

# Gay, Lesbian, Queer, and Transgender History, Theory, and Culture

Or

## Systems of Sex

*listed as*

Gay and Lesbian Literature

42.246

University of Massachusetts Lowell

Fall 2011

<http://gaylesbianlit-42-246-fall2011.wiki.uml.edu/>

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*Glen or Glenda?* (*I changed my sex*) dir. Ed Wood, 1953

Teaching a course in “gay and lesbian” “literature” always raises a number of questions for me. For one, it perhaps seems a little strange to even have a course focusing on gay and lesbian writers because so many gay and lesbian writers are already canonical and taught in many other courses. Try imagining an English department curriculum without Shakespeare, Byron, Whitman, Melville, Wilde, Woolf, Stein, Auden, Bishop, Baldwin, Rich . . . the list goes on. English and American literature *is* gay and lesbian literature.

But wait, you say, was Shakespeare gay? Or Melville or Woolf? Certainly their writing is charged with same-sex eroticism, but is it accurate to call them gay or lesbian? That might be an interesting question, and it’s one we will discuss, but it will turn out to be simply a jumping-off question rather than a question central to the class. It leads us, in other words, to other questions. Instead of asking whether such and such writer is gay, we will ask a somewhat different question: what does the author’s representation of sex and sexuality reveal to us about sex and sexuality at a particular historical moment?

What, for instance, does Walt Whitman's fantastically intense but difficult to penetrate (homo, omni, or onanistic?) eroticism in "Song of Myself" help us understand about the meaning of sex in the middle of the nineteenth century?

The "meaning of sex"? What do I mean by that phrase? Of course, it's easy to understand that sex has meaning, in one respect: sex means something to the people having the sex. But in this course, I mean something different than that. For lack of a more precise vocabulary, we will be interested in the political or ideological meaning of sex. Sex is an important element in many other systems of meaning. For instance, sex (and especially sexual object choice) plays an absolutely essential role in our notions of gender. To "feel like natural born woman," to quote Aretha Franklin, is to have desire for men (that's what the song is about, but what exactly is "desire," by the way?). Also, to name another "system," sex is often associated with the line between public and private; sex in this system of meaning is usually thought of as defining the realm of the private (even in very "public" forms of sexual representation, like pornography, where one is ostensibly given special access to the private). Different kinds of sex – same-sex sex (at least in the past), S&M sex, cross-generational sex, etc – also help define what counts as normal and what is understood as deviant – and not just normal and deviant acts, but normal and deviate "personalities" and "selves." Yes, sex even plays a role in the systems that define our deepest sense of the kind of person we are or someone else is; after all, for a long time now to be homosexual is not simply to take part in sexual acts with others of the same gender, but to be a particular kind of person – a homosexual – that reveals a lot more about you than the gender of people with whom you have sex. Has the meaning of homosexuality always functioned in this way? No, historians tell us, and this fact gives us an idea of just how much these systems of sex are constructed by various forces (political, ideological?) and an idea of how much they change through time. In addition to questions about these above "systems of sex," we might also ask about other systems: what role does sex play in our dominant systems of racial identification or our systems of Occident and Orient? How about our system of class?

So, the topic of this class is perhaps best summarized this way: "we discuss representations of sex (that is, literature and film, mostly) in order to investigate the various *systems of sex* that structure our lives and the lives of others throughout western history." An alternative title for this class (there are many alternative names) might be: "The Epistemologies of Sex" – you can google the word "epistemology."

Well, that's an overview, and a rather complex one. You might not get it all the first (or second) time reading it through. But if you did, it wouldn't be much fun to take the course. For those students who like definitive outcomes in their courses, I offer these:

At the end of the term students should be able to:

Explain the history (especially 20<sup>th</sup>-century history) of gay, lesbian, queer identities and movements in the U.S. and the west more generally.

Use some basic tenets of sexuality theory to think about gender identity, sexual identity, the family, media representation, heterosexism, heteronormativity, queerness.

Connect certain ideas from social theory (ideology, identity, community) together with certain ideas from sexuality theory (see above).

Consider how media representations (film, books, poetry, TV, etc) informs and impacts our understanding of gender identity, sexual identity, the family, media representation, heterosexism, heteronormativity (and how certain artists and groups have used media to critique these formations).

Consider the intersection of gender and sexual identities with race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, and illness (esp. AIDS).

Explain how sexuality has served as a linchpin in establishing hegemonic notions of the nation, the family, the community, urban space, and citizenship more generally.

Discuss the historical rift between women's studies and queer studies, and the overlapping areas of inquiry between the two fields. Also, discuss the tensions around transgender studies and feminism.

Above I mentioned that we base our inquiry into system of sex on literature and film. We also, I should quickly add, read a number of essays written by academics. Many of the essays (and other readings) are up on our wiki site (see the beginning of this syllabus). You do need to buy the following books, all available at the bookstore and many other places.

--Nella Larsen, *Passing*, Norton Critical Edition, ISBN 0393979164

--John Rechy, *City of Night*, Grove Press, ISBN 0802130836

--Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, Alyson Books, ISBN 1555838537

A few more things about the syllabus:

1. Reading the headings in the syllabus! They offer the themes for that section of the course. That said, many other issues and themes will come up as we move forward.
2. On any given day we may have a quiz, which you will score highly on if you've done the reading.

### ***Course Rules and Requirements***

1. **Class participation** makes possible a dynamic, collaborative learning community -- the possibility that we as a community produce knowledge. For this reason, class participation is part of your final grade. In order to participate you must, of course, come to class well prepared. Don't just do the reading, but write down questions you have and begin to develop opinions about

the reading. Always bring the assigned texts and materials with you to class: every class discussion will involve us in some close analysis of specific passages and images. I will often provide handouts with study questions, and you should come to class having considered those questions in depth. You should also come to each class with at least one marked passage or image and/or one well-considered question or observation to launch discussion. The less assertive need not fear: class participation is not measured by how much you talk; rather, it is the degree of your involvement with and attentiveness in the class, your ability to listen to and respond to your peers, your willingness to share your thoughts in a constructive way.

2. You will write two **formal paper/project** in this course. I will distribute handouts detailing requirements, due dates, and procedures. The assignment is due **AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS** on the date indicated on the syllabus, and must be typed. Late assignments lose half a letter grade for each class period late. **Only hard copies of written work will be accepted.**
3. **Plagiarism or cheating** of any sort will result in failure of the course. For a discussion of plagiarism see the plagiarism handout.
4. This course has two **tests**. Tests may only be taken late under extraordinary circumstances, and the student must provide a note from a doctor or a dean. In such situations, the request to take the test late must be made at least 24 hours in advance. Failure to follow these rules will result in a zero on the test.
5. **You are required to attend class.** Also, you must have prepared whatever material the assignment requires. An absence will affect your participation grade. And prolonged absences will lead to failure of the course. If you miss class more than three times I will expect you to see me in my office to discuss your future in the course and possible withdrawal. If you miss five classes you will fail the course.
6. If you come to class **excessively or repeatedly late**, it will affect your grade. Also, please refrain from getting up and leaving the room during class unless it's an emergency.
7. You may drink in class, **but you may not eat**. Please silence your phone (vibrate is not silence), and please refrain from messaging during class. If your phone is in any way used in class, I will immediately confiscate it and call my close friend who runs a gambling ring in Turkmenistan.
8. Your **final grade** is comprised of your grades on the papers/projects (each 20% of total), your grade on the two tests (20% each of total), and your grade on daily quizzes, class participation, and the presentation (together 20% of total).
9. In the event of a **class cancellation** because of snow or my absence, please stay current with the syllabus.
10. Please feel free to drop by my office hours to discuss the class or the reading/writing assignments. Of course, I will be happy to make appointments at other times if my office hours conflict with your schedule. **You can best reach me by email.**
11. You are responsible for checking your **UNIVERSITY email account**.

In accordance with University policy and the ADA, I will provide accommodation for students with documented disabilities. If you have a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services:

McGauvran 363 (978-934-4338) as soon as possible. They will contact me regarding effective accommodations. In order to speed up this process, you can also let me know in person or via email. This documentation is confidential.

## Syllabus

Week (1) of Sept. 5

W: Introduction to the course

Week (2) of Sept. 12

### Histories of Sexuality

M: David M. Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality?" (wiki)  
Michel Foucault, from *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1—just one page* (wiki)

W: Jonathan Ned Katz, "The Invention of Heterosexuality" (wiki)  
"Sexuality" from *New Keywords* – just a couple of pages (wiki)

Week (3) of Sept. 19

### Languages of Same-Sex Desire Before the Great Historical Divide

M: On friendship an sexual history:  
The following are all in one word doc on the wiki:  
Walt Whitman (wiki)  
Emily Dickinson (wiki)  
Gertrude Stein (wiki)

### The Meanings of Closets

W: Alfred Hitchcock, director, *Rope* (shown once before class; available in the UML Media Center and many other places).

Week (4) of Sept. 26

M: D.A. Miller, "Anal Rope" (wiki)  
Eve Sedgwick, from *Epistemology of the Closet* (wiki)

W: Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* (wiki), Ch. 1-14

Week (5) of Oct. 3

M: *Billy Budd*, cont. (wiki), Ch. 15 - End

W: Midterm

Week (6) of Oct. 10

M: NO CLASS: COLUMBUS DAY

## Sex and the Making of Race in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

W: Siobhan Somerville, from “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body” (wiki)

Week (7) of Oct. 17

M: Nella Larsen, *Passing* (5-43)

W: Larsen, *Passing*, cont. (43-81)

Week (8) of Oct. 24

## Social Theories and Sexualities

M: Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex” (wiki)

W: Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, “Sex in Public” (wiki)  
*Supreme Court Cases* (wiki)

Week (9) of Oct. 31

M: Two views of gay marriage:  
Michael Warner, from *The Trouble with Normal* (wiki)  
George Chauncey, from *Why Marriage* (wiki)

W: FIRST PAPER DUE

Week (10) of Nov. 7

## (Just) Before Stonewall: Queer Sixties

M: John Rechy’s *City of Night* (Introduction-84)

W: Rechy’s *City of Night*, cont. (85-173)  
Jack Smith, director, *Flaming Creatures* (on youtube.com; we’ll watch in class)

Week (11) of Nov. 14

M: Rechy, *City of Night*, cont. (175-280)  
Andy Warhol, director: *Kiss* and *Blowjob* (shown and discussed in class)

W: Rechy, *City of Night*, cont. (281-380 [end])

Week (12) of Nov. 21

## AIDS

M: Todd Haynes, director, *Poison* (shown before class and available at the media center and other locations)

W: Douglas Crimp, “How to have Sex in an Epidemic” (wiki)

Week (13) of Nov. 28

## Transgenders

M: Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (1-73)

W: FINAL PAPER DUE

Week (14) of Dec. 5

M: Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (75-207; note heavy reading load)

W: Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, cont. (209-256)  
Judith Halberstam, from *Female Masculinity* (wiki)

Week (15) of Dec. 12

M: Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, cont. (257-307)  
LAST DAY OF CLASS

EXAM during the exam period.