

Contextualizing Gender
Prof. Rashmi Gaur
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee

Lecture - 20
Eve Sedgwick's Epistemology of the Closet

Welcome dear friends, in the previous module, we had introduced the prominent queer theorist Eve Sedgwick and had discussed some of her major ideas, with the special focus to her critical work “Between Men”. Sedgwick had distinguished between male homosociality and male homosexuality, which violated the rules of homosociality by allowing the objectification of men.

“Between Men”, became a central document in the 1980s explosion of gay studies informed by feminism. In this module, today we shall look at her most influential work, “The Epistemology of the Closet” in detail. It is considered as one of the foundational texts of queer theory.

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Epistemology of the Closet (1990)

- Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* was published in 1990 in the midst of the AIDS pandemic in America.
- As a seminal work of queer studies, the book bridges the gap between theory and practice by analyzing homoerotic relationships in literary and philosophical history.
- It calls social and political attention to systematically marginalized groups in society and literature.
- The text is a progression of the analysis in Sedgwick's previous work on homosocial relationships, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985).

Source: University of California Press

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This book was published in 1990 in the midst of the AIDS pandemic in America. As a seminal work of queer studies, it bridges the gap between theory and practice by analyzing homoerotic relationships in literary and philosophical history. It calls social and political attention to systematically marginalized groups in society and literature.

The text is a progression of the analysis in Sedgwick's previous work on homosocial relationships between men.


The major argument she makes through this text is that the standard binary interpretation of human sexuality is too simplistic. And this over simplification has damaging repercussions throughout western culture. Sedgwick asked, if men's desire for other men is the great preservative of the masculinist hierarchies of western culture or is it among the most potent of the threats against them?

She compares the minoritizing view of homosexual and a universalizing assumption of a homosocial society. Minoritizing view that certain individual are truly born gay and only those born with the deviant traits share an interest in them. In comparison, universalizing assumption of a homosocial society is that homosexuality is important to persons with a wide range of sexualities.

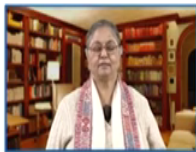
This view believes that there is no such thing as a stable erotic identity and while not everyone is bisexual in physical behavior, everyone is to some degree bisexual in their inherent qualities of mind and character. Her analysis which is deconstructive without theoretical discussions of deconstruction shows that each of these categories both contains and conflates with its opposite.

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- Sedgwick's methodological approach holds that the study of literature must be conducted along with an interrogation of the broader society in which it is situated.
- In *Epistemology of the Closet*, she examines authors from Europe and America, such as Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust and Herman Melville; to consider the historical moment when sexual orientation became an important signifier for personhood.
- She provides a history of sexuality that contends the dualistic homo/heterosexual model as a basis for modern culture.



Source: Routledge




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Sedgwick suggests that the study of literature must be conducted along with an interrogation of the broader society in which it is situated. She examines authors from Europe and America such as Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust and Herman Melville to consider the historical moment when sexual orientation became an important signifier for personhood.

She provides a history of sexuality that contains the dualistic homo and heterosexual model as a basis for modern culture. Through this book, she contributed to contemporary debates regarding the relationship between desire and normative structure of power, the question of empirical sexuality and the intricacies of the relation between sexuality and gender.

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- Sedgwick's inspiration for *Epistemology* came from her reading of D. A. Miller's essay, "Secret Subjects, Open Subjects", which Miller included in his work *The Novel and the Police* (1988).
- In her introduction to the text, Sedgwick treats the topic of "homosexual panic" as a way of introducing the main themes of the book.
- Sedgwick also identifies Deconstruction as the methodology that informs her study.
- Her deconstructivist approach shows that any social binary that defines subjects in society is not a relation of symmetry or balance between the terms.
- On the contrary, societal binaries are constituted by a relation of asymmetry in such a manner that one subordinates the other.



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Sedgwick's inspiration for *Epistemology* came from her reading of D. A. Miller's essay, with the title of "Secret Subjects Open Subjects" which Miller had included in his work "The Novel and the Police" in 1988. In her introduction to this book Sedgwick also treats the topic of homosexual panic as a way of introducing the main themes of the book.

She also identifies deconstruction as the methodology that informs her study. Her deconstructivist approach shows that any social binary that defines subjects in society is not a relation of symmetry or balance between the terms. On the contrary, societal binaries are constituted by a relation of asymmetry in such a manner that one subordinates the other.

Sedgwick deconstructs such binaries especially the ones which have been organized to favor heterosexual individuals in the context of gender. She asserts that it is only through the creation of the category homosexual that the heterosexual appeared. Through a century long process of medical, legal and psychiatric discourses, these categories came to have diametrically opposed meanings.

She exposes the dependence of a privileged heterosexual position upon the existence of a subordinated homosexual. Implicit in this analysis is a radical challenge to the foundation of much of contemporary lesbian and gay politics. The common strategy has been to assume that same sex, sexual activity is unique to a small number of individuals rather than seeing same sex contact; as one behavior in a range of erotic choices available to all human beings and not innately fixed to other aspects of personality or psychology but anything, but social construction.

While acknowledging that most of the civil rights gains made for lesbians and gays in the past 20 years have been achieved through maintaining a minority position. Sedgwick suggests that this strategy creates what is termed as a double bind. She insists that any useful anti homophobic project must continually question the definiteness of sexual categories.

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The slide features a quote by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on the left, a list of bullet points on the right, and a small video thumbnail at the bottom right. The quote reads: "I've heard of many people who claim they'd as soon their children were dead as gay. What it took me a long time to believe is that these people are saying no more than the truth. They even speak for others too delicate to use the cruel words. — Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick —". The bullet points are: "Sedgwick does not suggest discarding sexual categories and all minority political strategies for lesbians and gays." and "But she demands that we '[r]epeatedly... ask how certain categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations they are creating, rather than what they essentially mean." The slide footer includes the IIT ROORKEE logo, NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE text, and the number 5.

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categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations they are creating rather than what they essentially mean.

In the introduction to *Epistemology*, Sedgwick lays out seven axioms. Statements that underscore her work and serve as queer starting points for her later arguments; among these the first two are foundational to queer studies.

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Sedgwick's Axioms

- The first two axioms from the "Introduction" to *Epistemology*:
 1. People are different from each other.
 2. The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender.
- An example for the first axiom is that while many people experience sexual attraction towards others, some people never do and describe themselves as asexual.
- Similarly, in addition to attending to questions of sexual space or desire, we may bring in other lenses around gender, race and class etc., for analysis.
- Sedgwick highlights that sexuality extends along many dimensions that cannot be described in narrow ways.

Eve Sedgwick
Source: Artforum International


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The first two axioms are that people are different from each other and that the study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender. An example for the first exam is that while many people experience sexual attraction towards others, some people never do and describe themselves as asexual. Similarly, in addition to attending to questions of sexual space or desire, we may bring in other lenses around gender, race and class etc for analysis.

Sedgwick highlights that sexuality extends along many dimensions that cannot be described in narrow ways. Therefore, it is vital to disrupt or deconstruct the dominant ways of thinking about sexuality to reveal different forms of operation and subordination. Sedgwick's third and fourth axioms relate to the conceptualization of lesbian and gay identities where she argues that we need to rethink the commonly recited essentialist versus constructivist debates on sexuality.

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- Sedgwick's third and fourth axioms relate to the conceptualization of lesbian and gay identities, where she argues that we need to rethink the commonly recited 'essentialist versus constructivist' debates on sexuality.
- She puts forward an alternative, which she describes as a 'universalizing versus minoritizing' approach. (McCann and Monaghan, 2020)
- In her fifth axiom, Sedgwick critiques what she calls "the historical search for a Great Paradigm Shift" (1990, 44).
- She argues that those who seek to uncover a historical essence of homosexuality problematically juxtapose notions of "the past" with a unified image of contemporary gay experience.
- For Sedgwick, a deep analysis of the "relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence" of different models of sexuality is a more productive approach to queer studies.




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She puts forward an alternative, which she describes as a 'universalizing versus minoritizing' approach which we have discussed just now. In our fifth axioms, Sedgwick critiques what she calls "the historical search for a Great Paradigm Shift" and argues that those who seek to uncover a historical essence of homosexuality problematically juxtapose notions of "the past" with a unified image of contemporary gay experience.

For Sedgwick, a deep analysis of the "relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence" of different models of sexuality is a more productive approach to queer studies. Sedgwick's final two axioms relate to the literary canon and to issues of identification in literary as well as feminist theory.

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- Sedgwick reflects upon the power structures at play in the process of literary 'canonization'.
- She notes that the literary canon is a space of white, heterosexual privilege and that the establishment of mini-canons could create opportunities for greater acceptance of LGBT literature.
- In these final axioms, she notes that "the paths of allo-identification are likely to be strange ... so are the paths of auto-identification" (59).
- Here she reflects on the difference between "identifying with" [a woman] and "identifying as" [a woman]. This is also a testimony to her theoretical positioning as a heterosexual woman who rejected rigid identity categories in favour of gender fluidity.



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Reflecting upon the power structures at play in the process of literary 'canonization'. Sedgwick notes that the literary canon is a space of white heterosexual privilege and that the establishment of mini canons could create opportunities for greater acceptance of LGBT literature.


In these final axioms, she notes that "the path of allo-identification are likely to be strange; so are the paths of auto identification". Here she reflects on the difference between "identifying with" a woman and "identifying as" a woman. This is also a testimony to her theoretical positioning as a heterosexual woman who rejected rigid identity categories in favour of gender fluidity. The word allo still be slightly unfamiliar.

People who are allo-sexual are those that experience sexual attraction of any kind. Allo-sexual people might identify as gay lesbian, bisexual, pansexual or having another sexual orientation. Allo-sexual does not describe the gender you are attracted to, but rather the fact that you are sexually attracted to someone at all. 'Epistemology of the closet' is divided into five chapters. In chapter 1, Sedgwick takes up the notion of the closet.


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1. Epistemology of the Closet

- Chapter 1 bears the same name as the book. Sedgwick explores the relationship between the closet and what is known/unknown about one's sexual identity, as well as its impact on gay people's private and public life.
- She begins this chapter by detailing the 1973 legal case of Joe Acanfora, an eighth-grade science teacher in America who was removed from his teaching position after the school board discovered that he was gay. Acanfora took this unjust decision of the school board to the court.
- Sedgwick feels that the 'secrecy/admission bind' of one's homosexual orientation created a system in which staying "in the closet" allowed Acanfora to keep his job, albeit under some fears.



Joe Acanfora, 1972
Source: Washington Area Spark



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Chapter 1 also bears the same name as the book and Sedgwick explores the relationship between the closet and what is known or unknown about one's sexual identity as well as its impact on gay people's private and public life. She begins this chapter by detailing the 1973 legal case of Joe Acanfora, an eighth-grade science teacher in America who was removed from his teaching position after the school board discovered that he was gay and has discussed it publicly. Acanfora took this unjust decision of the school board to the court.


Sedgwick feels that the "secrecy and admission bind" of one's homosexual orientation created a system in which staying "in the closet" allowed Aconfora to keep his job albeit under some fears. His coming out gave the board of education the legal means of barring his exist to continue teaching in the classroom; merely, because his homosexuality had become a part of public knowledge.

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- Sedgwick notes that the court did not revoke the decision of the board which prevented him from returning to teaching.
- Although the court ruled that one's right to be a homosexual is protected by the First Amendment's freedom of association, he was provided with no relief for any of the constitutional violations committed against him.
- Sedgwick says,
 - The most obvious fact about this history of judicial formulations is that it codifies an excruciating system of double binds, systematically oppressing gay people, [their] identities and acts by undermining ... the grounds of their very being. (70)



Washington Post Headline – June 1, 1973 after court ruled against Acanfora.



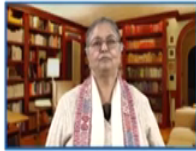
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The court did not revoke the decision of the board preventing him from going back to the classes and his teaching. Although the court ruled out that one's right to be a homosexual is protected by the First Amendment's freedom of association. He was provided with no relief for any of the constitutional violations committed against him and Sedgwick comments that the most obvious fact about this history of judicial formulations is that it codifies an excruciating system of double binds, systematically oppressing gay people, their identities and acts by undermining the grounds of their very being.

This legal case reveals the double bind structure of homosexual life. If one remained in the closet, there was a danger of being found out, but coming out of the closet also resulted in exposure to oppression. Sedgwick does not see the closet operating only in relation to the lives of LGBTQ people, but she does acknowledge its central place in LGBTQ experience.

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- Sedgwick says, for many gay people the closet is:
 - Still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence. (68)
- For Sedgwick, the closet problematizes what counts as speech and language.
- She reads the closet through the notion of performativity. She argues that the closet is performative in that it is part of a “language of sexuality”. It intersects and transforms other languages and relations by which we perceive, because being in the closet involves the specific act of not disclosing or speaking about one’s sexuality or gender identity.



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Sedgwick suggest that for many gay people, the closet is still the fundamental feature of social life and there can be few gay people; however, courageous and forthright by habit; however, fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still are shaping presence. For Sedgwick, the closet problematizes what counts as speech and language.

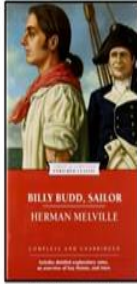
She reads the closet through the notion of performativity. She argues that the closet is performative in that it is part of a “language of sexuality”. It intersects and transforms other languages and relations by which we perceive, because being in the closet involves this specific act of not disclosing or speaking about one’s sexuality or gender identity.

According to Sedgwick, this silence is rendered as a performative speech. This highlights that ignorance of others is as potent as knowledge. Like knowledge, ignorance can be harnessed, licensed and regulated. Here Sedgwick illuminates not only how sexuality is made visible through the closet, but also how it is implicated in structures of oppression.


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2. Some Binarisms (I and II)

- The second and third chapters of *Epistemology* are titled "Some Binarisms" (Parts I and II).
- Sedgwick illustrates the figure of John Claggart, a gay policeman on a ship in Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd*, to present her arguments.
- In the story, Billy Budd is a "handsome sailor" who strikes and inadvertently kills his false accuser John Claggart.
- The ship's Captain, Edward Vere, recognizes Billy's lack of intent, but claims that the law of mutiny requires him to sentence Billy to be hanged.



Billy Budd book cover
Source: Simon & Schuster



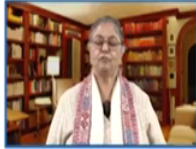
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The second and third chapters of *Epistemology* are titled "Some Binarisms" I and II. Sedgwick illustrates the figure of John Claggart, a gay policeman on a ship in Melville's novella *Billy Budd*, to present and analyze her arguments further. In this story, Billy Budd is a "handsome sailor" who is strikes and somehow inadvertently kills the false accuser John Claggart.

The ship's captain, Edward Vere, recognizes Billy's lack of intent, but claims that the law of mutiny, requires him to sentence Billy to be hanged. Melville did not finish the manuscript of the novella, the unfinished manuscript was completed by Melville scholars and was later published posthumously.

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- The plot of Melville's novella is set against the backdrop of mutinies against British navy ships. While Claggart is in charge of keeping the ship in order, it is these mutinies that raise Billy's suspicions about Claggart's 'moral character'.
 - Claggart is described in the text as "mysterious", "secretive", "peculiar", and "exceptional". His "peculiarity" is further defined as "natural depravity". However, it is difficult to understand him. As Barbara Johnson points out in her essay "Melville's Fist", "what we learn about the master-at-arms is that we cannot learn anything" (94).
- The climax of this story comes after Billy accuses Claggart of nefarious activity, and Vere intervenes by arbitrating the situation from within the privacy of the captain's quarters. During this interrogation, Billy finds himself speechless and in a moment of rage he accidentally kills him.



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However, it is difficult to understand him. As Barbara Johnson points out in her essay "what we learn about the master at arms is that we cannot learn anything". The climax of the story comes after Billy accuses Claggart of nefarious activity and Vere intervenes by arbitrating the situation from within the privacy of his quarters.

During this interrogation, Billy finds himself speechless and in a moment of rage, he accidentally kills Claggart. Sedgwick posits that the interrelationships between Billy, Claggart and Captain Vere are representations of male homosexual desire and the mechanisms of prohibition against this desire.

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- Sedgwick points out that Claggart's 'depravity' being defined as a "depravity according to nature," is an indication of his status as the central homosexual figure in the text.
- The story of Billy Budd is relevant for Sedgwick because of the stereotypes of opacity and secrecy in homosexual identity and desire. These stereotypes are strengthened by Claggart's status as a policeman.
- Melville's story is constitutive of heteronormative masculinity and heteronormative male-male relations.
- Heterosexual men are compelled to unceasingly police their desires and the desires of others.
- This unfounded suspicion verges on madness as depicted in Billy's murder of Claggart.



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Claggart's 'depravity' being defined as a "depravity according to nature", in Sedgwick's opinion is an indication of his status as a central homosexual figure in the text. The story of Billy Budd is relevant because of the stereotypes of opacity and secrecy in homosexual identity and desire. These stereotypes are strengthened by Claggart's status as a policeman. Melville's story is constitutive of heteronormative masculinity and heteronormative male-male relations. Heterosexual men are compelled to unceasingly police their desires and the desires of others.

The unfounded suspicion verges on madness as depicted in Billy's murder of Claggart. Therefore, the mutiny that happens on the ship in Billy Budd can be interpreted as a portrayal of homophobia in the political circumstances of the period. This reading of Sedgwick of a canonical literary figure like Melville shocked readers in the 1990s, a time when queer theory was not majorly included in the academia. Queer theory in Sedgwick's deconstructed analysis challenged people to question definitions and frames of reference they previously would have never doubted.

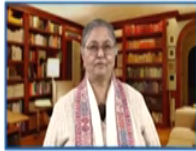
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3. Wilde, Nietzsche and the Sentimental Relations of the Male Body

- In the third chapter, Sedgwick explores the works of Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche, and how homophobic anxieties were embedded with heterosexual identity during the end of 1800s.
- She highlights the influence of ancient Greek art's perception of the male body during the Romantic period.
- According to Sedgwick, both Nietzsche and Wilde re-evaluated the significance of heterosexual masculinity in the light of German and English attitudes toward Ancient Greek art.



Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche
Source: Britannica




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In the third chapter, Sedgwick explores the works of Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche and how homophobic anxieties were embedded with heterosexual identity during the end of 1800s. She highlights the influence of ancient Greek art's perception of the male body during the Romantic period. According to Sedgwick, both Nietzsche and Wilde re-evaluated the significance of heterosexual masculinity in the light of German and English attitudes towards Ancient Greek art.

The male figure and the possibility of homosexuality had a more general social acceptance in the Greek mythology and art as compared to Victorian sentimentality.

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- Sedgwick says, “For Nietzsche as for Wilde, a conceptual and historical interface between Classical and Christian cultures became a surface suffused with meanings about the male body”. (136)
 - She cites the example of how the artist Basil describes Wilde’s fictional character Dorian Gray as “all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek”. (137)
 - Similarly Nietzsche associates homoerotic desire with the virility of ancient Dionysian warrior classes. He does not equate same-sex desire with effeminacy.
- However new divisions were gradually drawn between heterosexual and homosexual life in these writers, and heterosexuality was able to secure its ‘non-homosexual’ status through measured displays of sentimentality, thus coming across as more socially acceptable:
 - At the end of Wilde’s novel, the handsome young Dorian became a dead, old, “loathsome” man lying on the floor.



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Sedgwick says, that “For Nietzsche as for Wilde, a conceptual and historical interface between Classical and Christian cultures became a surface suffused with meanings about the male body”. She cites example of how the artist Basil describes Wilde’s fictional character Dorian Gray as “all the perfection of the spirit that is Greek”.

Similarly, Nietzsche associates homoerotic desire with the virility of ancient Dionysian warrior classes. He does not equate same-sex desires with effeminacy. However, new divisions were gradually drawn between heterosexual and homosexual life in these writers and heterosexuality was able to secure its ‘non homosexual’ status through measured displays of sentimentality, thus coming across as more socially acceptable.

At the end of Wilde’s novel, the handsome young Dorian became a dead, old, “loathsome” man lying on the floor. This ending of Dorian gray is similar to the ending of Melville’s Billy Budd where Billy is taken to the gallows for execution. Any possibility of sexual visibility in these works ends either in tragedy or in death.


Sedgwick views Nietzsche through a Wildean optic, and compares the late 1800s of England in Germany. Owing to prevalence of Christian/Greek contrast in morality and sentimentality, the romantic ideal in the writings of Nietzsche and Wilde, in the opinion of Sedgwick, reestablish the boundary between heterosexual and homosexual.

Sedgwick says that the western gay male identity tends to be contained in modern male heterosexuality. Because in the late 1800s, representation of homosociality is distanced from homosexual desire due to the conservatism in the morality of the period.

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**4. The Beast in the Closet:
James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic**

- In chapter 4, alluding to D. H. Lawrence and James M. Barrie, Sedgwick begins by reflecting on how Victorian and Gothic literature interpreted the values around heterosexual masculinity and how social norms were integrated into literary narratives.
- For Sedgwick, the Victorian literature marked a shift which defines the hetero/homosexual binary. Victorian literature depicted the male hero as isolated, aloof, and defined by a lack of desire.
- On the other hand, Gothic literature depicted the male hero as persistent and determined, almost to the point of martyrdom.




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In chapter 4, alluding to D. H. Lawrence and James M. Barrie, Sedgwick begins by reflecting on how Victorian and Gothic literature interpreted the values around heterosexual masculinity and how social norms were integrated into literary narratives. For Sedgwick, the Victorian literature marked a shift which defines the hetero/homosexual binary. Victorian literature depicted the male hero as isolated aloof and defined by a lack of desire. On the other hand, Gothic literature depicted the male hero as persistent and determined, almost to the point of martyrdom.


Sedgwick shows, that during the Victorian era the lines between heterosexual and homosexual life were recast in a way; that heterosexual masculinity came to be defined by the singular trait of aloof detachment from the whole of social life. To demonstrate this, she first illustrates the example of the famous British novelist William Makepeace Thackeray. Thackeray's novels like "Vanity Fair" or "the Adventures of Philip" are best known for their panoramic representation of the British society.

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- Sedgwick argues that Thackeray (1811-1863) popularized the figure of the “urban bachelor” (189).
- The mid-Victorian character of “the bachelor” is characterized by a “desexualized” persona.
- She contrasts the bachelor with the Gothic hero who is suicidally inclined or shows great rage or euphoria and is a central character to the plot.
- The bachelor, on the other hand, is a distinctly circumscribed and often a marginalized figure in the books.



William Thackeray
Source: Boston Public Library



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Sedgwick argues that Thackeray popularized the figure of the “urban bachelor”. The mid-Victorian character of “the bachelor” is characterized by a “desexualized” persona. She contrasts the bachelor with the Gothic hero who is a suicidally inclined or shows great rage or euphoria and is a central character to the plot.


The bachelor on the other hand, is a distinctly circumscribed and often a marginalized figure in the books. Joseph Sedley from ‘Vanity Fair’ and other fictional characters like Major Pendennis and Archie Clavering are all examples of such bachelor characters from Victorian fiction.

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- Thackeray's bachelors created/reinscribed a personality type which was one possible path of response against the "strangulation of homosexual panic" (Sedgwick, 1990).
- Sedgwick highlights Thackeray's novel *Lovel, The Widower* (1860), as its finest example.
- She argues that "to refuse a sexual choice, in a society where sexual choice for men is both compulsory and always self-contradictory" is a type of 'self-marginalizing' (193).
- Sedgwick criticizes this "sexual anesthesia" of heroes from fiction as it becomes a method for minoritizing or altogether rejecting the possibility of homosexual desire.



Source: Forgotten Books




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Thackeray's bachelors created or reinscribed a personality type which was one possible path of response against the "strangulation of homosexual panic". Sedgwick highlights Thackeray's novel 'Lovel, The Widower', as its finest example. She argues that "to refuse a sexual choice in a society where sexual choice for men is both compulsory and always self-contradictory" is a type of 'self-marginalizing'.


Sedgwick criticizes this "sexual anesthesia" of heroes from fiction as it becomes a method for minoritizing or altogether rejecting the possibility of homosexual desire. Similar forms of silence and suppression of same sex desire are traced in the works of Henry James.

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- Sedgwick refers to Henry James's 1903 novella *The Beast in the Jungle*, considered as one of his finest short narratives, dealing with the themes of love, loneliness, fate and death.
- It tells the story of John Marcher, a neurotic egoist, obsessed with the lurking feeling that something incredible is about to happen to him – like encountering a beast in the jungle.
- Consumed with anticipation and dread, Marcher is unable to reciprocate the love of his companion, May Bartram.
- Eventually May passes away and Marcher realizes that the greatest tragedy in his life was his inability to comprehend her love for him.



Henry James
Source: John Singer Sargent



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Sedgwick refers to the 1903 novella ‘The Beast in the Jungle’ by Henry James which is considered as one of his finest short narratives dealing with the themes of love, loneliness, fate and death. It tells the story of John Marcher, a neurotic egoist, obsessed with the lurking feeling that something incredible is about to happen to him - like encountering a beast in the jungle. Consumed with anticipation and dread, Marcher is unable to reciprocate the love of his companion, May Bartram.


Eventually May passes away and Marcher realizes that the greatest tragedy in his life was his inability to comprehend her love for him. Sedgwick deconstructs this story to present a queer reading.

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- Sedgwick notes that the story begins with a statement that John Marcher has a “secret”. Although the story notes that the secret is that of facing a beast, Sedgwick argues that his ‘bestly secret’ is nothing but his homosexuality.
- Sedgwick suggests that May Bartram *may* feel desire for Marcher, but in the beginning she gets involved with him because she senses that he is imprisoned by homosexual panic. (201)
- May has opted for helping Marcher come out of his closet or dissolve it, rather than perpetuating it.



Source: naxosaudiobooks.com Source: Kobo Books



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Sedgwick notes that the story begins with a statement that John Marcher has a “secret”. Although the story notes that the secret is that of facing a beast, Sedgwick argues that his “bestly secret” is nothing but his homosexuality. Sedgwick suggests that Mary Bartram may feel desire for Marcher, but in the beginning, she gets involved with him because she senses that he is imprisoned by homosexual panic. May has opted for helping Marcher come out of his closet or dissolve it, rather than perpetuating it. Sedgwick finds that May is also imprisoned in the closet with Marcher.

This happens because he cannot perceive or value her as a person beyond her complicity in his own predicament. Marcher on the other hand is vexed and trapped in self ignorance around his homosexual possibilities. Acknowledging his sexuality is the only way to free himself of his perennial fear and worry.

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- Sedgwick notes that at the end of the story, Marcher turns into a man incapable of love, either homosexual or heterosexual.
- By the predominance of heterosexual compulsion, his life was defined by constant deflection through suppression of desire, and he replaced his instinctual sexual drive with envy.
- Sedgwick opines that this self-deception marked by a lack of introspection and self-knowledge is suggestive of homosexual panic of the period, which forced people to live closeted lives.

A story has its purpose and its path; it must be told correctly for it to be understood.
— Henry James

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Sedgwick opines that this self-deception marked by a lack of introspection and self-knowledge is suggestive of homosexual panic of the period, which forced people to live closeted life. She shows, how heterosexuality secured, its non homosexual status by rejecting occasions for desire and attachment. Through her reading of Henry James “The Beast in the Jungle”, Sedgwick locates its protagonist as a victim of homosexual panic and demonstrates the destructive effect that the closeting of homosexuality can have on women.

Sedgwick’s inquiries into proofs in the final chapter demonstrate once again the importance of the open secret of the closet; that much discussed condemned and medicinalized the space for the love that dare not speak its name to modern politics, philosophy, religion and society.


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5. Proust and the Spectacle of the Closet

- In the final chapter, Sedgwick turns her attention to the French novelist Marcel Proust (1871-1922), famous for his monumental seven-volume novel *In Search of Lost Time* (French: *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913-1927).
 - The first translation to English was titled *Remembrance of Things Past*.
- It follows the narrator's recollections of childhood and experiences into adulthood in the late 19th and early 20th century France, while reflecting on the loss of time and lack of meaning in the world.
- Sedgwick focuses her reading on the two queer characters in the novel.



Marcel Proust
Source: Britannica



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Proust is famous for his monumental seven volume novel ‘In Search of Lost Time’ which was published originally in French between 1913 and 1927. The first translation to English was titled, ‘Remembrance of Things Past’. It follows the narrator’s recollections of childhood and experiences into adulthood in the late 19th and early 20th century France, while reflecting on the loss of time and lack of meaning in the world. Sedgwick focuses her reading on the two queer characters in the novel.

She identifies Proust’s masterpiece as the most vital center of the energies of gay literary high culture. It offers the definitive performance of the incoherence of modern gay and non-gay sexual specification and gender.

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- Questions pertaining to homosexuality appear throughout the novel.
- The theme is first mentioned in Volume One, titled *Swann's Way*, where the daughter of the piano teacher Vinteuil is seduced and the narrator observes her having lesbian relations.
- The narrator invariably suspects his lovers of liaisons with other women.
- Critics have often observed that while the character of the narrator is ostensibly heterosexual, Proust intimates that the narrator is a closeted homosexual. (Lucy, 2006)
- The narrator's manner towards male homosexuality is consistently aloof, yet the narrator is unaccountably knowledgeable.



Source: Kobo Books



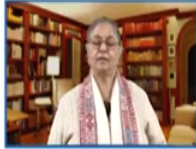
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Questions pertaining to homosexuality appear throughout the novel. The theme is first mentioned in Volume One, title *Swann's Way*, where the daughter of the piano teacher is seduced and the narrator observes her having lesbian relations. The narrator invariably suspects his lovers of liaison with other women. Critics have often observed that while the character of the narrator is ostensibly heterosexual, Proust intimates that the narrator is a closeted homosexual.

The narrator's manner towards male homosexuality is consistently aloof, yet the narrator is unaccountably knowledgeable. This strategy enables Proust's to pursue themes related to male homosexuality. In particular, the nature of closetedness from both within and without a homosexual perspective.

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- Lesbianism tortures the character of Charles Swann and the narrator, because it presents an inaccessible world. Whereas male homosexual desire is recognizable. Lesbian trysts of Odette and Albertine thus also represent Swann and the narrator's painful exclusion from desire.
- Sedgwick takes our attention to Baron de Charlus, a licentious gay man who is "spectacularly closeted".
- Proust's narrator describes Charlus and Albertine as different in every relevant way, despite both being homosexuals.
- Regardless of the suspicion surrounding Charlus's true sex and Albertine's sexuality, both figures are cast as inhabiting a feminine position relative to the world of the text as a whole.




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Lesbianism tortures the character of Charles Swann and the narrator, because it presents an inaccessible world whereas, male homosexual desire is recognizable. Lesbian trysts of Odette and Albertine this also represents Swann in the narrator's painful exclusion from desire. Sedgwick takes our attention to Baron de Charlus, a licentious gay man who is "spectacularly closeted". Proust's narrator describes Charlus and Albertine as different in every relevant way, despite both being homosexuals.

Regardless of the suspicion surrounding Charlus's true sex and Albertine's sexuality, both figures are cast as inhabiting a feminine position relative to the world of the text as a whole. In other words, Sedgwick wants to show that what becomes tied to heteronormativity is not femininity, but masculinity.

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- For Sedgwick, Proust was only able to conceive his previously fragmentary work as a unified novel on the basis of what she calls as “the spectacle of the closet.”
- Sedgwick refers to the character of Baron de Charlus as “the novel’s most ravishingly consumable product.”
- The “spectacle of the closet” provides Proust with an intermediary form of desire that serves to guarantee his first-person satire.
- This portrayal of the spectacle makes Charlus’ character entertaining and even empowering as he reveals his vices to the secretly observant Self.
- Charlus exemplifies the desiring self as a self-conscious and self-constructed work of art. His persona, with all its ironies and pathos is emblematic of putting forth desires brazenly without stigma or shame.



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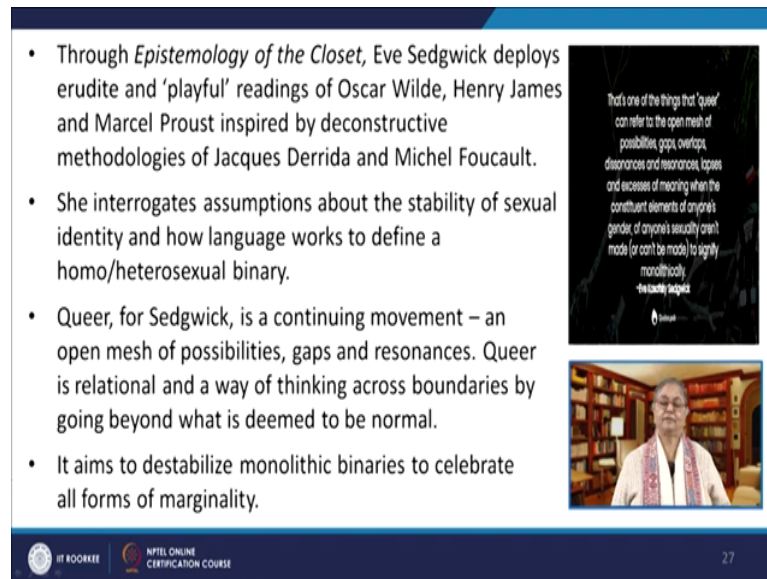
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For Sedgwick, Proust was only able to conceive his previously fragmentary work as a unified novel on the basis of what she calls as “the spectacle of the closet”. Sedgwick refers to the character of Baron de Charlus as “the novels most ravishingly consumable product”. This “spectacle of the closet” provides Proust with an intermediary form of desire that serves to guarantee his first-person satire. This portrayal of the spectacle also makes Charlus’ character entertaining and even empowering as he reveals his vices to the secretly observant self.

Charlus exemplifies the desiring self as a self-conscious and self-constructed work of art. His persona, with all its ironies and pathos is emblematic of putting forth desires brazenly without stigma or shame. This nature of closeted sexuality found in Charlus is oppositional to what we have seen in the silenced and suppressed mannerisms of John Marcher in the fiction of Henry James. Sedgwick concludes that this iconic novel by Proust’s can be read as a mediation on the modern crisis of male sexuality.

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- Through *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick deploys erudite and 'playful' readings of Oscar Wilde, Henry James and Marcel Proust inspired by deconstructive methodologies of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.
- She interrogates assumptions about the stability of sexual identity and how language works to define a homo/heterosexual binary.
- Queer, for Sedgwick, is a continuing movement – an open mesh of possibilities, gaps and resonances. Queer is relational and a way of thinking across boundaries by going beyond what is deemed to be normal.
- It aims to destabilize monolithic binaries to celebrate all forms of marginality.



That's one of the things that "queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.

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Through 'Epistemology of the Closet', Eve Sedgwick deploys erudite and 'playful' readings of Oscar Wilde, Henry James and Marcel Proust inspired by deconstructive methodologies of Derrida and Foucault. She interrogates assumptions about the stability of sexual identity and how language works to define a homo/heterosexual binary. Queer for Sedgwick is a continuing movement an open mesh of possibilities, gaps and resonances. Queer is relational and a way of thinking across boundaries by going beyond what is deemed to be normal.

It aims to destabilize monolithic binaries to celebrate all forms of marginality. What Sedgwick brought to queer theory was a methodology for deconstruction that enabled a deep interrogation of sexuality, gender, bodies and pleasure in and across western culture. Her textured analysis of literary texts and social relations have earned her a prominent place in the arenas of cultural studies, critical theories and gender and sexuality studies.

This marks the end of week 4. In this week, we undertook a detailed study of various contributors who shape the modern field of queer studies contributing to our present day understanding of gender. In the coming week, we shall look at how queer representation is manifested in different artistic forms of expression including literary text, cinema and digital OTT platforms.

Thank you.

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