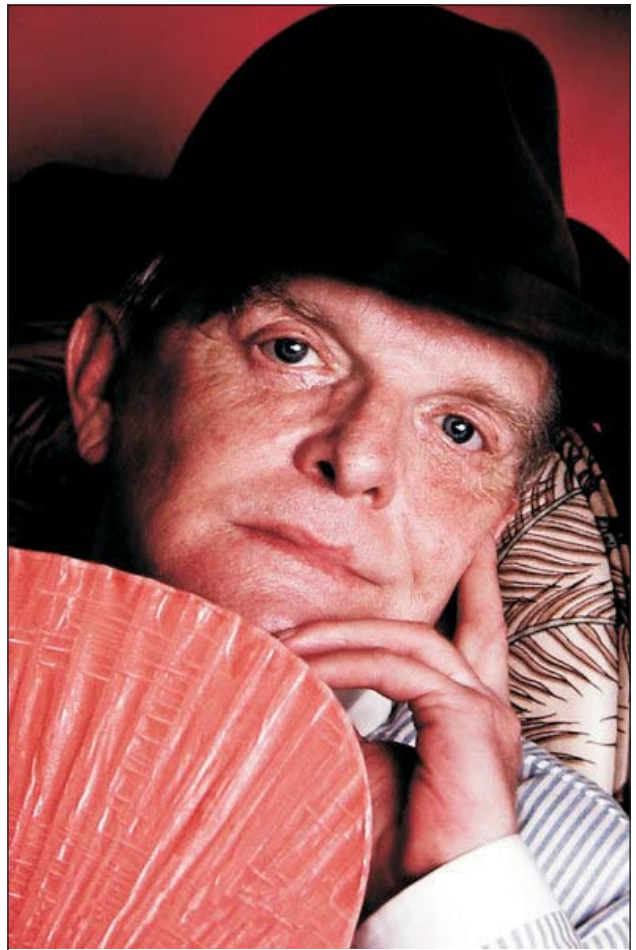
James Arthur Baldwin once dismissed his childhood as “the usual bleak fantasy.” Nevertheless, the major concerns of his fiction consistently reflect the social context of his family life in Harlem during the Depression. The dominant figure of Baldwin's childhood was clearly that of his stepfather, David Baldwin, who worked as a manual laborer and preached in a storefront church. Clearly the model for Gabriel Grimes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, David Baldwin had moved from New Orleans to New York City, where he married Baldwin's mother, Emma Berdis. The oldest of what was to be a group of nine children in the household, James assumed a great deal of the responsibility for the care of his half-brothers and half-sisters. Insulated somewhat from the brutality of Harlem street life by his domestic duties, Baldwin, as he describes in *The Fire Next Time*, sought refuge in the church. Undergoing a conversion experience, similar to that of John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, at age fourteen in 1938, Baldwin preached as a youth minister for the next several years. At the same time, he began to read,



TRUMAN CAPOTE

Capote's greatest accomplishment was his merging of the dramatic narrative techniques of fiction with the objective reportage of journalism in what he termed "the nonfiction novel." He is widely considered one of the most important gay authors of his time, although many gay persons and critics of his era faulted him for allegedly reinforcing various supposedly negative stereotypes about gay men.

Truman Capote was one of the earliest and most visible gay American writers in the second half of the twentieth century, although he rarely explicitly identified himself as gay, but was widely assumed to be so because of his unusual manner of speaking (he had a very high-pitched voice) and behaving (he was often considered strikingly effeminate). These traits were often on wide display through his many appearances on television, and in fact many gay people of his era accused Capote of reinforcing common stereotypes of gays as extremely effeminate, interested in gossip, and somewhat "bitchy." Later, as his life began to collapse around him, he was often seen as reinforcing the stereotype of the "tragic gay" man, and both his fiction and his life were sometimes accused of being shallow and superficial. Capote himself admired the works of Marcel Proust, the French writer who had elaborately chronicled the society of his times and had featured various gay and lesbian characters while doing so. In his own society and times, Capote had to deal, at least at first, with extreme antigay preju-



Truman Capote, 1980. Photo by Jack Mitchell, via Wikimedia Commons.

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SAPPHO

Sappho (who actually lived on the island of Lesbos) is widely considered the earliest and most influential of all the women writers who have been identified as “lesbians.” For centuries she was the most famous inspiration for female authors writing about love between women. Although some male writers have for various reasons long resisted calling her a “lesbian” in the standard sense, and although some evidence has led various scholars to claim she was bisexual or even heterosexual, she was also long attacked precisely for being a “lesbian” in the current sense of that word. In any case, few deny her enormous skill as a poet and the powerful beauty of her poems.

While some scholars note that Sappho was probably married to a man, others suggest that even if this were so it would not exclude the possibility that she herself experienced “lesbian” feelings. In any case she often wrote about such feelings in her poems. Marriage was common and indeed expected for Greek women of her era, and in fact Sappho herself wrote poems celebrating heterosexual love and heterosexual marriage. Sappho has long been depicted as the head of an informal school for girls, a school in which affection among females seems to have been taken for granted, even if most of the students did eventually marry men. Sappho’s poems are often credited with implying genuine mutuality and equality between women, and, when she speaks of Love as a deity, she typically invokes the female Aphrodite rather than the male Cupid. The fact remains that most of her surviving love poems are not only about women but are often addressed to women.

Thanks in large part to the much-later Roman poet Ovid, who wrote about Sappho’s supposed infatuation with a young man named Phaon (who allegedly rejected her, supposedly causing her to kill



Sappho (1877) by Charles Mengin (1853–1933). One tradition claims that Sappho committed suicide by jumping off the Leucadian cliff. Image via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

herself), many later male writers depicted Sappho as a woman who ultimately abandoned women for men and then, when spurned by a man, committed suicide. In later periods, including the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, she was sometimes variously depicted as fat and ugly, as a whore, and/or as a failed heterosexual. But she has also long been celebrated for the sheer beauty of her verse, which not only deals with issues involving women in love but with such other themes as intense feelings (including jealousy), the appeal (but also the ephemerality) of physical beauty; the unfortunate fragility of love; and the occasional competition between women and men for the love of women.

As one of the most admired poets of the ancient world, Sappho was widely popular not only during

her lifetime but also for centuries after. Although she wrote nine books of poetry, very little of the corpus remains. Except for a very few phrases on vase paintings or papyri, Sappho's poetry has been preserved primarily in small bits that happened to be quoted by other writers. Some 170 of these fragments are extant, and although there may be among them one or two complete poems, most of the fragments consist of only a few lines or a few words. When Sappho's poem fragments are discussed, the numerical system of Edgar Lobel and Denys Page, *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta*, is used.

These fragments indicate that Sappho's poems were largely lyrical, intended to be sung and accompanied by music and perhaps dance. Although her poetry was thus traditional in form, it differed significantly in content from the larger body of Greek verse, which was written primarily by men. Whereas other Greek poets were mainly concerned with larger and more public issues and with such traditional masculine concerns as war and heroism, Sappho's poems are personal, concerned with the emotions and individual experiences of herself and her female friends. In exploring and describing the world of passion, in particular, Sappho departed from conventional poetic themes. Perhaps that is one of the reasons that her poetry was so popular in the ancient world.

Sappho's work has continued to be popular, however, not only because of the timelessness of her subject matter but also because of the exactness of her imagery and the intensity of her expression. Although her style is simple, direct, and conversational, her poems are powerful in creating an impression or evoking an emotion. Her world is therefore not the larger world of politics or warfare, but the smaller world of personal feeling. Nevertheless, in depicting the outer limits of that world—the extremes of jealousy as well as tenderness, the depths of sorrow as well as the heights of ecstasy—Sappho's writings set a standard for later lyric poets.

In addition to being well known for her subject matter, Sappho has come to be associated with a particular metrical form. Although she was probably not the inventor of Sapphic meter, it has been so named because of her frequent use of it. In Sapphic meter, the stanza consists of three lines, each of

which contains five feet—two trochees, a dactyl, and two more trochees—with a concluding fourth line of one dactyl and one trochee. The first line of the “Ode to Aphrodite” in the original Greek illustrates this meter. This ode is thought to have been accompanied by music written in the Mixolydian mode, a musical mode with which Sappho is also associated. Plutarch, in fact, claims that this mode, which is said to arouse the passions more than any other, was invented by Sappho.

Sappho's enduring reputation is based, however, on the fragments of her poetry that remain. Although those fragments themselves indicate her poetry's worth, there is in addition the testimony of other writers regarding the greatness of her accomplishment. She was praised and revered by a long line of ancients, including Solon, Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Catullus, Ovid, and Plutarch. Proving that imitation is the highest form of praise, some later poets actually incorporated her verse into their own compositions; Catullus's Poem 51, for example, is a slight reworking of a poem by Sappho. Plutarch, who, like Catullus, admired this particular ode, described it as being “mixed with fire,” a metaphor that could accurately be applied to the entire body of Sappho's remaining poetry.

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There are few details about Sappho's life that can be stated with certainty; the only evidence is what other writers said about her, and there is no way of knowing whether what they said is true. She is thought to have been of an aristocratic family of the island of Lesbos and to have had three brothers and a daughter named Cleis; dates of her birth and death, however, are not known. Athenaeus, writing around 200 CE, claimed that Sappho was a contemporary of Alyattes, who reigned in Lydia from 610 to 560 BCE; Eusebius of Caesarea, who was writing in the late third and early fourth centuries CE, refers to Sappho (also known as Psappho) in his chronicle for the year 604 BCE. Other writers indicate that Sappho lived at the time of another poet, Alcaeus of Lesbos, who seems to have been born around 620 BCE. It seems safe, therefore, to conclude that Sappho was born sometime during the last quarter of the seventh century and lived into the first half of the sixth century BCE.



ALICE WALKER

*Alice Walker, the popular and award-winning African American writer who has identified herself as a bisexual, drew strong notice for the positive way in which lesbianism is presented in *The Color Purple*, perhaps the best-known of all her many writings.*

Walker has often suggested that bisexuality and lesbianism can function as two means of liberation from various kinds of sexist oppression, whether imposed by white males or even by fellow black men. Indeed, June Pamelab argued in 2011 that one of “Walker’s ongoing objectives has been the subversion of heteronormativity,” which Pamelab defines as “a sociopolitical compulsion towards heterosexuality as the standard, ‘normal,’ and accepted way of life—a system that definitively labels ‘other’ ways of life as unnatural, abnormal, aberrant, and immoral.” According to Pamelab, in Walker’s view, “biological sex at birth determines how a person will be socialized; individuals are expected, consequently, to demonstrate the corresponding gendered behaviors. The heterosexual family unit functions continually to re-cycle this hegemonic system, as subjects are encouraged to pursue this same course or be labeled ‘deviant.’” Walker herself has written that “The men I have loved and been turned on by have said NO to all forms of domination, racist, classist, sexist or otherwise, and the women have done the same....I loved and desired them in their moments of resistance & glory; I love & admire them now” (see *Gatherin Blossoms* 406).

Thus, Iman Hami has suggested that “Walker sees lesbianism as a healing process to reunite all creatures including men. In [such] womanist thoughts, lesbianism exists as a step to-



Alice Walker on the cover of Ms. magazine alongside Gloria Steinem, Fall 2009. Photo courtesy of Ms. magazine, via Wikimedia Commons.

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OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde is one of the most-discussed "gay" authors of all time, perhaps even more as a gay man than as a gay writer. Wilde's notorious trials for allegedly indecent behavior made him, as several scholars have suggested, perhaps the first modern celebrity and certainly one of the most famous gay men who have ever existed. He came to be widely regarded as a martyr by many later members of the LGBTQ community, and his reputation as an effeminate gay man helped shape stereotypical assumptions about gay males for decades to come. His life was often associated, by his critics, with hedonism and decadence and, by his admirers, with courage and unmerited suffering. He seemed to exemplify the idea that gay men were dandies and aesthetes rather than more "masculine" types, such as Edward Carpenter, the great English champion of gay rights who was one of Wilde's contemporaries. Partly for this reason, Wilde is sometimes seen as a prominent figure in the history of a "camp" sensibility and thus helped associate later gays with that sensibility, which was often linked to effeminacy.

Interestingly, Wilde became known as primarily a gay person only late in his life. He had married and fathered children early in his career, and it seems to have been only in the second half of the 1880s that he began to behave (and secretly identify) as primarily a "homosexual" (a term that had only recently been invented). Wilde, in fact, is sometimes seen as a pivotal figure in the alleged transition from an early preoccupation with mere homosexual acts (which could be committed by people who did not and perhaps even could not think of themselves as "homosexuals") to a later preoccupation with gay "identity"—that is, with homosexuals as a specific and distinct kind of people. For scholars who adopt this approach, Wilde was not only one of the most famous gays in history but one of the very first gays in history, with Carpenter being another.

Wilde, in his youth, had been associated with the Anglo-Catholic "Oxford Movement," which was sometimes associated with homoeroticism. He was also influenced by Victorian "Hellenism," which often championed the idea of male beauty and of Platonic love between men. His association with aestheticism, or the idea of "art for art's sake," opened him to charges that he was less interested in using his art for moral purposes than with using it to create beauty for the sake of beauty. Wilde was in many ways an outsider, a self-consciously "witty" person who stood apart from society



Oscar Wilde, 1882. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]