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# Yes, I Should but No I Wouldn't?: Teachers? Attitudes towards Introducing Lesbian/Gay Issues in the Literature Classroom

Randall Lawrence Fair

ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, "YES, I SHOULD BUT NO I WOULDN'T': TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS INTRODUCING LESBIAN/GAY ISSUES IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM, by RANDALL LAWRENCE FAIR, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

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ABSTRACT

"YES, I SHOULD BUT NO I WOULDN'T': TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS INTRODUCING LESBIAN/GAY ISSUES IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM
by
Randall Lawrence Fair

Many studies have demonstrated that lesbian and gay students are often more likely to suffer from high risk factors. These students often have higher rates of suicide, are more likely to drop out, use drugs and alcohol, etc. Often schools do not provide this invisible minority with appropriate support.

One natural place to address lesbian/gay issues in the high school curriculum is the literature classroom. Literature textbooks often include statistically high numbers of lesbian/gay authors. However, often literature teachers are reluctant to identify the sexuality of these authors, and rarely do these teachers introduce issues of sexuality in any other way. In this study, I examine why some teachers avoid discussions of lesbian/gay issues and why others include them.

The overarching theory that I use in my research is that of lesbian/gay/queer theory. While the term lesbian/gay/queer theory might seem to be an unnecessarily long and awkward title, I use it here to make it clear that I will be combining elements of lesbian/gay theory with elements of queer theory. My purpose in doing this is to craft a study that will embrace both the practical aspects and the academic rigor required to meet the changing needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (queer) people.

Since this study examines attitudes, the design is a qualitative one. I gather data

from many sources including informal observations, classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups. Rigor is provided through prolonged engagement, member checking, and triangulation of data through multiple sources.

My results shed light on why individuals in this group of literature teachers often approach the study of lesbian/gay issues in a multitude of ways and have a number of different reasons for their various approaches.

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# CHAPTER 1

# RATIONALE

## Why I am interested

Over the past fourteen years of my teaching career, I have become more and more interested in the lack of attention given to gay and lesbian matters in the school system and especially in the literature classroom. Just in the short time I have been teaching I have noticed a shift in the attitude of students but not any change in the attitude of teachers. Students now often bring the topic up in class, whereas in the early years of my teaching career the subject was taboo. Teachers, on the other hand, are reluctant to talk about homosexuality. Over the years the subject of gays and lesbians has made its way into many of the mainstream media. It has been featured in sitcoms, talk shows, movies, talk radio, newspapers, and magazines. It seems the one place where it is unacceptable to talk about the subject is the school system. Ironically, the classroom is one of the few places that could provide intelligent discourse on the subject.

The teacher in the classroom, especially the literature classroom, has an important responsibility to discuss issues concerning homosexuality. First and foremost, the literature teacher has a responsibility to provide gays and lesbians with appropriate role models. The instructor also has the responsibility of making the literature classroom a safe environment for all students to discuss their personal

response to the readings. For gays and lesbians, this means a response that includes all factors of their life, including their sexual identity. Literature teachers also have a responsibility to allow the heterosexual students to examine homophobic beliefs that they may have and confront their fears concerning homosexuality in a way that is non-threatening to the lesbian and gay students.

The teachers' methods of providing these outlets for discussion of these issues may vary depending on the sexual orientation of the teacher. Although all teachers, regardless of sexuality, share the instructional responsibility for teaching about gay and lesbian issues, lesbian and gay teachers would need to confront their fears of coming out in their classroom before they could approach this subject. On the other hand, heterosexual teachers, usually because of a variety of factors such as homophobia, a lack of knowledge on the part of their teachers, and a general disinterest in the topic, have limited knowledge of lesbian and gay issues and would need extensive academic and sensitivity training.

## The Responsibility of the Schools

Research shows that the schools are not presently meeting their responsibility to lesbian and gay students. Paul Gibson (1994), the author of "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide," points out that, "suicide is the leading cause of death among gay male, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual youth" ( p. 16). Gibson also reports that, "Homosexuals are far more likely to attempt suicide than are heterosexuals" (p. 17). Gibson cites school as one of the factors in this unusually high suicide rate among gay and lesbian teens. He states, "Many gay and lesbian youth feel trapped in school

settings because of a compulsory obligation to attend and the inability to defend themselves against verbal and physical assualts" (p. 45). These physical and verbal assaults by fellow classmates are often the most important factor contributing to the high risk of suicide among gay and lesbian teens. These constant attacks by both students and teachers are also the primary factor in the lowering of self-esteem among lesbian and gay youth (Jennings 1998).

While providing many opportunities for the lowering of self-esteem among gay and lesbian teens, schools do almost nothing to build the self-confidence of homosexual students. Gibson (1994) states:

> The failure of schools to educate youth about homosexuality presents another risk factor to gay and lesbian adolescents. By ignoring the subject in all curricula, including family life classes, the schools deny access to positive information about homosexuality that could improve the self-esteem of gay youth. They also perpetuate myths and stereotypes that condemn homosexuality and deny youth access to positive adult lesbian and gay role models. This silence provides tacit support for homophobic attitudes and conduct by some students. (p. 46)

The best way to end this silence in schools is through the existing curriculum. It is ironic that the literature classroom, one of the places where the topic would come up the most naturally, is the place where many teachers are squandering the opportunity to have intelligent discussion on these matters. The literature book is filled with the works of gay and lesbian authors, but the teachers of literature rarely, if ever, mention the sexual orientation of the author even when it has a direct impact on the work.

Opportunities for Discussion of Lesbian/Gay Issues in Literature Class

The often used high school texts Adventures in American Literature (1989) and Adventure in English Literature (1989) provide many examples of how teachers in the literature classroom have opportunities to introduce the subject of homosexuality, but the textbooks do not support the introduction, and teachers rarely make use of the opportunity on their own. In the American Literature text, out of 120 authors mentioned, seventeen authors, or about 14%, are identified by Martin Grief (1982) in The Gay Book of Days and Claude Summers (1995) in The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage as people with same-sex attraction. In many cases these are some of the most well known and most frequently taught authors. The authors from the American Literature textbook are: Auden, W. H.; Baldwin, James; Cather, Willa; Cullen, Countee; Dickinson, Emily; Doolittle, Hilda; Hughes, Langston; James, Henry; Jewett, Sarah Orne; Lowell, Amy; McKay, Claude; Melville, Herman; Millay, Edna St. Vincent; Stein, Gertrude; Thoreau, Henry David; Whitman, Walt; Wilder, Thorton.

Similarly in the Adventures in English Literature, sixteen of 101 or 16% of the authors had same-sex attractions. They are: Auden, W. H.; Eliot, T. S.; Forster, E. M.; Gordon, George (Lord Byron) (Bisexual); Gray, Thomas (Virgin, repressed homosexual); Hopkins, Gerald Manley (celibate, repressed); Housman, A. E.; Lawrence, D. H.; Marlowe, Christopher; Maugham, Somerset; Owen, Wilfred; Saki (Hector Hugh Munro); Sassoon, Siegfried (Bisexual); Spender, Stephen; Wilde, Oscar; Woolf, Virginia (Bisexual).

Contradictions Between the Way Homosexual and Heterosexual Authors are Treated in Textbooks

None of these authors' biographies in the Adventures in American Literature text mentions the homosexuality or bisexuality of the author. In fact, it appears as if the editors deliberately took steps to deny the homosexual aspects of these authors' lives. A notable example of this is the biography of James Baldwin. (p. 877) In listing Baldwin's works, the biography leaves out one of his best known works, Giovanni's Room, a novel about same-sex love.

Conversely, it is not uncommon for the editors to mention the sexuality of heterosexual authors. Robert Frost's biography (p. 740) states, "The other (valedictorian) was Elinor White whom he later married." Nathaniel Hawthorne's biography (pp. 247-248) says, "He left (Brook Farm) after seven months, married, and moved to Concord, where he lived in the Old Manse, the house where Emerson had written Nature." The sexuality of virtually every heterosexual is revealed throughout the biographies in this book.

Arguably, the biographies would be remiss in some cases if they did not mention the love interest of some of the heterosexual authors. A notable example of this would be the biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald. (p. 608) Zelda Sayre must be mentioned because knowledge of Fitzgerald's relationship with her contributes to the reader's understanding of the works. However, the same is true for the gay and lesbian authors. For example, the biography of W.H. Auden (p. 813) mentions

Stephen Spender and Auden's group of author friends. The biography does not inform the reader of the fact that Spender, Isherwood, and Forster were all gay. Not only would this knowledge explain for the reader the close connection these men had to each other, it would also contribute to the reader's understanding of the sense of alienation found in Auden's works.

Just as knowing about the heterosexual author's personal life contributes to the understanding of his or her works, that same knowledge of a homosexual author's life clarifies elements of his/her works. A perfect example of this is Oscar Wilde's play, The Importance of Being Earnest. Certainly, the reader can enjoy and learn from this play without knowledge of Wilde's homosexuality. However, once the reader does know of the homosexuality of the author, the Bunburying (taking on another identity) has an entirely different meaning. With this new knowledge (the knowledge of Wilde's homosexuality), the reader understands the possibility that Bunburying is a reference to the double life that gay men and lesbians often lead.

In many cases, the authors were very open about their sexual orientation (examples are Whitman, Stein, and Wilde). There is every reason to believe that these authors would expect the biographies to reveal their same sex attractions. Other lesbian and gay authors actively concealed their homosexuality, but the sexuality of these authors should be revealed whether the author wanted it revealed or not. The teacher's failure to reveal the same sex attraction of a homosexual author, while revealing the love interests of heterosexual authors, sets up a double standard. Michelangelo Signorile (1993) takes on the issue of this double standard in his book, Queer in America. Signorile argues that conspiring to keep a person's

sexual orientation a secret does not really help the person. In fact, it sends the gay or lesbian person the message that his/her homosexuality is such a terrible thing that it must remain unspeakable. To illustrate this point, Signorile cites Marshal Alan Phillips:

> If a public figure is Jewish or Jehovah's Witness or Hindu, divorced or married or single, Asian or Icelandic or Kenyan, those personal and private facts, if verified, may be duly reported. No need for an on-the-record admission. Only in the case of gays does this silly rule of invisibility apply.
> It is based on the hackneyed straight assumption that, somehow, being a gay person is innately bad. Never mind that such a person may be well-bred, well-educated and doing a terrific job, have a stable romantic relationship, even attend church every Sunday. If he or she is gay, the media pulls a pious veil of privacy around that fact. Why? Because doing otherwise would confirm the terrifying (to straight folks) truth that gays are normal, happy, well-adjusted, hard-working, capable and everywhere. If you're not gay, you know someone who is. (p. 157)

Breaking this conspiracy of silence regarding the discussion of an author's homosexuality is of utmost importance. One reason is that gay and lesbian teenagers are not presented with role models. The absence of acknowledgment of the lesbians and gays who have shaped the world leads students to believe that homosexuals have not made any valuable contributions to civilization as we now know it. This is damaging to heterosexuals because it presents them with false information and allows homophobia to continue unchecked. For lesbian and gay adolescents, it is devastating. Because homosexuality is not discussed, gay and lesbian teenagers are left with feelings of isolation and despair.

How Knowledge of Author's Sexuality Might Alleviate the Isolation of Lesbian/Gay Teens

This sense of despair and isolation brought on by lack of role models is well documented. Howard Brown (1976) states:

> Compounding the fearful loneliness that accompanies discovery [of homosexuality] is the general absence of role models. Blacks, of course, felt this same lack until the advent of their civil rights movement. People become, in large part, what they perceive they can become - a perception that depends on their knowledge of what others like them have become. And homosexuals have been a people almost totally without a history. Moreover, the fragments of history that do exist are still largely kept from the view of the general public. High school teachers generally do not mention Leonardo da Vinci's sexual proclivities, or Walt Whitman's or Oscar Wilde's or Henry James's or E. M. Forster's or W. H. Auden's; they usually treat the homosexuality of ancient Greece as classified information, if they are familiar with it at all. This concerted hush is hardly surprising, of course, since the administrators who run most high schools shy away from sex even in its traditionally most acceptable from. (In part they are yielding to pressure from parents, who yelp whenever the topic comes up outside the home - where it almost never does). (p. 41)

Certainly, mentioning prominent gay and lesbian literary figures would provide adolescents an opportunity to form role models, and it would give the teenagers a chance to link themselves up with a larger community thus ending much of the isolation they feel. This is clearly what gay and lesbian adolescents are crying out for. Aaron Fricke (1981), the teenager who made national news when he took a same-sex date to the prom, speaks of this isolation when he says:

> As I entered seventh grade, I noticed that kids were changing

> physically as well as socially. No one looked like they had in sixth grade. Many of the boys grew facial hairs and the girls developed breasts.
> Every day at lunch a group of my now-unrecognizable friends would assemble at one table. Interesting conversations concerning heterosexuality occurred at nine out of ten lunches. What had happened? The kids I had once been so secure with in my sexuality had changed. They looked, sounded and smelled different. I was confused but didn't dare voice my thoughts because I remembered the aversion I had seen earlier in my life toward my sexuality. But back then, my friends had been like me. Now, unexpectedly, I was alone.
> I managed to avoid trouble by not saying anything at lunch. Interestingly, Bob Cote and I began a sexual relationship. In fact, we had sex together quite frequently. So I was completely taken by surprise one day at the lunch table when he tried to initiate me into the conversation about heterosexuality.
> "How about you, Aaron, What would you do if you had some pussy right now?"
> I froze. For the life of me I couldn't think of anything original, which was the object of the discussion. All I could do was sit blank-faced through the most uncomfortable silence I have ever experienced. As the weeks wore on I tried to remain part of the group but I became more and more removed from these discussions until I was saying nothing at all through lunch. When I started getting occasional stares and sneers from new members of the group, I felt it best to remove myself. (p. 23)

There are numerous examples of this sense of alienation that Fricke describes as homosexual teens find that they are no longer comfortable with their former community of peers and lack any way of bonding with and forming communities with lesbian and gay peers. Joanne, an adolescent whose story appears in the anthology, <u>One Teenager in Ten</u>, feels this same sense of isolation:

> Soon after I decided to accept the new identity, I knew I had to find people to talk to. My first instinct was to approach my hockey coach. I imagined telling her of my feelings and her immediately confessing that she was also a lesbian. We would then fall into each other's arms and comfort each other, sharing

> the loneliness faced by deviants in a hostile world. Needless to say, this scene did not occur. Quite the opposite. She told me I was just nervous around boys and should make an attempt to be around them more. I was crushed. That was definitely not what I wanted to hear. Nonethelesss, I decided to do as she said because at that point I thought I was the only lesbian on earth. (Heron, 1983, p. 10)

Even when lesbian and gay teens try to end their isolation by turning to reading, they often find many difficulties. As Gary Dowd, age 20, says:

> I also found some good information [on homosexuality] in books, but had some difficulties with libraries. I did not find many books on homosexuality, and those few did not have much information that was applicable. I was also reluctant at the time to walk up to the check-out with gay books, so I often hid in the dark corners to read them. In the long run, the most helpful books I found were those that I borrowed from friends, and gay and lesbian organizations. (Heron, 1983, p. 23)

This sense of isolation is more than just unfortunate. It is dangerous for identity development. The constant alienation from a community of peers can greatly impact the lives of lesbians and gays. As Richard Isay (1989) states:

> The development of gay identity, which begins in the earliest years of childhood with same-sex erotic fantasies, usually carries with it, in our culture, the burdens of guilt and self-loathing that may impede or delay its consolidation and integration. Social stigmatization is particularly damaging to the adolescent and young adult because of the importance of peer acceptance in the task of separation from parents. Such stigmatization and the internalization of social bias often lead to further lags in formation of a healthy sexual identity by encouraging conformity to prevailing social conventions such as marriage and to the denial of inherent sexual and attendant psychological and social needs. (p. 66)

To suggest that merely mentioning an author's sexual orientation is the total solution

to these identity problems among lesbian and gay youth would be preposterous. However, it is an important step in the development of gay and lesbian identity formation. First, it provides role models. Second, it links isolated lesbians and gays to a larger community and gives them a sense of their place in the world. Providing role models through reading is an absolute necessity for gay and lesbian teens because, more often than not, adult gays and lesbians can not serve as role models for these youth without fear of repercussion. As Carolyn Caywood (1993) states:

> An important element in materials for gay teens is the presentation of role models. Because homosexuality and child molestation are so often erroneously conflated in public opinion, it is very risky for any adult gay or lesbian to reveal his or her identity to a teen. As a result, the only positive images many teens encounter are in books or movies - and even there, they can be difficult to find. (p. 4)

Although not a panacea, providing role models for lesbians and gays can have an enormous impact in raising self -esteem. An incident I had in my own classroom illustrates this point.

## An Example From My Experience

Veronica (pseudonym) came into my class on the first day with an attitude. When she sat down, she folded her arms across her chest as if to say, "I dare you to teach me anything." A diminutive, young woman with blonde hair and beautiful blue eyes, she would stand out in a crowd anyway, but her short-cropped hair and manner of dress that conforms to the stereotypes of lesbian clothing separate her even more from the average high school student.

Veronica started to relax more and more as the year progressed. When she saw that she was accepted there, I think it became one of the few classes she actually looked forward to. Establishing a personal relationship with Veronica was difficult. She has very little to say in the school setting.

The first sign I had that I had made a personal connection with her was the day she found out I lived in a neighborhood known for being progressive and liberal. She came up after class and told me that she hung out in this area which was surprising since it is a considerable distance from the school. I told her where I lived, and she later told me that the next time she came into the neighborhood, she looked for my apartment.

During Women's History month, I was in charge of organizing students to do an announcement recognizing a woman of achievement for each day. Friday is casual day, so on Friday I wore a feminist T-shirt. The students asked where I bought the shirt. I had gotten it at a feminist bookstore in Washington D.C. That sparked a great deal of discussion since many students didn't know there was such a thing as a feminist bookstore. I told them about a feminist bookstore near my home.

After class, Veronica stayed and told me that she went to this bookstore all the time. Although it is a feminist bookstore, it is also known for its extensive collection of works by and about lesbians. I was unsure, but I felt this was Veronica's attempt to let me know that she is a lesbian.

During the reading of Beowulf, I had the students do an assignment where they had to choose a hero or heroine. While we were in the media center, Veronica asked me who was a famous woman she could report on. I was wearing a Getrude

Stein T-shirt at the time. I said, "Why don't you do it on Gertrude Stein?" I went on to tell her how Getrude Stein changed literature forever, and how artists and writers of her day looked to her as a leader.

Veronica said she wasn't interested in her, so I suggested Margaret Sanger. I started to tell her a little bit about Margaret Sanger's role in history when another student at the table interrupted me. "You mean that's a woman on your shirt?" Karen asked. "Yes, it is." "She looks like a man," was Karen's next comment. "Well, both she and her lover chose to dress like men," I replied. "You mean she is a lesbian?" "Yes." "And that was ok back then?" "If you mean was it accepted, no, I don't think it was. That's why she moved to Paris to escape the repressive American society of the time." Karen then asked, "Why did she dress like a man?" "I don't know, but I assume it was because women's clothes in that time were confining and repressive." I then looked back at Veronica and said, "Anyway, back to Margaret Sanger."

Veronica looked up and said, "No, I want to do my report on Getrude Stein." I took her over and showed her where the biographies of Gertrude Stein were. She chose two of the thickest books and started pouring over them. When she came to a picture of Alice B. Toklas and Stein together, she brought it to me and asked if that was Stein's lover. The thought that this famous historical figure was like her was obviously a tremendous discovery for her.

In the next paper, Veronica came out. The paper was a personal narrative, and she waited until the end to bring it up, almost as an afterthought. In class, her entire attitude began to change. She listened attentively to everything that went on and

seemed to relax.

When we were going over John Donne's "Meditation 17," I made a big deal out of saying over and over again that they would hear allusions to this work for the rest of their lives. The next day, Veronica met me in the hallway and said, "I have to show you this. I'm going to prove you right." She had brought in a Mellisa Ethridge tape and played a song where Ethridge (a lesbian) paraphrases the lines, "Do not ask for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee." We started discussing Ethridge and the Indigo Girls, another lesbian group. The Indigo Girls have many allusions in their songs as well. While we were discussing it, my department head came in. We began talking about Virginia Woolf, and why the Indigo Girls might make allusions to her. My department head said maybe they felt a strong connection to her not only because of her feminism, but also because her first lover was a woman. Hearing people discuss the subject of homosexuality as if it were any other fact of life was a turning point for Veronica.

Clearly, Veronica became a much better student because she came to terms with who she is. She started to read more once she knew about Stein and Woolf , as well as others. More importantly though, she started to link up literature to her daily life. When I told her about "A Room of One's Own," she read it immediately. I think Veronica's desire to know will increase more as time goes on, but this thirst for knowledge would not have happened this early if Veronica had not been able to come out.

As a senior, she decided to do her senior research paper on Stonewall. Stonewall is the symbolic beginning of the lesbian/gay rights movement that took

place when lesbians and gays rioted during a bar raid in 1969 (Duberman 1993). She began to read constantly and constantly asked for more books. I had not seen any great desire for reading prior to this student's acceptance of her homosexuality, but now I witnessed her interest in her education and her future becoming a priority for her. She began working on strategies to get accepted to a university in the area that is primarily for female students, and she began to focus on possible areas of scholarship that she might pursue. This introduction to one role model has significantly changed this student's life.

Veronica's experience is unique. Most lesbians and gays are totally unaware of the fact that there is an entire lesbian and gay literary canon that they can explore. They lack this knowledge because schools are not honest in their presentation of facts. As Anthony D'Augelli (1992) says:

> When [gay and lesbian] young people pursue an understanding of themselves, they do not encounter a literature affirming their lives. Most importantly, when they look to their undergraduate curricula for insights, they find themselves deleted from most relevant courses. They are the "invisible" minority, yet the "hidden curriculum" that devalues the existence and contributions of lesbians and gay men is quite clear. At a time when accurate information and supportive experiences are critical to their development, young lesbians and gay men find few, if any, affirming experiences in higher educational settings. (p. 214)

Exposing gays and lesbians to positive role models in the existing curriculum can provide them with the affirming experiences that D'Augelli speaks of. This can have a powerful effect, but it is not the complete answer.

Going Beyond Biography

Merely mentioning the sexual orientation of the authors is not enough. Literature teachers must incorporate discussion of lesbian and gay literature and issues. Heterosexual students regularly see characters who have backgrounds very much like their own. Homosexual children virtually never see themselves represented in any text. Until lesbian and gay children see themselves reflected in the text, their possibility for successful interaction in the literature classroom will be hindered. Robert Probst (1988) speaks of this need for children to identify with the literature:

> Literature should strike a responsive chord in him [the child], offering the substance to keep alive questions and interests, feeding them so that continual reexamination is rewarded with some sense of growth or progress. Preoccupation with self should make adolescents uniquely receptive to literature, for literature invites their participation and judgment. (p. 5)

As true as this is for heterosexual students, homosexual students do not feel invited in to literature because they rarely see any character in literature who shares the same thoughts, feelings, and desires that they have. This is why the literature class must not only identify the homosexuality of authors, but must also include literature with gay and lesbian themes or characters.

Unless high school teachers make the raising of lesbian and gay issues an integral part of the curriculum, lesbian and gay students will not feel free to share any personal connection they might have to the literature. This personal connection to the works is an essential ingredient in the development of an aesthetic and intellectual appreciation of literature. However, as high school teachers move closer

and closer to a reader response model for literature study, the plight of gay and lesbian students will be exacerbated. Reader response requires students to share their personal thoughts and feelings in order to make connections with the literature. Because the hostile climate towards lesbians and gays in the schools makes them reluctant to reveal their true feelings, homosexual students will find themselves more alienated than ever in the literature classroom.

This intensification of the isolation gays and lesbians will experience due to the adoption of reader response models is ironic because Louise Rosenblatt (the theorist who developed the model) provides much support for raising gay and lesbian issues in the literature classroom. In Literature as Exploration, Rosenblatt (1938) calls for the exploration of controversial issues; "Equally essential is freedom for youth - and indeed all citizens - to experience those works of art that reveal weaknesses in the contemporary world or that create a vision of greater fulfillment of human values" (168) . Surely, this freedom should include the exploration of gay and lesbian issues. No other present issue exposes the "weaknesses of contemporary society" more clearly than the lesbian and gay issues now being explored in the media, legislatures, and courts. While these issues are explored in the most public of places, one public place, the school system, still remains secretive and refuses to let students examine their stand on these issues.

Another argument of Rosenblatt's that seems to confirm the need for gay and lesbian literature is her theory that readers need diversity in their reading. While Rosenblatt asserts the need for a personal connection to the literature, she also argues that the readers need to explore the lives of those with whom they have little in

common. She says, "We must also develop the capacity to feel intensely the needs and sufferings and aspirations of people whose personal interests are distinct from our own, people with whom we may have no bond other than our common humanity" (p. 186) . Lesbian and gay characters provide this chance for readers to explore the lives of people very different from themselves. Though the heterosexual readers will never fully know what life is like for lesbians and gays, they can begin to imagine and develop some sense of empathy.

Rosenblatt argues that the readers gain in knowledge by exploring how others live. She states:

> The significant thing is not that a book tells how the Eskimo fishes, builds his house, and wins his mate, but whether the book presents the Eskimo as a remote being of a different species or as another human being who happens to have worked out different patterns of behavior. (p. 248)

Rosenblatt's words provide direction for literature teachers who choose to introduce gay and lesbian fiction in the classroom. The lesbian and gay literature presented in class should not be works that present homosexuality as something exotic or strange, but rather works that show gays and lesbians as people who for whatever reasons (heredity, environment, or both) live their lives in particular ways. Heterosexual students should have the opportunity to realize that while gays and lesbians are different from them, in some ways all people are linked together by their common humanity and lesbians/gays in some cases may have more in common with heterosexuals than with each other. Conversely, heterosexuals may in some cases have more in common with lesbians and gays than with other heterosexuals.

Literature teachers should give heterosexual students the opportunity to examine

their feelings towards homosexuality in the same manner that the teachers allow them to examine a host of other social issues. What literature teacher would ever assign Huckleberry Finn without talking about racism? Would a literature teacher ever teach The Scarlet Letter without allowing the students to discuss issues of morality? High school age students need the opportunity to discuss homosexuality more than any other group since their age group tends to be the most ignorant about the issue and therefore the most homophobic. Heather Rhoades states, "Most perpetrators of anti-gay hate crimes are white men in their teens or early twenties" (1993, p.2) . Other studies show that extreme homophobia is pervasive in most schools:

> In Massachusetts, a survey designed by the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth was distributed to all students at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School in February of 1993. Three hundred ninety-eight male and female students responded to the survey. Students were asked the question "How often have you heard homophobic remarks made at your school?" An overwhelming 97.5% of the respondents said they had heard homophobic remarks at school. Forty-nine percent of the students reported they had heard the remarks very often and 49% had heard the remarks sometimes. Only 2.5% had never heard anti-gay comments in school. (The Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993, p. 161-162)

The only solution to the high levels of homophobia in today's schools is education. This education will help ease the plight of lesbian and gay students, but it will also help the heterosexual students.

## How Heterosexual Students Might Benefit From Discussions of Homosexuality

Cooper Thompson (1992) in his essay, "On Being Heterosexual in a Homophobic World" speaks of the many ways the lives of heterosexuals might

improve when they begin to confront their homophobia:

> In the case of homophobia, the benefits of living in a less homophobic world include expanding my options as a man, expanding the types of relationships I have with women and men, a greater appreciation of my own sexuality, and increased sense of safety as I interact with other men, learning from the experiences of lesbian and gay people, continuing my friendships with lesbians and gay men, learning about other forms of oppression in a way that is facilitated by my understanding of homophobia, and the possibility for greater justice and love in the world. (p. 240)

Thompson overcame many of his fears of homosexuals after becoming friends with several lesbians and gay men. Given the climate of fear that keeps gays and lesbians from speaking up about their sexuality, many heterosexuals have not been able to get to know openly gay and lesbian people. Although heterosexuals may be denied this opportunity in their everyday lives, they can get to know gays and lesbians through literature.

In my own teaching experience, I have seen many examples of the need for heterosexual students to explore gay and lesbian issues. Lesbians and gays are often a part of the heterosexual students' lives in ways that teachers never consider. This fact became clear to me through my interactions with Mary and Sam (both pseudonyms).

## Two Examples From My Experience

The first incident occurred when Mary came into class early one morning. It was not uncommon for students to come to see me before school, but I could see that something was bothering Mary. She said, "Mr. Fair, can I ask you something?" "Sure," I replied.

Her question was a surprising one; "Is the pardoner in The Canterbury Tales gay?" "No, he is not. Why do you ask that question?" Mary told me that her English teacher had told the class that the pardoner was gay. I explained why someone her teacher's age might make the assumption that because the pardoner is effeminate, he is a gay character. However, I told her that this assumption was not correct, and that if she came back the next day, I would have some literary criticism to prove that the pardoner was not gay.

The next day, Mary came back. I gave her two articles that chastised scholars for assuming, without any evidence from the text, that the pardoner was gay rather than what he really is a eunuch. Mary looked relieved, so I said, "I hope that helps you out. You really seemed to be concerned about it yesterday." "I was," she replied. "You see my guardian is gay, and when Mr. Jones said the pardoner was gay because he was effeminate, I was really starting to worry." I don't think Mary told anyone else at the school that her guardian was a gay man. When her teacher began assigning negative stereotypes to all gay men, it became a problem for her because she had never explored the issue. If the school had presented Mary with a more balanced presentation of gay men, one negative comment from a teacher most likely would not have concerned her as much.

The next incident involved Sam, a very mild mannered, young man. Sam was in a non-college bound, senior English class. The class as a whole was very boisterous, but Sam never really participated in the usual acting-out behaviors that many of the other students engaged in. About three weeks before the end of his senior year, he decided to disrupt the class. In the middle of the class period, for no

apparent reason, he suddenly said, "I hate faggots." I told him that use of that type of language was inappropriate and not to do it again. The next day, he did the same exact thing. I again told him it was inappropriate, and if he did it again, he would have to go to the office. The next day, he did the same thing, and I sent him to the office.

Since it was the last few weeks of his senior year, the administrator did not punish him but did tell him to apologize. When he came by to apologize, he was obviously very upset. I said, "Sam, you didn't get into any trouble, so what are you so upset about?" He said, "Other people in the class have done wrong things, and you never send them to the office. I never do anything wrong, but you sent me to the office just for saying, I hate faggots."

I told him to come back in the morning before school, so we could have more time to talk about it. I thought that he might not even show up for the meeting, but the next morning, he came in to discuss the situation. I told him that I sent him to the office because of the magnitude of the offense he committed and because he continued to do it for three days. At that point, he said, "But you didn't even let me tell you why I hate faggots." I told him that I would let him tell me if he would use the words "gay people" instead of "faggots." He said, "I hate so called gay people because my father is a faggot. He left me and my mom when I was born to go live with another man. He never even came to visit me, and now that I'm graduating, he wants to come to graduation and be a part of my life."

As soon as Sam said that, it became clear to me why he was being so persistent with the disruptions to class. Sam needed to discuss the issue, but he did not have

any opportunities to discuss it with any of the adults in his life. I let him talk about it for awhile, and I assured him that I understood why he was angry with his father for abandoning him. I also asked him to consider his father's point of view. I told him that neither of us could imagine what it must have been like for someone who was coming to terms with being gay at that period of time. I was unable to help him bring his issues to any resolution, but he did at least have an opportunity to have a mature and reasonable conversation about the issue.

These examples illustrate why heterosexual students need to be exposed to gay and lesbian literature just as much as homosexual students. I had no idea that these two students were dealing with these issues, and I'm sure no one else at the school knew. If these students, and the many other students like them that teachers are unaware of, had been exposed to gay and lesbian literature, they would have had a much easier time dealing with all the fears that they had. They would not have had to feel ashamed of the sexuality of these people who are so important in their lives.

## Why Teachers Don’t Talk About Lesbian/Gay Issues

If the use of lesbian and gay literature in the classroom can help heterosexual and homosexual students, the question then becomes, why don't more teachers use gay and lesbian works? I believe the answer may vary depending on the sexuality of the person. Homosexual teachers often already are isolated and fearful in the school

setting (Jennings 1994). This leads them to avoid any mention of their own homosexuality and the issue of homosexuality altogether. Heterosexual teachers who are not homophobic may avoid using gay and lesbian literature because of fear of repercussions from the school board or parents. However, I believe the overwhelming majority of heterosexual teachers do not use lesbian and gay literature for two reasons. First, their knowledge in this area is severely limited. Second, some are intensely homophobic.

Since the present climate in the school system is hostile towards gays and lesbians, homosexual literature teachers are not free to discuss the sexual orientation of the authors they teach or to provide literature that includes gay and lesbian characters. Although these educators are the most likely to know the of the homosexuality of the authors and may be the best prepared to introduce the issue of homosexuality, to do so might make students, parents, and other teachers suspect that they are lesbian and gay. Most lesbian and gay teachers would not be willing to bring such scrutiny to their curriculum choices. As Pat Griffin (1992) states:

> Lesbian and gay educators constitute a large, but often invisible minority group in the schools. Most choose to remain closeted rather than risk being subjected to prejudice, discrimination, and accusations that they are child molesters or recruiters to an immoral lifestyle. As a result of this invisibility and the stigma attached to research on homosexuality in education, little is known about gay and lesbian educators. (p. 167)

Although researchers have traditionally ignored the attitudes of gay and lesbian educators, new research proves Griffin's point. Lesbian and gay educators feel isolated and fear being fired because of their sexual orientation. Because of this, lesbian and gay teachers avoid bringing up issues of homosexuality in the classroom.

Many lesbian and gay teachers believe that if students know about their orientation, classroom discussion about any subject may suffer. Ruth Irwin (1994) tells the story of her own harassment by a student named Trevor who suspected that she was a lesbian and tried to use this fact against her in class:

> But his [Trevor's] classmates did quickly understand what Trevor was doing, and I believe that for many of them the specter of my lesbianism began to overshadow my role as teacher. This was what became the most painful part of the experience for me. Each day as I waited at my door for the students to arrive I endured the downcast eyes, the curt greetings, the snickers that hurt so much. In class, the discussion was too often stiff and controlled, and the barriers some students erected were so powerful they were nearly visible. I got to the point where I dreaded coming to the job I had always loved. (p. 102)

Because of the fear on the part of gay and lesbian educators that they will be unable to teach if students know about their sexuality, many avoid any mention of the issue of homosexuality. When it is mentioned by students, they ignore it or change the subject. In fact, many gays and lesbians even allow students to use epithets regarding gays and lesbians in order to avoid detection. The teachers feel if they tell the students not to make these remarks, the students will automatically assume they are gay or lesbian because the students believe no heterosexual teacher would care about the use of these terms. Anecdotal evidence shows that in many instances this is the case. As Teri Gruenwald (1994) reports:

> Lynne [Gruenwald's student] told me many of my other students had figured out that I'm a lesbian because I talk about lesbian and gay issues in my classroom. "The only people who talk positively about lesbians and gays are lesbian and gays. None of the other teachers talk about it," she explained. (p. 154)

I have had incidents in my teaching experience that verify the fact that students and

teachers automatically assume that any teacher who speaks out against homophobia must be gay or lesbian. One such incident happened when a teacher brought some information by my homeroom class. While she was going over the material, one student began calling another student a faggot. I took the student out in the hall and lectured him about the use of that word telling him I would speak with his parents if he did it again. Later, the teacher who was in the room at the time told me she was a lesbian. She said, "I knew you must be gay also because no one else would have told the student that using that word was wrong."

Because they fear they would be outing themselves by introducing lesbian and gay issues and materials, lesbian and gay literature teachers do not make curriculum changes that they know would be beneficial to students. Lesbian and gay teachers, at this point in time, are justified in their fears. Many students do believe that any teacher who introduces homosexuality as a topic must be a homosexual. While the teacher might not be ashamed of his/her sexual orientation, revelation of the fact might cause the students to reject the teaching or even worse, the teacher might be fired. The problem becomes circular since lesbian and gay educators cannot reveal their orientation because of the homophobia of the students, parents, teachers, and administrators; and yet, the students, parents, teachers, and administrators cannot confront their homophobia because the issue is never raised.

Some heterosexual teachers do understand the necessity of introducing gay and lesbian fiction or revealing the orientation of the authors. However, these teachers are in the minority, and when they do try to introduce the topic, they often meet with violent opposition. One heterosexual teacher, Roberta Hammet (1992), who saw the

need for the introduction of this issue decided to create an optional gay and lesbian literature unit. She prepared a rationale for this unit and asked her principal to approve it. The principal seemed encouraging, but told her she would have to have it approved by supervisory personnel. The reaction from the supervisor of curriculum was less than supportive:

> I sent the unit plan to the supervisor of secondary curriculum, whose reaction was very negative and who sent copies without permission to senior central office personnel. The principal was called in to defend such a potentially controversial plan to three supervisors, all apparently very opposed to the proposal. I met later with the supervisor of secondary curriculum to discuss the unit and his action. I indicated I had been seeking his reaction and was upset that he had photocopied the essay without permission and had discussed it with the principal instead of with me. We discussed the unit and later exchanged written comments on the essay and our meeting. He like the other supervisors who read the unit plan, warned me that my own sexual orientation would be questioned. (pp. 256-257)

After facing all of this difficulty and unwanted controversy, Hammet decided that she would no longer attempt to add the unit on gay and lesbian literature to her curriculum; "Right now I have too much to contend with to enter into a new conflict over the teaching of gay and lesbian literature" (p. 257). Hammett's experience demonstrates the difficulties that heterosexual teachers can expect if they try to introduce gay and lesbian issues. Because of these difficulties, most heterosexual teachers who would like to introduce these issues never will do so because they will not want to cause problems for themselves.

However, having the desire to teach gay and lesbian literature but being unable to because of political pressure is not the problem for most heterosexual literature teachers. Most heterosexual teachers do not want to introduce these issues, or have

anyone else introduce them, because they are homophobic. Their homophobia leads them to believe that these issues are not appropriate topics for adolescents. To determine the level of homophobia among teachers, James Sears (1992) studied the attitudes of prospective teachers. He found, "Eight out of ten prospective teachers harbor negative feelings toward lesbian and gay men; fully one-third of these persons are high grade homophobics" (p. 42). With the level of homophobia this high among teachers, it is no wonder that teachers are not introducing gay and lesbian literature.

The problem becomes cyclical. Fear of homophobic teachers, administrators, and parents keeps both heterosexual and homosexual teachers from introducing gay and lesbian literature. Since students have little exposure to knowledge regarding gays and lesbians, they grow up to be homophobic themselves and perpetuate the cycle. Students are breaking this cycle though. However, the knowledge they are gaining on the issues is not coming from the school system. It is coming from popular culture.

Schools should always lead the way in exposing students to knowledge, but in this area schools are far behind. The teachers could be improving the self-esteem of gay and lesbian students and helping them to live fuller and richer lives. Teachers could also help heterosexuals deal with the homophobic feelings they might have. But instead teachers are passing this duty on to the mass media and shirking their duties to both heterosexual and homosexual students.

## How I Have Used Lesbian/Gay Issues to Enrich My Classroom Discussions

I first started incorporating lesbian/gay issues into my teaching in 1990. It was

my fourth year teaching, so perhaps one of the factors involved was the knowledge that I now had tenure. At this time, I was also beginning to become involved in local gay politics, and this might have increased my desire to be more honest about the curriculum. A third factor was the huge push for multiculturalism. Teachers in my county were bombarded with staff development classes on pluralistic education. The county had begun to diversify the curriculum and had made it mandatory that English teachers demonstrate how they had made efforts to make the curriculum more inclusive. In all of these efforts, no one every mentioned doing anything to incorporate lesbian/gay concerns.

The sense of injustice I was feeling was the main prompt for my decision to do something to incorporate this issue into my teaching. Looking back on it now, I realize my first efforts were awkward and not well thought out. My first effort involved my decision to reveal the sexuality of any lesbian and gay authors we studied. I gave no thought to whether this knowledge would help the students understand the literary work or not. I simply decided to identify every author who was lesbian or gay.

I started to question this decision towards the end of that year because of the comments of several students. During our discussions of a short story by Willa Cather, I pointed out that Cather was a lesbian. While there are times when I think this knowledge is important in helping students understand her works (as in the discussion of My Antonia), in this case her lesbianism clearly had nothing to do with the story. Near the end of our discussion a student raised her hand, "Are any of the authors in this book heterosexual?" While I assured her that most of the authors in

the book were heterosexual, many of the other students started to agree with her that it seemed as if we were always reading the works of lesbian/gay authors.

Later, when reflecting on the students' comments, I began to question the way I had approached the incorporation of lesbian/gay issues. What had happened regarding the students' perception of the sexuality of the authors we studied is not unlike what has happened in the past (and continues to happen) regarding the incorporation of the works of ethnic minorities in literature class.

Every year, somewhere towards the middle or the end of the school year, someone always asks why we don't ever study the works of white people. I always respond by making the students go through the table of contents and count the works that were written by white people. When we are finished, it always turns out that about 60% of the works are by white authors. However, since students often are not accustomed to reading the works of minority authors, their perceptions when minority authors are included is skewed so that they believe that these works make up a much greater proportion of the curriculum than they actually do.

I believe the reaction of the students towards my identifying lesbian/gay authors was caused by the same principles that are at work with their reactions towards the inclusion of other minority authors. However, the comments of the students did make me question how and why I was incorporating lesbian/gay issues in my teaching. I started to compare it to the ways I have seen many teachers incorporate the biography of Edgar Allen Poe into their study of one of his works.

Virtually every teacher I knew of who taught Poe, also taught about his life. No matter what work the teachers were studying, they discussed Poe's marriage to

his adolescent cousin, Virginia Clem. While I certainly see the obvious necessity of students knowing about Virginia when studying "Annabel Lee," I started to ask myself how this knowledge could possibly aid a student in the interpretation of "The Mask of the Red Death" or "The Tale-Tell Heart." I realized that, at least some of the time, the reason many of us were talking about this fact of Poe's life was merely to titillate.

With this fact in mind, I began to question how I was incorporating the sexuality of the authors' lives into my discussions. I started to believe that maybe I shouldn't always point out every lesbian and gay author we studied, just as I didn't always talk about the spouse or partner of every heterosexual author. I began to use the rule that I would discuss the sexuality of the author only when knowing how this aspect of the life of the author would aid the students in their interpretation of the work. I would apply this rule to heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual authors alike.

For example, when discussing The Great Gatsby, I always talk about the relationship of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda Fitzgerald because knowledge of this relationship helps the students interpret the work. In the same way, when teaching My Antonia, The Importance of Being Earnest, or other works that include lesbian and gay themes, I typically tell the students about the sexuality of the author.

Besides providing information of the author's lives, there are other times when the literature calls for discussion of lesbian/gay issues. I always talk about sexuality, for instance, when reading The Canterbury Tales. It is imperative that students be allowed to talk about the stereotypes created with characters such as the

Summoner and the Pardoner, and I always initiate a discussion if the students don't bring it up on their own. Another time that I find it important to have a discussion of sexuality is when studying the Shakespearean sonnets. While I try to avoid any discussion of exactly who Shakespeare was, I do point out that there is a certain amount of scholarly ambiguity about exactly who wrote these works. I then point out that the first ones were written to a man while the last ones in the series were written to a woman. By providing this information, we are better able to explore the inherent sexism of lines such as, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments…" (Shakespeare, 1609/1989, p.168). When the students know that this line was written by one man to another, they are better able to question why many Elizabethans did not believe that a "marriage of true minds" was possible between a man and a woman due to the fact that they didn't believe women had minds that were as advanced as those of men.

Other works that have only a remote connection to homosexuality, often provide opportunities for discussions of lesbian/gay issues. For example, I was teaching The Crucible in the early 90's when debates over whether or not gays should serve in the military were raging. When connecting the Salem witch trials to McCarthyism, I also brought in newspaper articles about the military investigations of suspected homosexuals. This dispelled for the students any ideas that modern day witch hunts can't occur.

Another way that I incorporate lesbian/gay issues into my class is through what I call, "the newspaper article of the day." For years now, I have started every class with a newspaper article of the day. I do this because I want the students to know

more about the world around them and because I want them to see that there are things they might be interested in reading. When lesbian/gay issues have been featured prominently in the news, as they have been in recent years, then I have featured these issues as the newspaper article of the day, just as I would any other controversial issue.

Perhaps the most overt way I incorporate lesbian/gay issues in my classroom occurs on the first day of class each year. Since I first began teaching, I always read a newspaper article with the students about a high school student who shot himself because the students were teasing him about being overweight. I use this article to demonstrate why students shouldn't call each other names. We talk about the damage this can do, and I make it clear that I will not tolerate it.

Since the death of Matthew Shepard, I have added a newspaper column written by me to this first day ritual. After Shepard's death I had an article of mine published in The Atlanta Constitution. In this article, I spoke about the damage that occurs to lesbians and gays daily in school through the name calling and negative comments surrounding homosexuality. Now I read both articles with the students and discuss why phrases like, "that's so gay," are harmful.

With some of the ways I incorporate lesbian/gay issues in my classroom, it may seem as if we are talking about it a great deal of the time. In truth, the discussions are not very frequent, but it has been my experience that they need not be. By discussing lesbian/gay issues, just as with any other issue, where they naturally occur, the students begin to realize they can bring up the topic, or any other topic for that matter, whenever they see a need to as one student did when we discussed The

Chocolate War. She saw in the character, Jerry (who is persecuted because he is different, parallels between Jerry's experiences and her own experiences as a lesbian. She shared these feeling in class and wrote her paper on the novel connecting the two.

I have come to believe that when these discussions occur naturally they are more powerful. The students are more receptive to them and I believe feel freer to express their true ideas about the subject. It has been my experience that incorporating lesbian/gay issues into the classroom not only allows the students to explore a topic they are already interested in, it also opens classroom discussions up for all discussions of difference.

# CHAPTER 2

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

## Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theory

The overarching theory that I will be using in my research is that of lesbian/gay/queer theory. While the term lesbian/gay/queer theory might seem to be an unnecessarily long and awkward title, I use it here to make it clear that I will be combining elements of lesbian/gay theory with elements of queer theory. My purpose in doing this is to craft a study that will embrace both the practical aspects and the academic rigor required to meet the changing needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (queer) people.

In the following I will explain why queer theory and lesbian/gay theory have come to represent different theoretical paradigms. I also will explain why practitioners are more likely to embrace lesbian/gay theory, while academics are more likely to embrace queer theory. Then, I will show why it is theoretically sound to use a combination of both paradigms when dealing with a study that is both theoretical and practical.

It is tempting to group lesbian/gay theory with

queer theory by simply suggesting that both can be included under the title queer theory. While this would seem to be expeditious, it would also cause confusion regarding the questions I am asking and what exactly it is that I am studying. However, I believe that by using elements common to lesbian/gay studies, I can create a study that is also consistent with the principals of queer theory.

Definition of Queer Theory

I will be using the definition of queer theory set forth by Tierney and Dilley (1998) in their review of the literature regarding gay and lesbian studies, "Constructing Knowledge: Educational Research and Gay and Lesbian Studies." They write, "Queer theory, then, is about questioning what (and why) we know and do not know about things both normal and queer" (p. 60). While queer theory might encompass varying ideas depending on the theorist or researcher, the one idea that is consistent throughout all of queer theory is this post-modernist notion of challenging what it is we know and how we know it (Taylor, 1998; Castell, S (1998); Francis 1998; et. al.).

To better understand queer theory, it is necessary to trace its origins. As presented by Tierney and Dilley (1998), queer theory has "evolved" from other, earlier research with regard to homosexuality. They divide this "evolution" of queer research into three distinct, but overlapping, periods of research (one might be called the study of homosexuality as deviance; the second might be termed lesbian and gay studies; while the final one might be termed queer theory).

Homosexuality as Deviant Behavior

In the early years of research regarding homosexuality, most researchers treated it as a disease or pathology (D' Emilio 1992). Tierney and Dilley (1998) state, "Well into the second half of this [twentieth] century, scholars interested in the study of deviance investigated homosexuality as a disease to be contained" (p. 65). While this period is now seen by most as outdated, it did provide the foundation for what would later be more progressive movements in the study of homosexuality. Henry Minton (1992) describes this period from its beginnings in the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth in the following way, "A gay intelligentsia did not become established until the nineteenth century. It was also within the nineteenth century that human sexuality in particular, fell within the province of medicine and science" (p. 2) As this gay "intelligentsia" began to establish a more vocal presence, they also tried to divorce the field from its roots in the study of deviant behavior. This move was given an unexpected boost from the now famous Kinsey (1948) study, Sexual Behavior in the Human Male. As Minton (1992) states, "The impact of the Kinsey studies, in terms of both challenging established scientific thought and raising public consciousness about homosexuality, is one of the historical forces that set the stage for the emergence of gay and lesbian studies" (p. 2). Many of the lesbian and gay scholars who worked during this period were completely divorced from the academy as work in this emergent field was at the very least viewed with disdain by the university. In some cases researchers of homosexuality were

persecuted by the university through loss of credibility and employment (D'Emilio, 1992).

## The Development of Lesbian and Gay Studies

While this idea of homosexuality as deviant behavior has not completely abetted, with the advent of gay civil rights struggles, many researchers were willing to risk rejection of their work in order to disprove the idea of homosexuality as deviant behavior. In fact rather than seeing the homosexual as a deviant being, these researchers set out to show that lesbian and gay people had a long and proud history. They also wanted to show that the reason most people were not aware of this history was due to the oppression of lesbians and gays at the hands of heterosexual society. In order to disrupt the idea of homosexuality as deviance, lesbian and gay researchers began to see their mission as one of exposing the oppression of homosexuality and repairing the damage this oppression had created for homosexual people. (Tierney and Dilley, 1998)

One of the most obvious ways researchers during this period combated the oppression of lesbian and gay people was by recovering historical facts that had long been suppressed. Much of this work came by researching the lives of famous people who have since been classified as homosexuals by lesbian/gay historians. These people include such figures as Alexander the Great, Oscar Wilde, Gertrude Stein, and Walt Whitman. It also entailed examining periods that historians saw as especially conducive to homosexual behavior. These periods include ancient Greece and Rome, the sexuality of African cultures, and Berlin prior to WWII.

During this period, often much of the research was carried out by people working as activists in the lesbian and gay community rather than by academicians working in the university setting (Escoffier 1992). In fact, as stated earlier, often research on lesbian and gay issues during this time period was met with disdain from the university; Escofier (1992) states: "GAU [The Gay Academic Union] grew out of a need to confront the virulent homophobia of academia" (p. 13). With this close connection between community and scholarship, not surprisingly, much of the focus of the research was on helping homosexuals overcome psychological damage caused by a homophobic society; as Escoffier states:

> The impulse towards realizing one's authentic self informed much of the thinking and action of the political and cultural movements of the sixties. The experience of "coming out" – so fundamental to the personal and political development of gay and lesbian identities – is a perfect example of an individual's experience of authentic selfhood. Sarte, Beauvoir, Paul Goodman and others who wrote on the importance of being true to one's authentic self were often the intellectual sources that influenced gay and lesbian writers, intellectuals and young academics when they took up writing about gay liberation and feminism. (p12)

No longer satisfied with searching for psychological or medical causes for homosexual behavior, lesbian and gay researchers now began to explore ways that homosexuals might uplift themselves by achieving self-actualization (Escoffier ,1992). As Tierney and Dilley (1998) state:

> From the 1970s to the present we have seen a great deal of work that seeks to shed light on the problems that lesbian and gay individuals face and to offer solutions to those problems. One primary area of research has concentrated on how to improve the site – educational institutions- for lesbian and gay people, on the idea – education – as a way to increase understanding in the society at large. (p. 65)

As Tierney and Dilley show here, scholars of lesbian/gay studies believe that if this

hidden history of homosexuality becomes common knowledge, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike will see that homosexual behavior has been around throughout history. While not the norm, the researchers hope to show that homosexual behavior might still be considered a normal part of the human experience.

The emergence of a strong lesbian and gay studies movement in recent years has made great inroads in achieving some of its initial goals. Because of the work of gay activists, some universities now offer courses in lesbian and gay studies, lesbian and gay researchers are increasingly finding acceptance in the university setting, and lesbian and gay issues are increasingly integrated in the mainstream curriculum of many university courses (Minton, 1992).

## The Emergence of Queer Theory

Jeffrey Escoffier (1992) points out that at the same time proponents of lesbian and gay studies were asserting themselves, a new group of theorists started to emerge. These new theorists (eventually called queer theorists) began to question the very existence of homosexuals as a category of people. Looking at different time periods had left scholars questioning the wisdom of naming people from these vastly different cultures as homosexuals: "ambiguities raised questions about who was 'a homosexual' in earlier historical periods and in different cultures. Once scholars and writers raised these questions, the idea of discovering the history of authentic homosexuals seemed problematic" (pp. 15-16). As Escoffier points out, this search for homosexuals was problematized as researchers and historians discovered that,

"homosexual activity frequently occurred without the presence of 'homosexuals' and that intense homosocial or erotic relationships existed between people who otherwise did not appear to be 'homosexuals'" (p. 16). Rather than showing, as lesbian/gay scholars had hoped, that homosexuality is normal, queer theorists questioned the very idea of normality. Queer theorists wanted to show that humans are capable of a wide range of behaviors and that at different time periods and under different circumstances people might be classified differently regardless of behaviors.

For example, one modern analogy that explains this assertion of the queer theorists is the sexual behavior of prisoners. While prisoners may engage in homosexual relationships, it is unlikely that many of them see this as anything other than situational or contextual behavior. Many, if not most, of these prisoners may return to heterosexual behaviors once their prison term is over. In the same way, a man may be engaged in a conventional heterosexual marriage, but may enjoy occasionally having sex with men. A man in this situation might not consider himself to be homosexual, and possibly not even bisexual. It then becomes a problem to attach a label to someone who rejects any such label. Even more problematic for queer theorists is the idea of labeling historical figures as homosexuals when these people from vastly different cultures and vastly different time periods did not share the same modern day concept we have come to call gay or lesbian identity.

Queer theory then became predicated on the notion that scholars should not seek to recover the past in order to prove that historical figures were homosexuals, instead queer theorists seek to disrupt any idea of categorization, especially that of

the monolithic idea of such a thing as a "homosexual." Tierney and Dilley (1998) explain the concept in this way:

> Queer theorists argue that proponents of normalcy and deviance have accepted a sexual binarism – heterosexual – homosexual – that privileges some and silences others. Rather than concentrate exclusively on what they claim to be surface-level issues – faculty appointments, an inclusive curriculum, a gay friendly environment – queer theorists argue that structures need to be disrupted. If one assumes that the structures of knowledge in part have defined normalized relations that have excluded homosexuals, then one needs to break those structures rather than merely reinvent them. (p. 65)

As Tierney and Dilley assert, queer theorists seek not to reclaim some static notions of past history or current oppression, rather they seek to challenge the fundamental ways we have historically organized all knowledge, especially as it pertains to the categorization of people.

## Divisions Between Lesbian/Gay Theorists and Queer Theorists

Rather than just extending the ideas of lesbian and gay theorists, queer theorists created a breach in the study of homosexuality and divided the field into two separate camps. One camp is occupied by those researchers working in lesbian and gay studies. This camp is accused of engaging in "identity politics," and its practitioners are labeled essentialists. Queer theorists reject the work of these researchers in favor of their stance known as social constructionism.

Essentialism

For the purposes of this research, I am using the definition of these two terms set forth by Diana Fuss (1989) in her work Essentially Speaking. Fuss defines essentialism in the following way, "For the essentialist, the natural provides the raw material and determinative starting point for the practices and laws of the social. For example, sexual difference (the division into 'male' and 'female') is taken as prior to social differences which are presumed to be mapped on to, a posteriori, the biological subject" (p. 3). In other words, people are born as either male/female, black/white, heterosexual/homosexual, and because of these differences that are "essentially" there, the person acts and reacts in certain ways according to the possibilities allowed to his/her group according to the culture and time period. Another way of stating this is that regardless of social conditions, there are certain biological or psychological conditions that make up the "essence" of every individual. In discussions of essentialism and social constructionism, this "essence" is sometimes referred to as the "always already" (Fuss, 1989). The individual may act out the "essence" of his or her self in different ways according to cultural mores, but that essence is always present.

Social Constructionism

Fuss distinguishes social constructionism from essentialism by saying, "Thus while the essentialist holds that the natural is repressed by the social, the constructionist maintains that the natural is produced by the social" (p. 3). Thus, queer theorists argue that there is no "essential" true self. Instead, there is only a self constructed by the culture and time period in which the individual lives. For example, people we now refer to as African-Americans would not have been seen that way during the 17th and 18th centuries. During that time period, identity for people we now call African-Americans was much more likely to hinge on the individual's position as a free person/slave than on the origin of birth or ancestry. Using logic such as this, queer theorists argue that not all individuals engaged in homosexuality at all times and in all places should or could be considered homosexuals, much less so gay.

How Ideas of Essentialism/Social Constructionism Are Used by Researchers

It is customary for researchers working in queer studies to position themselves as either essentialists (lesbian and gay researchers) or as social constructionists (queer theorists). Indeed Tierney and Dilley (1998) neatly "categorize" the works of the researchers they include in their review of the literature as being one or the other. While it is evident that Tierney and Dilley respect the work of those they label essentialists, they clearly favor the work of social constructionists as superior and as

an evolution needed in the field.

In their unequivocal praise of social constructionism, Tierney and Dilley are so focused on demonstrating the superiority of the research done by social constructionists, they never ask the difficult question that their literature review raises. Given their extensive review, it is unclear why they fail to mention one of the most significant findings of their review. While Tierney and Dilley do not take up the issue, a quick glance at their work shows that all of the research they label essentialist is carried out by practitioners. Conversely, all the research they label social constructionist is carried out by university scholars. Tierney and Dilley never ask the question that is essential to this work which is why those who work the most closely with lesbian and gay youth often reject the ideas of social constructionism.

Why These Divisions Are Problematic

For the purposes of this research, I resist any attempts at categorization of this work as either essentialist or social constructionist. I do not label myself or force myself to draw only on one of the paradigms. In fact I fully intend to draw on the works of those labeled as essentialists and the works of those labeled social constructionists. I think there is a considerable amount of theoretical support for my doing so.

In fact Fuss (1989) says, “One of the main contentions of this book is that essentialism, when held most under suspicion by constructionists, is often effectively doing its work elsewhere, under other guises, and sometimes laying groundwork for its own critique”(p. 1). What Fuss is pointing out here is the fact that essentialism in

its construction of binary terms such as homosexual/heterosexual can often be doing the practical work that social constructionists advocate.

A way of illustrating this point is to imagine the work a lesbian/gay theorist might advocate in the classroom. For example, imagine what might happen if a history teacher, working under the principals of lesbian/gay theory, points out that Socrates was a homosexual. While social constructionists would say this is wrong, students who previously had no idea that homosexuals had ever contributed to the history of the world might see their previous beliefs about the superiority of heterosexuality challenged. In this case, the teacher operating from a theoretical perspective of essentialism, might be doing the very work that social constructionists advocate. Hypothetically speaking, the students might be prompted to ask further questions about the culture of Ancient Greece. If this occurs, a discussion of the different ways that the ancient Greeks organized their thinking around sexuality might cause students to think in greater depth about the infinite possibilities of sexual behavior.

In cases such as the hypothetical one above, members of a minority group, lesbian and gay youth, might find themselves affirmed in classroom discussions. This affirmation of the students' experience as an oppressed minority has been touched on by theorist, bell hooks. While praising Fuss' explanation of how essentialism can be used to do the work of social constructionism, bell hooks (1994) goes even further than Fuss in defending the essentialist position. Hooks takes exception to the latter part of Fuss' work, where Fuss points out what she sees as one of the major flaws of essentialism, the fact that minority students in her class often

resort to essentialism to justify their claims of authority regarding issues of race, gender or sexuality:

> According to Fuss, issues of "essence, identity, and experience" erupt in the classroom primarily because of the critical input from marginalized groups. Throughout her chapter, whenever she offers an example of individuals who use essentialist standpoints to dominate discussion, to silence others via their invocation of the "authority of experience," they are members of groups who historically have been and are oppressed and exploited in this society. Fuss does not address how systems of domination already at work in the academy and the classroom silence the voices of individuals from marginalized groups and give space only when on the basis of experience it is demanded. (p. 81)

In defending the right of minority students to argue from essentialist positions, hooks not only challenges Fuss' work, she also challenges the current practice of academia. In this challenge to academia, hooks places herself in the same position as the early lesbian/gay theorists who often had to work against the university rather than with it. Hooks expresses her challenge to theoreticians most clearly when she says:

> Often individuals who employ certain terms freely – terms like "theory" or "feminism" – are not necessarily practitioners whose habits of being and living most embody the action, the theorizing of engaging in feminist struggle. Indeed the privileged act of naming often affords those in power access to modes of communication and enables them to project an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work and actions, that may not be accurate, that may obscure what is really taking place. (p. 62)

It is perhaps these words of hooks that best express my stance here. While I am in agreement with the social constuctionist stance, I have become increasingly doubtful of its value when working with lesbian and gay youth. As a practitioner myself, I have seen the impracticality of using it when working with students.

Tierney and Dilley's (1998) review of the literature surrounding lesbian/gay issues with regards to education illustrates that the problem I have with social

constructionism, namely its impracticality for use with high school aged students, is shared by many. As stated earlier, all of the works Tierney and Dilley list in their review show the breach between practitioners and theoreticians.

I believe the reason for this different choice of paradigms between practitioners and university scholars is a quite simple one. University scholars, far removed from the actual day to day work with lesbians and gay teens, are likely to be adamant in their defense of social constructionism because of its clear, theoretically sound reasoning. Even to superficial observers, it is clear, for instance, that the ways that homosexuality is constructed in the U.S. at the present time bares little resemblance to the ways homosexuality, if it can even be called that, was constructed in ancient Greece or Rome.

Practitioners, who work very closely with lesbian/gay youth, often recognize the "truth" of social constructionism, but also recognize the dangers that it offers. Lesbian/gay youth coming to terms with their identity often meet with resistance from family, friends, etc. It is not difficult to see the dangers in attempting to destabilize identities in individuals who are desperately trying to discover who they are. Perhaps, Catherine Taylor (1998) states this best:

> It is hard to imagine how any project inside or outside a classroom that is predicated on destabilizing gay identity could not be experienced as agonistic, with marginalized people occasionally digging into foxholes of their always already – embattled identities. Among the pedagogical challenges that can arise in a classroom where the teacher sets out to trouble identity is that transformative utterances can seem insensitive to the lived experience of oppression because they are not intelligible, being part of a world that is not yet. (p. 21)

Taylor's words here offer a wise cautionary note. The principles of social

constuctionism can often backfire when used as teaching strategies. One of the possible ways this can happen, as suggested above, is by destabilizing a youth's identity at a time when that solidified identity may be the only defense the youth has against a hostile society. Another way that the pedagogical strategies of social constructionism might work against themselves is by creating a reaction in the individual that causes her/him to construct an identity that is even more rigid than it otherwise might be as a self-defense mechanism.

Taylor (1998) illustrates this point in one of the most poignant insights of her essay, "Teaching for a Freer Future in Troubled Times." This insight is drawn not from research, but from her own experience in the classroom. Her point is the same type of experience that hooks so eloquently defends. Taylor states:

> In my own classrooms I now avoid trying to open minds through speeches about judgmentalism and the fluidity of sexual identity, having inspired several students to appear in class defiantly wearing the flannel shirts and Birkenstocks I had described as "too rigid a notion of what lesbians must look like," their assigned identity-troubling text pointedly unread. (p. 21)

Just as Taylor points out here, the danger in "troubling" identity is that the very reverse of what is intended can occur. Rather than agreeing with this problematized sense of identity, students may retreat further into the safety of an even more rigid sense of identity than they previously experienced.

## How the Distance Between Practitioners and Theorists Might Be Bridged

Luckily for lesbian/gay research, I believe there are ways to conduct this research that are both practical and theoretical and that while seemingly essentialist

in orientation might do the very work social constructionists advocate. Eve Sedgewick (1990) offers one alternative to this difficult choice between paradigms.

> I am specifically offering minoritizing/universalizing as an alternative (though not an equivalent) to essentialist/constuctivist, in the sense that I think that it can do some the same analytic work as the latter binarism, and rather more tellingly. I think it may isolate the areas where the questions of ontogeny and phylogeny overlap. I also think, as suggested in Axiom 1, that it is more respectful of the varied proprioception of many authoritative individuals. But I am additionally eager to promote the obsolescence of "essentialist/constructivist" because I am very dubious about the ability of even the most scrupulous gay-affirmative thinkers to divorce these terms, especially as they relate to the question of ontogeny, from the essentially gay-genocidal nexuses of thought through which they have developed. And beyond that: even where we may think we know the conceptual landscape of their history well enough to do the delicate always dangerous work of prying them loose from their historical backing to attach to them newly enabling meanings, I fear that the special volatility of post modern bodily and technological relations may make such an attempt peculiarly liable to tragic misfire. Thus it would seem to me that gay affirmative work does well when it aims to minimize its reliance on any particular account of the origin of sexual preference and identity in individuals. (pp. 40-41)

Sedgewick makes several important points here. First, she points out that her binarism, minoriritizing/universalizing, might be a more effective one than the current essentialist/constructivist one. In other words, those of us working in lesbian/gay/queer studies might ask different kinds of questions than we previously have about our work. Most importantly, we might ask, does our work theorize lesbians and gays as a minority group of victims of an oppressive society, or does our work imagine a multitude of ways of being of which a lesbian or gay identity is only one of an infinite number of possibilities.

Also Sedgewick's words raise one of the dangers that strict adherence to social constructionism might promote. That is that in arguing that homosexuality is a construct of society, theorists might be giving succor to the long standing tradition of

those whose wish to eradicate the idea of any other ideas of sexuality other than that of heterosexuality.

Finally, Sedgewick points out that we might do our best work when we avoid any adherence to one set theory as to the origins of homosexuality. As Sedgewick points out here, any attempts to separate ideas of homosexuality from their historical and cultural time and place are "liable to tragic misfire." In other words, while we must do the delicate balancing work of showing that sexuality is much more fluid than we have previously thought, we must be careful to do it in a way that doesn't discount the fact that some of these identities may be somewhat "fixed." An illustration of this point is the example earlier in this paper of Catherine Taylor's (1998) experience with the lesbians who came to class in flannel shirts and Birkenstock's. In trying to show that there is a wide range of ways of being among lesbian/gay people, we shouldn't discount the fact that some of those ways of being may include what are considered stereotypes.

## How This Work Will Be Informed by Both Lesbian/Gay Theory and Queer Theory

In shaping this work, I will adhere to the cautionary statement of Stephen Murray (1984): "Avoiding the Scylla of labeling everyone anywhere who engages in homosexual behavior as a "homosexual" or a "gay person," exposes one to the opposite danger, the Charybdis of arguing that there is no category at all" (p. 45). As I navigate the dangerous waters of queer theory for the purposes of this research, I will draw as freely from the works of "essentialists" as I will from the work of social constructionists.

How I Will Be Using Essentialism and Social Constructionism

As suggested in Chapter 1, I will be using the works of essentialist researchers to describe and explain the current climate for lesbian and gay teens. It makes sense that the researchers who are most qualified to know and describe this climate are those researchers who work the most closely with lesbian and gay youth. Some of those researchers mentioned in Chapters 1-3 are Gibson (1994), Harbeck (1992), Hunter (1994) Rofes (1989), Telljohann and Price (1993), etc.

I also will draw on the works of queer theorists. I will do this in suggesting how we might problematize sexuality in ways that challenge the current binarism of heterosexual/homosexual that always favors the heterosexual point of view by either silencing different views of sexuality or by treating other sexualities as oppressed victims. To do this I will, as suggested in Chapters 1-3, use the works of Castell and Bryson (1998), Keating (1994), Taylor (1998), etc.

By blending the two paradigms, I believe that I will be better able to describe the world of those whom now or may someday identify as lesbian or gay. At the same time, I want to also make sure that this research keeps in mind the main principle of social constuctionists, that of challenging categories rather than reifying them.

Literature Review

Very few high school, literature teachers have reported attempts at integrating

lesbian and gay issues into the curriculum. Of the few that have made attempts to include issues concerning homosexuality, the results have varied significantly.

Roberta Hammett (1992) talks about her decision to incorporate lesbian and gay literature into her literature class. She details the steps that led her to make this choice. Then, Hammett chronicles her decision to first develop a rationale for the inclusion of this subject in her class. As part of her preparation to introduce this new unit, she gave a copy of the plan to her principal. He insisted that before she use this plan, she discuss it with supervisory personnel, students, teachers and parents.

Hammett was not discouraged and sent a copy to the supervisor of secondary curriculum. Hammett describes his reaction:

> I sent the unit plan to the supervisor of secondary curriculum, whose reaction was very negative and who sent copies without my permission to senior central office personnel. The principal was called in to defend such a potentially controversial plan to three supervisors, all apparently very opposed to the proposal. I met later with the supervisor of secondary curriculum to discuss the unit and his action. (p. 256)

Hammett had several more meetings with school personnel about the issue. The supervisor of curriculum told her that if she continued her efforts to introduce this unit her own sexual orientation would be called into question. Finally Hammett concluded, “Right now I have too much to contend with to enter into a new conflict over the teaching of gay and lesbian literature.” (p. 257) Hammett, like many high school teachers, was forced to choose pragmatism over principle.

While Hammett’s attempts at integrating lesbian and gay studies into the high school curriculum proved problematic, other high school teachers have met with much more success.

Paula Roy (1997) speaks in glowing terms of her success with integrating the topic of lesbian and gay issues into her junior and senior, college preparatory, English classroom. She notes however that she has significant support from administrators who respect a curriculum that is inclusive and also cites the close proximity of her school to New York City as factors that make her decision to discuss this issue an easier task than many other teacher might face.

Using student journals, student evaluations of her teaching, and informal observations, Roy finds that students are generally appreciative of her efforts to include the topic of homosexuality. As she says, "In my students' evaluations of my teaching, the most frequently cited aspect is the openness of discussion" (p. 211). She also points out the opportunity this inclusion provides for lesbian and gay youth, "Over the years several students have 'come out' to me in journals and personal writings" (p. 216).

Roy points out three ways that she believes her students have been helped by discussing openly issues of homosexuality; "(1) the invisible gay/lesbian students have at least one period a day in which their identity is validated; (2) students already supportive of gay/lesbian rights feel additionally empowered; (3) open-minded but ignorant students have an opportunity to learn, discuss and question assumptions" (p. 216) While Roy believes that her teaching has been enriched by including this topic, she is careful to recognize that her teaching situation provides opportunities that might not be afforded to literature teachers in other areas of the country.

Another high school, literature teacher that has had success with including the topic of homosexuality in her curriculum is Vicky Greenbaum (1996). Although

Greenbaum describes herself as an "openly lesbian faculty member," she reports that she first started including lesbian and gay issues while still in the closet. She asserts that her efforts at including the topic of homosexuality have given students new insights into literature.

Because Greenbaum introduces the possibility that a homosexual subtext might appear in a literary work, her students become more adept at noticing aspects of the works that they have previously ignored. As she describes it, "The results continued to be positive, in class after class, year after year. Entire classes began to notice often-ignored (or tiptoed-around) moments, such as Holden's visit to Mr. Antonelli's house in Catcher in the Rye, or the possibility that Tom in The Glass Menagerie might be gay" (p. 83). These new insights created a richer literary experience for Greenbaum and her students.

Greenbaum concluded that the enriching the literary environment was well worth the risks involved in introducing this topic. As she states:

> The deeply personal nature of sexuality causes many teachers to feel doubt about the appropriateness of addressing such matters in their classes. Yet how can we isolate such a vital issue as sexuality from the intellectual sphere, from the school as a place where so many vital discoveries are made? Education needs to be about dangerous questions. Yet we teachers too often yield to our vulnerabilities and sacrifice the opportunity for English classrooms to become the crossroads where intellectual learning and the more personal complexities intersect. (p. 89)

Clearly Greenbaum's experiences have elements in common with both Hammett (1992) and Roy (1997). Like Hammett, Greenbaum recognizes the inherent dangers in talking about homosexuality in the high school setting. However, Greenbaum continues despite these potential dangers because, like Roy, she gets personal

satisfaction from this academic freedom, and she sees it as an enriching experience for her students.

The most important work done thus far on integrating lesbian and gay studies into the high school, literature curriculum has been done by Steven Athanases (1996). Athanases studied a teacher who introduced an essay by Brian McNaught entitled, "Dear Anita: Late Night Thoughts of an Irish Catholic Homosexual."

The introduction of this story was part of this teacher's course, "The Ethnic Experience in Literature." Athanases studied the student's reactions during the discussion of this essay and immediately after, their writings about the essay, and the impact the lesson had on the students after two years had passed.

Athanases found that the lesson was effective in many ways. First, it helped students break stereotypes and myths they had previously formed about lesbians and gay men. Second, at least some of the student's writings showed that they had developed some empathy for lesbians and gay men. Third, for at least two of the students feelings of identification and validation were key components of the effectiveness of the lesson.

When Athanases held discussions with these students two years later, many of them mentioned the McNaught essay and the discussion that followed as one of the most memorable lessons of the year. Athanases concluded:

> Some educators fear that including sexual orientation and homophobia in a multicultural curriculum dilutes the focus on race and ethnicity that belongs at the heart of the multicultural agenda. Reiko's lesson shows that a lesson on gay and lesbian concerns need not detract from these issues but can, in fact, deepen students' understanding about identities and oppression and the ways in which marginal groups both share features and differ. (p. 254)

Athanases' interviews with students showed the many ways they were able to compare the experiences of different groups that have been marginalized. The students came to see that members of groups they had once thought were very different from themselves shared many commonalities.

Athanases (1998) contextualizes these results in "Diverse Learners, Diverse Texts: Exploring Identity and Difference Through Literary Encounters." No longer focusing only on the issue of homosexuality, Athanases explores all of the attempts two teachers made at exploring diversity in the classroom. In this study, we see that what the students learned from the essay by Brian McNaught was very similar to what they learned from reading pieces by other minority authors.

While all of the attempts of the four teachers who tried to integrate lesbian and gay studies into their high school literature class varied greatly, they did have some common elements. This despite the fact that each teacher taught in a very different setting and had unique and individual reasons for the desire to teach about this topic.

All of these efforts contained accounts of people who opposed the introduction of lesbian and gay issues into the curriculum. Sometimes it was the students who resisted the discussion of issues involving homosexuality as in the case of Roy (1997) and Athanases (1996). Other times it was the opposition of fellow educators as in Greenbaum (1996) and Roy (1997). Most significant though was the opposition of administrators as in the case of Hammet (1992). The three teachers who had supportive administrators continued their work. Only Hammet, the teacher who met with resistance from her administrators, felt compelled to stop introducing this topic.

In all cases, the educators felt that their efforts with teaching about issues involving homosexuality were good for the students. Not only did they see these efforts as being positive because they broke down stereotypes, they also felt that the students learned more about literature because of their work with lesbian and gay texts. In addition, these teachers felt that they learned more and that their teaching experience was enriched (Athanases, 1996; Greenbaum, 1996; Hammet, 1992; Roy, 1997).

More importantly the students consistently reported feeling that the topic was worthwhile and educational. While many of the students resisted at first, ultimately they came to appreciate the opportunity to discuss this topic. Many of the students reported that their attitudes towards homosexuality had changed, and many lesbian and gay students said that it was the first time they had seen themselves mentioned in the curriculum (Athanases, 1996; Greenbaum, 1996; Roy, 1997).

While the accounts of literature teachers introducing the topic of homosexuality in the high school curriculum are limited, it seems that the educators who have done so feel that it is worth the effort. If these early efforts are any indication, then literature teachers who attempt to integrate lesbian and gay studies in their classrooms can expect to face criticism. However, if the teacher can withstand this criticism, both student and teacher will benefit.

With so few teachers introducing lesbian and gay issues into the literature classroom and even fewer reporting the results, the state of knowledge about this population's results with literature is lacking.

# CHAPTER 3

# METHODOLOGY

## Naturalistic Methodology

The paradigm of research that is most appropriate for the study is the naturalistic one. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the features of the naturalistic research paradigm that make it particularly relevant for my study:

> Where positivism establishes meaning operationally, the new paradigm establishes meaning inferentially. Where positivism sees its central purpose to be prediction, the new paradigm is concerned with understanding. Finally, where positivism is deterministic and bent on certainty, the new paradigm is probabilistic and speculative. (p. 30)

Since in this study, I was researching the perceptions of teachers, a quantitative paradigm would not have been useful here. I did not seek to make predictions, but rather as Lincoln and Guba state, I sought to come to a better understanding of why the teachers with whom I work do or don't incorporate lesbian/gay concerns in their discussions about literature.

The research I conducted with these teachers was focused on moving from a simplistic explanation of why teachers do not talk about the sexuality of lesbian/gay authors, i.e. calling it homophobia, to discovering the more complex reasons. From the data collected, I have drawn inferences for future action, however, because of the complex nature of this issue any results will be highly speculative.

The best research design for a study such as this one is the naturalistic

method. Naturalistic research was especially suited here because much of this work was focused on researching internal states (Bernard 1995). I need to know why teachers make the choices they do about literature instruction.

In order to do my research with this group, I felt that it must be done in a way that was consistent with what Loffland and Loffland (1995) identify as the ethical criteria of feminist research. They state, "Research in which there is an absence of equality and full sympathy between researcher and researched violates the tenets of feminist ethics" (p. 27). My role as a colleague and friend of the group of teachers that volunteered as informants placed me as one of their peers and provided for equality and sympathy.

Loffland and Lofland also state, "A corollary line of thought recommends that, as much as possible, feminist research be collaborative and at the service of the objectives and needs of the researched population"(p. 27). This research is of service to all literature teachers because they can benefit greatly from exploring this topic in depth. My research, as much as possible, fulfilled the requirement of collaboration. While most literature teachers I work with have not been overly concerned with lesbian and gay issues in literature, this is in many cases because they have not had the opportunity to explore the importance of these issues. It is my hope that my research has given these teacher/informants a chance to explore critically their pedagogy in regards to lesbian and gay issues. In addition, I hope their participation in this study has given them the opportunity to examine the general importance of discussing an author's sexuality as a key component in the study of literature. It is my belief that working through their feelings about these

issues has helped at least some of the teachers/participants better understand their lesbian and gay students who may be struggling with identity issues. It is my hope that some of these teachers have also begun to understand how their incorporation of lesbian/gay subject matter into the curriculum can help all of the students have new and greater insight into the work.

In fact it was because I believe that this was an opportunity for the teachers involved that I chose them for my informants. I believe that the researcher, the informants and more importantly an oppressed group of students will benefit from this study. As Mary Catherine Bateson (1990) states:

> On the one hand, excluded groups need to find ways of affirming their own value, from the search for self-esteem of women in consciousness-raising sessions to the expressions of gay pride, slogans like "black is beautiful," and the struggle to escape from a colonial mentality. On the other hand, the values and potentials of excluded groups need to be made visible and accessible to stimulate the imaginations of those who have always assumed that their way-often the way that benefits them most-is the best. (p. 71)

This research has given these teachers a chance to explore both their pedagogy and their personal beliefs about a group that most of them knew little about. In doing this, these teachers have started on the process of enhancing their ability to be more inclusive in their pedagogy.

## Researcher Role

Because this design is a naturalistic one, I have taken a quite different role as a researcher from the role I might have taken if this were a quantitative design. As Creswell (1994) states: "Qualitative research is interpretative research. As such the

biases, values, and judgment of the researcher become stated explicitly in the research report" (p. 147). As I will demonstrate in the next section, my role in this study is complicated, and I believe enhanced, by my multiple identities as a teacher, researcher, and a gay man.

Positioning Myself as a Researcher

This study is framed around my role as teacher and researcher. Because I am a literature teacher and because I am a gay man, I am more interested than most other teachers in improving the way literature teachers approach the teaching of works by lesbian and gay authors. The role of the teacher in shaping theories about pedagogy has traditionally been very limited. As Marilyn Cochran –Smith and Susan Lytle (1993) state, "Those who have daily access, extensive expertise, and a clear stake in improving classroom practice have no formal ways for their knowledge of classroom teaching and learning to become part of the literature on teaching" (p. 5). I hope to contribute to the theories of literature instruction by bringing my knowledge as a gay man and my knowledge as literature teacher together to frame this research study. By doing this, I hope to provide a unique insight into this area of pedagogy.

As a literature teacher in the school where I did my research, I had to recognize that I have a personal interest in the results of my study. Also I have far more knowledge of the participants and the setting than outside researchers would. Smith and Lytle (1993) address the advantages that a teacher-researcher might bring to the research process:

> We argue that efforts to construct and codify a knowledge base

> for teaching have relied primarily on university-based research and have ignored the significant contributions that teacher knowledge can make to both the academic research community and the community of school-based teachers. As a consequence, those most directly responsible for the education of children have been disenfranchised. We propose that teacher research, which we define as systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers, makes accessible some of the expertise of teachers and provides both universities and school communities with unique perspectives on teaching and learning. (p. 5)

It is because I have this unique perspective as both a teacher and a researcher that I am interested in this topic of inquiry. I have witnessed first hand the very limited amount of support offered to lesbian and gay students at my school, and I have become increasingly dissatisfied with what the school is doing to address the needs of these students.

Another perspective I bring to this study is that of a gay man who happens to teach literature. While this identity of gay teacher might lead some to see this work as biased, it is unlikely that someone who is not lesbian or gay would have the interest necessary to conduct this research. Castell and Bryson (1998) speak of the complexities of having lesbians and gay men as ethnographers for lesbian/gay research:

> What if the work you do is not because you're interested, or even because you have a stake in it, but because you are compelled to study it; you do it because you (feel you) *have* to? This surely puts a different twist on the worrisome ethical dilemmas concerning relevance, the validity of outsiders' perspectives, and the charge that ethnographies of 'others' are fundamentally exploitative. (p. 107)

These words reflect my feelings towards this research study. My role as a literature teacher and my gay identity combine to create an intense desire to take some sort of action to help students who are struggling with issues that surround sexuality.

Because I turned to literature during my own struggles with identity formation, I know the value that it can have.

In fact, my desire to return to the doctoral program has been largely an attempt to understand why literature teachers are resistant to the idea of incorporating lesbian and gay issues into the classroom. In this sense my research is as much about myself as it is about the teachers I work with. As Oscar Wilde (1891/1983) says in The Picture of Dorian Gray, "Every portrait ever painted is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself" (p. 18). While all research studies are in some sense autobiographical, this study places my personal concerns at the heart of the research process. .

My interest in this project is both personal and intellectual. In my high school experience, teachers who brought lesbian and gay concerns to the forefront piqued my interest in literature (Fair 1998). My tenth grade literature teacher was the first person I ever heard discuss homosexuality in an intellectual and unbiased way. I became more and more attentive during literature class. My twelfth grade teacher continued this interest by telling us about the homosexuality of Oscar Wilde and the bisexuality of Lord Byron. I remember that after the discussion of Wilde, I went to the library every morning for weeks and reread his biography in the World Book Encyclopedia. In addition, I have seen how much my teaching has improved as I have evolved in my efforts to include lesbian and gay concerns in my lesson plans (Fair 1998, May 14). I have seen students develop a better understanding of literature by contemplating the role that the author's sexual orientation played in the

developing of the work.

Bringing together the very different worlds of activism and pedagogy has been a slow process for me. Because of my desire to be a part of the gay community, I left Alabama immediately after graduating from college. I moved to the large southern city where I have lived and taught for the last fourteen years.

My first years teaching were in a somewhat small and rural school where the subject of homosexuality rarely came up. The population of the school was very much like the population of my home state. Not wanting to jeopardize my job and still somewhat new to the gay community, I convinced myself that by just being there that I was doing enough. My argument was that if lesbian and gay students needed a role model, they could have one by inferring that I was a homosexual. I had done this in my high school experience when I assumed my high school social studies teacher was gay because he was a single man in his thirties.

After my first three years at this school, it closed because of a consolidation process the county school system was undertaking. I found myself at a school that was much more racially, socially, and economically divided. This diversity of the student population and my own growth as an activist combined to make me believe that I could be more assertive about introducing issues of sexuality in my class discussions. I began to include the author's homosexuality as a part of the biographical information when we studied works by lesbian and gay authors. To my surprise, no one complained. In fact, my classroom discussions became richer as students started to look in new ways at how the author's life informed the work.

It was around this time that my department head took a new job at a suburban

school in an affluent area outside the city. The next year, she asked me to transfer because she felt this school would be more receptive to the efforts of a gay teacher. She had witnessed the homophobia I experienced from administrators at the other two schools and thought I would be happier at this school because there were a large number of lesbians and gays on the faculty. While these lesbian and gay faculty members were not completely "out" to the school, their sexual orientation was somewhat common knowledge, at least among the faculty members. This is the site of my research.

Community of Research Site

The community from which our students come is an affluent one in a suburb located outside a large metropolitan area in the Southeast. The area as a whole has voted republican in the last several elections. From talks that I have had with members of the community concerning their political beliefs, it appears to me that most of them are fiscally conservative but socially liberal. However, this is often determined by how long the person has lived in the area.

Like many suburbs of the South, the community can be divided into two sharply different groups, those that are long time residents of the city and those who have moved in more recently from other parts of the country because of job opportunities. While there are other small factions, clearly these two groups make up the majority of the community.

From my observation of students, discussions with parent volunteers, and conversations with local business people who categorize themselves as belonging to

one of these two groups, I have come to see that often the two groups have greatly contrasting views, especially with regards to politics. One issue that clearly demonstrates this fact is the division between the two over changing the state flag, which at one time contained a Confederate symbol. For the most part, those who identify themselves as long time residents often vociferously defend the Confederate emblem, while those who consider themselves newcomers often announce that they have no special allegiance to the Confederate flag.

I have observed that these perceptions often cross over into other areas as well. Generally speaking, long time residents tend to be much more conservative regarding social issues, than do the newcomers.

School Research Site

The school is a large one (2135 students) and grows in population every year. Most of the students at the school are white (89%). The racial breakdown of the rest of the student population is 4% Asian, 5% Black, and 2% Hispanic (Council for School Performance). Despite the lack of diversity, the school, at least in its ideal culture, has made a strong commitment to multiculturalism. The student directory compiled by the Parent Teacher Association includes a quote from Alice McLellan Birney, "Our appeal is to all mankind and womankind, regardless of color, creed, or condition, to recognize that in the child lies the hope of the race and that the republic's greatest work is to save the children." The student handbook includes the following statement on harassment and bigotry:

> A student shall not insult, intimidate, or harass any person by

> committing any act of bigotry (directed toward another person's race, ethnic heritage, national origin, religion, age, sex, disability, or economic status) that, under the circumstances, would tend to cause substantial disruption of the educational setting or school activity. Prohibited acts of bigotry include verbal harassment, such as racial, sexual, or ethnic slurs, derogatory comments, insults, and jokes; physical harassment, such as offensive touching; and visual harassment, such as racially, sexually, or ethnically offensive posters, graffiti, drawings, clothing or gestures that, <u>under the circumstances, would tend to cause substantial disruption of the educational setting or school activity.</u> (p. 31)

Despite this ideal culture that claims to value all students and prohibits students from making "sexual slurs," the real school culture is one where terms like fag, dyke, and the phrase "that's so gay" are a part of everyday life. I have heard these terms used frequently in the halls, seen them written on students' lockers, and had to give countless detentions and reprimands for the use of these phrases in my classroom. My interview with the drama teacher confirms my perception of the students' frequent use of homophobic epithets. He says that after the AIDS play was presented at school, "there were some kids that said… of course… that said some negative things. You know… a fag show…and why do we have to watch this and why don't they just have all the fags come to the show? We heard that a lot. Well not a lot but we did hear that." While at least one teacher heard these comments, the students making them were not punished. In fact, they were not even reprimanded. This is despite the clear violation of the discipline policy.

Three incidents that have occurred at the school since I have been teaching there are particularly illustrative of the contradictory perceptions of the school towards homosexuality. All of these events have taken place through the English department or have had English teachers in key positions in the organizing of the events.

The first event was a play presented during AIDS awareness week. The play was very straight-forward in its presentation of the different groups of people who have contracted the disease. One of the characters was a teenage homosexual. It was my first year at this school, and I remember thinking at the time how progressive the school was. My vision of the school as a bastion of liberal tolerance was shattered when AIDS awareness week was canceled the next year because two parents objected to it. As the person in charge, the drama instructor heard some of the objections the parents had to the program:

> I did hear that there were some parent complaints. That the subject matter was too adult. I heard that. That it was inappropriate. I heard that the parents… I heard this more than you would think… I heard that they were upset because they didn't even like to acknowledge that high school students would even have sex. So there was no way to deal with AIDS because let's not even talk about AIDS because of course we don't have sex. Excuse me… their children don't have sex. So, this is irrelevant… to talk about condoms because our kids don't … so that is some serious denial on the parents' part.

Clearly he did attribute this reaction of the parents to homophobia. When asked whether or not he felt the parents concerns were legitimate he stated:

> Of course not… of course not… We are used to that bullshit. It wasn't legitimate. Of course it wasn't legitimate, they uh… its homophobia… it's homophobia and it's denial about their children having sex. They keep thinking these children are little, Leave it to Beaver, children from the fifties and of course these kids aren't. And you hear them talk and these kids have done a lot. In some ways more than I ever thought about doing when I was a teenager… uh… No, I thought they were wrong. I thought it was wrong. And I thought they were wrong… and I think it was homophobic. I think it was probably homophobic. It wasn't valid at all. That's a lot of crap about it being too provocative.

Despite the negative reactions he received from some students and teachers, he still

believes that the play overall was a success:

> When we came back to class some students talked about some issues (surrounding homosexuality and AIDS). Some things they did not know. One of the neatest things about that play was that we had a line up. It looked like a police lineup because we had stereotypes… like we had an effeminate looking boy with a sweater tied around him, and out of that whole group, he was the only one that didn't have AIDS and the rest of the people did. So we did explode myths and stereotypes. So I hope that resonated with the students… stereotyping and that sort of thing. I liked the show because it had some things with some humor in it… we had condom man and the use of condoms… and condom man was like a super hero and… umm yes I do. I think it made students think.

The drama teacher, along with other teachers and students, felt the play was successful and instructive. However, because a small minority of parents, no more than ten, complained, the AIDS awareness week was canceled for the next year. Only after a group of teachers, many of them lesbian and gay, protested the decision was the program allowed to continue.

Two other school wide drama presentations show just how conflicted the school culture can be we it comes to the topic of homosexuality. In one of these presentations, two young men played the part of gay characters, and the drama teacher received several parent complaints. In the other presentation, a celebration of diversity, a young woman played herself by coming out as a lesbian through her dramatic monologue. There were relativity few complaints about this presentation.

The play involving the two boys playing gay characters was scheduled to be presented to the English classes each period of the day. By midday the school had already started receiving phone calls from angry parents. One of the administrators consulted the drama teacher and encouraged him to change the remaining shows:

> …a couple of calls about the boys being too much and the assistant principal asked me to cut that scene and make them not gay. And I asked the boys. And I was very proud of them because they said they wanted to play it that way and we weren't going to change it. I was real proud of them. Because I asked them… you know they are adolescent high school boys and I asked them… you know here at the school… it is not fair for me to put their ass on the line if they don't want to. So I asked them… do you want to cut that? Or just play it as straight characters? And they said, "No, we are wearing those hats and we are wearing those outlandish scarves and we are going to do it just as we planned it." and I asked them when we got the phone calls… I think we had three more shows to do… And they said, "Yes we will just do it the way it is."

While the drama teacher was severely criticized for this fictional presentation of homosexuality, when a young woman did a true account of her homosexual feelings, the drama teacher received very few complaints.

This young woman decided to do her monologue for a diversity presentation on the fact that she was a lesbian. At first it was uncertain whether the student would be allowed to present her monologue:

> Well… you know at that time I believe she was a tenth grade girl… and I didn't know exactly what to do. So of course I went to the assistant principal… and she said she would go to the principal and see … and he said he thought it would be cool. He thought it would be fine if she did it, but she would have to let her parents know that she was going to do that. I think she was fifteen at the time… so that her parents wouldn't flip out when you know the whole school heard this and the parents hadn't heard it. We thought that would be damaging … her parents… she went home and asked her parents I think she asked her father and the parents said it would be fine.

After administrators consulted with her parents, they allowed the presentation to go forward. In discussion of the program in my classes, the students were almost universally supportive of this student. In fact, most students commented that they admired her courage. The drama instructor agrees in this assessment:

> It was kind of umm an interesting thing. It was kind of weird. Some people … I don't know I guess it was denial said, "Well, it's just a play. I am sure she isn't a lesbian…" and I figured… and some people said it was cool… and I heard some comments. There was some buzz. I heard someone… I heard a boy came up and asked her… and there was some buzz around school about it. I don't think it was traumatic for her.

There are of course several differences between the presentation the young woman did and the one done by the two male students. Of course the gender could be a factor. It could be that the students were less threatened by lesbianism than they were by gay male behavior. It could have been due to the time difference. The diversity seminar was three years after the play with the two males. It could be that students had become more educated on the topic because of their exposure through the other productions or by the increased portrayals of lesbian and gay experience in the mass media. Any one of these differences or all of them could be a factor or factors in why the reaction from the students and parents might view the productions differently.

Still the reaction from the parents and the students is puzzling. In the first presentation the boys were playing fictional characters, and yet they were perceived as being gay because of their portrayal of these fictional roles. In the second presentation, the students were aware that the monologues came from the real experience of the actors, and yet apparently many of them chose to believe this real life account was a work of fiction.

Another event that illustrates the conflicting perceptions toward homosexuality was a literary program sponsored by the literary magazine staff. This was another school wide program that took place through the English classes. Each English

class selected one literary writing, song, poem, or video to be presented at an assembly that would take place during that period. Under these guidelines each period's assembly would be different since each period would have a different group of winners. Despite this fact, one video that was rife with homophobia was allowed to be shown during each period rather than just the period in which it was the winner. After another teacher and I raised objections to the content of this video, an administrator viewed it and agreed that it was indeed homophobic. Most English teachers did not agree with our assessment of the film as homophobic. However, the administrator demonstrated her agreement with our perception of the film by calling in the English department head to discuss the way the presentation of the film was handled. The result of this was that the assembly at which attendance had been mandatory was now made voluntary.

Faculty at High School

Teachers and administrators are clearly conflicted in their perceptions about how the topic of homosexuality should be handled. When teachers do decide to tackle the subject they are open to criticism from other teachers, parents, and students. These teachers who do try to deal with the topic often begin to doubt their own objectivity. As the drama instructor says:

> I personally even heard… which really pissed me off because I am a gay teacher. Some parent told [the assistant principal] this… every play I do here has to have some kind of gay character. Like that really pissed me off. You know that is kind of bullshit too. Like we are trying to infiltrate them. Like we are tying to show them propaganda movies like in the 30's you know the Reich… Hilter's movie or something… and I got so angry that I had to go back.

> You know I went back into my scrapbooks to see if I had done that, and it really was bullshit. I didn't do that. I hadn't done that… but uh… I have had some parents say to (the assistant principal) that every time I did a play I was trying to get some message out. And she wouldn't tell me who the parent was… because I wanted to have the name because I wanted to have them in here and talk to them… because it did piss me off.

As long as the school has no consistent policy towards the topic of homosexuality, each teacher has to decide for him/herself how to deal with the topic. There is no real commitment to academic freedom because teachers cannot be assured of support from the administration. Teachers may avoid the topic because they might not be as willing as the drama teacher is to face criticism and take chances. It might be easier to just avoid the topic altogether, and this avoidance will continue to make the subject forever taboo.

For the past eight years I have attempted to raise awareness among the teachers about homosexuality. Since I am a literature teacher, I have tended to have these discussions about this issue with other literature teachers. It is this group of literature teachers who comprise the central informants for my study. In many ways the teachers in this English department are very typical of the English department of any suburban school. The teachers range in age from 26 to 57. Nine of the twenty teachers are male and eleven are female. Three teachers (including myself) identify themselves as gay or lesbian. The other twelve identify themselves as heterosexual. Having worked with these teachers for eight years gives me an unusual amount of access for a researcher. It also places me in the role of an insider.

Entering and Establishing My Role as Researcher

This study stems from my desire to understand why my informal efforts to encourage my colleagues to incorporate the concerns of lesbian and gay students into their lesson plans have been largely ineffective. In informal discussions with these teachers, I have argued that honest discussion of the sexual orientation of the authors would enrich the study of literature. While the teachers are usually polite and sometimes even agree, I do not see them making any major changes in this area. I began this study with the hope that it would not only help me see why the literature teachers I work with are resistant to the idea of incorporating lesbian/gay subject matter into their classroom, but would also help inform future practice for these teachers and for other literature teachers as well.

In fact, it is because of my empathy with this group that I understand that the reason they do not presently integrate lesbian and gay issues into their classroom is not due simply to homophobia. Because I have gotten to know this group well over the last eight years, I understand that while, like all people in our society, they may have some internalized homophobia, this is not the sole reason for their choice to exclude lesbian and gay issues.

This would be a weak study indeed if I were only looking to prove that literature teachers are homophobic in their choice about which authors' biographies are relevant and what biographical material is deemed important to the study of literature. As David Silverman (1993) states:

> Avoiding the temptation, at its height in the 1960's, to favour the 'underdog' at the expense of everybody else, one should have doubts about a study which fails to deal even-handedly with the people it

> describes or to recognize the interactive character of social life. Dingwall's ethic of 'fair dealing' implies that we should ask of any study: 'Does it convey as much understanding of its villains as its heroes? Are the privileged treated as having something serious to say or simply dismissed as evil, corrupt or greedy without further inquiry?' Clearly, this is as much a scientific as an ethical issue. (p. 45)

Because these informants are my friends and colleagues, I have even more reason to avoid constructing this group of teachers as villainous or homophobic. Also, their friendship with me over the years has made me doubtful of how much of this decision lies strictly on homophobia.

As I began this study I came to realize through informal discussions with teachers about this topic that most have honestly seemed to feel that it shouldn't matter what the sexuality of the author is. They have come to this belief because they have been taught that great works of literature should "stand on their own." Many of them have also said that they believe that literature is universal, and therefore no matter what the identity of the author, every reader should be able to connect to the universal themes included in the work.

While literature is indeed universal in its themes, it does not follow that this universal quality makes the identity of the author irrelevant. Teachers of literature could learn a great deal from the work of ethnographers. Qualitative researchers have asserted the importance of reflexivity in their studies arguing that "who is doing the looking" is essential to the work. Just as this concept is important to ethnography it is also important to the study of literature. My research questions centers around why literature teachers do not hesitate to reveal the importance of an heterosexual lens with regard to literature but are reluctant and often deliberately

obscure the homosexual lens of an author, arguing that it doesn't matter whether the author is heterosexual or homosexual.

By not revealing the sexual orientation of homosexual authors, literature teachers deprive lesbian and gay students of appropriate role models. More importantly, these teachers deprive all students of the opportunity to fully understand the work of literature and to fully understand an often hidden part of life. Because the teachers' refusal to address this issue, they intentionally signal the students that this topic is taboo. By constructing homosexuality as an identity that deserves ostracism, the teachers unknowingly prevent lesbian and gay students from developing a healthy and affirming sense of self.

## Guiding Questions

Because I am deeply concerned with how literature teachers are perhaps unknowingly constructing only images of heterosexuality, my guiding questions are the following:

Why has the sexuality of lesbian/gay authors traditionally been hidden from students working with their texts?

Why do many literature teachers still teach the works of lesbian/gay authors without telling the students the authors are lesbian/gay?

Why are some literature teachers seemingly very comfortable with talking about lesbian/gay issues, while others actively avoid such discussions?

How do literature teachers decide what aspects of an author's life to reveal and which to keep hidden?

What might be gained if literature teachers were more comfortable talking about

sexuality with the students?

Prolonged Engagement

For the purpose of this study I gathered many different types of data as Loffland and Loffland (1995) recommend: "Rich data mean, ideally, a wide and diverse range of information collected over a relatively prolonged period of time" (p. 16). As suggested above, I have met the requirements of prolonged engagement. I have been working with some of the teachers in this study for as long as fourteen years. I have been a teacher at the research site for eight years, and have definitely become a "native."

As Flick (1998) states, " The question of how to gain access to the field under study is more crucial in qualitative research than in quantitative research" (p. 54). Of course, as a teacher at my research site, I had already entered the field of study and had an appropriate purpose other than my observational one. I also did not have to worry with what is sometimes a difficult dilemma for researchers, how to choose informants. Flick says, " Once the researcher has gained access to the field or the institution, he or she faces the problem of how to reach those persons within it who are the most interesting" (p.58). Once again, for me this problem was already predetermined. I used the English teachers as my informants because they are the ones that were likely to hold the answers to my research questions. Not only that, I had already built personal and professional relationships with these teachers that enabled me to do a more comprehensive study and helped me choose and convince the teachers to participate in this study.

Participant Observation

This period of prolonged engagement or what Bernard (1995) terms "hanging out" has given me a unique insight that an outside researcher might not have been able to attain. As Bernard says, "It may sound silly, but just hanging out is skill, and until you learn it you can't do your best work as a participant observer" (p. 151). I have had many years of "hanging out" and observing these teachers. Also by being a fellow teacher, I have observed these teachers in ways and in situations that most researchers would not get to see. Cohcran- Smith and Lytle (1993) offer validation for the types of data I have collected informally over the years:

> Many teachers have sophisticated and sensitive observation skills grounded in the context of actual classrooms and schools. In analyzing the patterns and discrepancies that occur, teachers use the interpretive frameworks of practitioners to provide a truly emic view that is different from that of an outside observer, even if that observer assumes an ethnographic stance and spends considerable time in the classroom. (p. 18).

It is the type of practitioner knowledge that Cohcran-Smith and Lytle speak of that I brought to my first stages of research as an informal participant observer.

Loffland and Loffland (1995) define the term participant observation in this way: "Participant observation refers to the process in which an investigator establishes and sustains a many-sided and relatively long-term relationship with a human association in its natural setting for the purpose of developing a scientific understanding of that association" (p. 18). In the English office, during lunches, on planning days, etc. I have had the opportunity to get to know in an informal and collegial way the personalities and teaching styles of all of the teachers in the

department. This fulfills the requirements Loffland and Loffland set forth for participant observation: "Classic participant observation, then, always involves the interweaving of looking and listening, of watching and asking, and some of that listening and asking may approach or be identical to intensive interviewing" (p. 19). Despite my many years of listening and asking, I was still unsure why many teachers resisted the idea of incorporating lesbian/gay issues, while others did so with relative ease and seemingly think of this incorporation as a natural thing to do.

## Choosing Participants

After observing the teachers for some time, I began to choose which teachers I would use as informants. I based this choice on many factors. First, I wanted teachers that I viewed as core members of the group who had strong voices in shaping the culture of the department. The teachers who ultimately became my informants for this study were all teachers who either had been a part of the department for a considerable time, or they were leaders in the department in some way. The choice was also based on the willingness of the participants to be a part of the study. Clearly a participant who was reluctant to reveal personal views would make an unreliable informant. I did chose one participant, Vanessa, who was somewhat reluctant to participate in the study. She did not participate in all aspects of the study in some cases because she did not remain a member of the department for the full length of the study. However, she did agree to classroom observations and the initial interview. While Vanessa was somewhat reluctant to be a part of the

study, I did feel that she was honest and forthcoming.

Part of my decision to choose Vanessa as a key informant was because of my belief formed during early observations that she was somewhat uncomfortable with the topic of homosexuality. Just as I chose Vanessa because I thought she represented one extreme in the department, I chose June and Sally as informants because I knew they had gay friends, included lesbian/gay subject matter in their curriculum, and were generally more comfortable with the topic than other members of the department. In some cases, I chose informants because of their sexuality. Ford is gay and Lily is a lesbian. I might have chosen them regardless of this fact because they have both been members of the department for a considerable length of time and are in leadership positions. However, I felt that their perspective added unique insight into the study.

Formal Interviews

Using the teachers that I had chosen as key informants, and because I wanted to study in more depth exactly why teachers do or don't incorporate these issues into their classes, I used the advice of Loffland and Loffland who recommend intensive interviewing. It is my belief that these interviews were as useful to the instructors themselves as they have been to me as a researcher. Because this study is mainly concerned with teachers' perceptions, it is my belief that the formal interviews are the most important data in this research. While classroom observations, informal

observations, and other types of data are important as sources of triangulation, it is the interviews that allow the teachers to express exactly what their perceptions are concerning the inclusion of lesbian/gay subject matter. Throughout the interview process I sought to maintain equality between the researcher and the participants using Cochran-Smith and Lytle's definition of the interview process, "Oral inquiry processes are procedures in which two or more teachers jointly research their experiences by examining particular issues, educational concepts, texts (including students' work), and other data about students" (p. 30). While the teachers I interviewed were not co-researchers in the technical sense, I believe that the interview process gave these teachers an opportunity to investigate a dimension of their teaching that has perhaps gone unexplored, namely the reasons behind their inclusion or exclusion of lesbian/gay issues in the literature classroom.

Possibly the most formidable part of this data collection was the formation of interview questions. Because of the advent of post-modernism, forming questions required making choices about terminology. When referring to authors, should I call them gay/lesbian? Queer? Gay, lesbian, bi, transgendered? What if the author never used these terms to refer to him/herself?

It was not my desire to turn this study into a psychological treatise on appropriate ways of naming. In some ways, any term I used would be technically incorrect because the term homosexual is relatively new [coined in 1868 by the Hungarian journalist Karl Maria Kertbenny (Fone 2000)], and the term gay is an even more recent development. Not only have the terms changed throughout time, even in the gay community there is sharp disagreement over what terms are

appropriate for lesbians and gays.

For my decision on the use of terminology, I looked to Joseph Cady (1992), and followed his common sense approach:

> I usually start my courses by trying to establish two fundamental frameworks. The first is a working definition of "homosexuality." Here I try to keep the discussion concrete and experiential rather than abstract and etiological. For example, instead of beginning with questions like "Is homosexuality transhistorical? or "Where does homosexuality come from?", I might start by asking "How (i.e., by what factors) would we identify or recognize homosexuality in a person/author/text?" or "If you said someone was 'homosexual' or 'gay,' what would you mean by that?" The definition that typically emerges from this discussion, and that is certainly supported by our subsequent discussions and readings, is homosexuality as the de facto experience of same-sex attraction. Within this broad definition, I then focus on homosexuality as what we what we would now call an "orientation" (i.e. a profound and lasting attraction) rather than homosexuality as only an occasional feeling, since only a deeply-felt homosexuality is likely to spur a distinct homosexual literature. At the same time, I am careful to acknowledge that in its most universal sense "homosexuality" could refer to either an orientation or an occasional desire. (p. 92)

By focusing on a common sense approach to this problem, Cady avoids the pitfalls of a social contructionist trap. His definition works because it makes sense. In many ways it is not unlike the famous statement made by Judge Potter Stewart when deciding a pornography case. Stewart's quote is included in Leonard Frank's (1999) Quotationary. In his decision of the case, Stewart said, "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material…embraced within that shorthand description [of obscenity]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it" (p. 622). In the same way that Potter knows pornography when he sees it, Cady knows that there are people who generally speaking can be referred to as homosexuals. Cady does recognize the difficulties in categorizing, especially given the current trend towards social constructionist ideology and fluid and multiple identities.

While it is difficult to develop a single term that will be inclusive for all, most of us recognize that whether we use the term gay, homosexual, or refer to the person as having a same gender attraction, all three identities have a great deal in common with each other especially in the sense that they are defined by their opposite, heterosexuality.

While Cady's approach is a common sense one, it does not mean that he abandons intellectualism. He sets up strict criteria for who will be included under his definition of homosexuality:

> The definition of homosexuality that I follow in the course thus depends neither on acts nor on self-labeling. In its terms, for example, the category of "a homosexual" could include, among others: a virgin whose erotic fantasies are chiefly or exclusively about his/her own sex; someone who has sex only with the other sex but whose erotic wishes are chiefly or exclusively for his/her own sex; and someone who had sex chiefly or exclusively with his her own sex but still called him/herself "heterosexual." As mentioned, the validity of this definition becomes only more obvious as the course proceeds, but one of its immediate and foremost values is in helping thwart denial. One of the most common defenses of people who do not want to think about homosexuality is, of course, to demand evidence of "facts" or "acts" in discussing the subject. A stock objection of anxious literary critics, for example, is the red herring assertion that "We can't conclusively say that X was homosexual since we have no hard evidence that he/she ever slept with another man/woman." A definition of homosexuality based on de facto desire alone removes the ground for evasive maneuver at once and also gives students a means of addressing it when they meet it in hostile questioners outside the classroom. (pp. 92-93)

As in important as Cady's points about identity are, there is an additional reason for the selection of the terms that I decided to use when talking with the teachers. In setting up my interview questions, I choose to use the general terms, lesbian and gay, because those are the term most of the teachers presently use and the terms they are

most likely to understand. In informal conversations, the English teachers have expressed that they are more comfortable with the terms lesbian and gay. Many of these teachers have expressed the belief that the term homosexual is too clinical and also too focused on sexuality. Not only would it be uncomfortable to shift back and forth between terms, it also would be confusing to the informants and at times would complicate the issue unnecessarily. A case in point would be Willa Cather. Although Cather did not describe herself as a lesbian, and in fact went to great lengths to hide her lesbianism, literary critics today recognize that she was in fact involved in same-sex attraction and sexual practices.

In order to maintain consistency, I developed my questions by using the terms lesbian and gay. I focused my questions on how teachers integrate biographical knowledge of the author with the teaching of the work. Naturally, this focused on issues of identity. Teachers were asked to think about whether a lesbian or gay identity is important in the forming of a work of literature. Because this research deals with issues of identity, I also wanted to question the teachers about how they approach students who "come out" to them. Also in order to make the questions more accessible for the teachers, I adjusted them according the works each teacher covers. For example: If I knew that a teacher uses My Antonia, I would use that as an example of a work by a homosexual author. For another teacher, I might use the works of such authors as W. H. Auden, Oscar Wilde, and Walt Whitman.

This construction of the research questions is advocated by Loffland and Loffland (1995) when they state, "interviews might more accurately be termed *guided conversations*" (p.85). Keeping these issues in mind, my questions followed the pattern

below with changes in authors depended on what the teacher I was interviewing teaches (for example: there would be no need to talk about Willa Cather with a teacher that I know does not include any of her works. So I changed the question and talked about Walt Whitman or another author that I knew is a part of that teacher's curriculum.)

Interview Questions

What place do lesbian/gay issues have in the teaching of literature?

What kinds of issues should/should not be included?

Authors of some of the texts that we teach are gay/lesbian. How does this fact influence your instruction of their writing?

When studying a work of literature how important do you think it is to include personal information, such as the impact a spouse or significant other had on the work?

If a student came to you and said I want to choose a gay adolescent novel to read, how comfortable would you be with that? What would you do?

When the topic of gays and lesbians comes up in class say with My Antonia give me an example of how you handle that discussion.

When you are studying the work of Langston Hughes, do you tell the students that he was African American? If so, why? If not, why not?

When you are studying the work of Langston Hughes, do you tell the students that he was gay? If so, why? If not, why not?

Have you ever had a student come out to you?

How did you handle that?

Classroom Observations

Both before and after the formal interviews, I conducted classroom observations. Classroom observations added to my research because as Flick states: "interviews and narratives merely make the accounts of practices accessible instead of the practices themselves" (Flick 1998). Classroom observations did at times identify aspects of the teachers' perceptions that could otherwise be hidden in interviews. However, because I am a full time teacher at the school, the number of formal classroom observations was somewhat limited. I did observe all of the primary informants at least two times and some I observed numerous times. The observations that took place before the interviews help me focus on what types of questions I might ask, and the observation that took place after the interviews were an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of some of the data I received during the interview stage. However, equally as important

as these formal observations were the informal classroom observations I conducted with all of the teachers in the study. I was frequently in and out of these teachers' classrooms for short periods of time. During these times, I gathered information in an informal way by noticing the teachers' styles and their interactions with students when they were not aware that I was "observing."

Teacher/Researcher Data

In addition to these traditional ways of collecting data, I also achieved triangulatation by looking at data that is unique to a teacher research. This data defended by Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993) consists of student essays, student notes, and the comments students make both in and outside of class. By paying attention to this type of data, I have a unique insight into the climate of the school. Also, by listening to the students' comments about the teachers and their classes and the school in general, I get a different perspective than I otherwise would. For example, because the times when lesbian/gay subject matter comes up in class are quite unpredictable, there was no way for me to schedule observations on times when I could be sure the subject would come up. However, the students frequently tell me when a teacher talks about the subject, and they did so throughout this research process. While this second hand information is not definitive, when the students' stories were the same or similar to the way the teachers told me they handled the situation, I could feel more confident that these discussions did take place.

Life Histories

Because the participants' personal beliefs about homosexuality were often as strong and perhaps even stronger than their pedagogical beliefs on this subject, I also conducted life histories with three of the four major participants in this study. One of the major informants, Vanessa, had already left the department and was no longer interested in doing further work with the study. The life history as defined by Creswell(1998), "is an approach found in the social sciences and anthropology where a researcher reports on an individual's life and how it reflects cultural themes of the society, personal themes, institutional themes, and social histories" (p. 49). For the purpose of this study, I used the following questions to conduct life history interviews:

Life History Questions

Everyone has a life story. Tell me about your life, in about twenty minutes or so if you can. Begin wherever you'd like and include whatever you wish.

Early Life:

Were you ever told anything unusual about your first year of life?

Do you remember anything about your first year of life?

What feelings come up when you recall your parents?

Education:

Did you enjoy school in the beginning?

What are your best memories of school?

What accomplishments in school are you most proud of?

What organizations or activities were you involved with in school? In college?

Love and Work

Did you have a steady boy or girlfriend in high school?

How would you describe your courtship of your spouse?

What has been the best and worst parts of marriage?

How did you end up in the type of work you do?

What is important in your work?

Historical Events and Periods

What was the most important historical event you participated in?

What is different or unique about your community?

Inner life and spiritual awareness

What role does spirituality play in your life now?

How do your spiritual values and beliefs affect how you live your life?

Major Life Themes

What has been the happiest time in your life?

What relationships in your life have been the most significant?

Vision of the future

When you think about the future, what makes you feel the most uneasy?

What gives you the most hope?

Closure

Is there anything that we have left out of your life story?

Do you feel you have given a fair picture of yourself?

What are your feelings about this interview and all that we have covered?

Interpreting Data

When analyzing the data I gathered, I used an emergent design. Loffland and Loffland (1995) define this type of design in this way: "In qualitative field studies, analysis is conceived as an emergent product of a process of gradual induction" (p. 181). Starting from my earliest data gathering (informal observation), I have looked for patterns. As I began to see these patterns emerge, I started looking for similar patterns in new data gathering. However, I remained open to patterns that I had not seen previously. Throughout the process, I was prepared to change any assumptions that began to emerge if I saw that these patterns were not consistent with new data gathering. This process did require some creativity. As Loffland and Loffland (1995) state: "Because analysis is the product of an inductive and emergent process in which the analyst is the central agent, achieving this order is not simply a mechanical process of assembly line steps" (p. 181). Throughout the process I challenged my assumptions, and I tried to always remain open to new ways of looking at data, as well as looking for new ways to gather data.

As I began to code data, I used the strategies that Flick (1998) terms "thematic coding." Flick recommends using this method of coding when "the underlying assumption is that in different social worlds or groups, differing views can be found" (p. 187). This was an appropriate method for my study. As early as my informal observations I had already identified at least two groups among the literature teachers, those who incorporate lesbian/gay issues in their classroom discussions and those that don't. As I continued gathering new types of data such as the formal interviews, I

began to see more sophisticated themes and realized that the number of groups I might divide the department in was greater than I had originally thought.

Flick suggests that the first step in this process of thematic coding is to develop case studies. From the initial case studies, Flick says, " a deepening analysis of the single case is carried out which pursues several aims. The meaningful relations in the way the respective person deals with the topic of the study are to be preserved, which is why a case study is done for all cases. In the analysis, a system of categories is developed for the single case" (p. 188). Once this analysis of the first case was done, thematic domains began to emerge. From informal observation, classroom observation, and formal interviews, I began to get a clear picture of the informant's perceptions and started to notice the pervasive themes.

I was then able to compare the themes that emerged from the first informant to the patterns that were revealed by other informants. As Flick states, "A thematic structure results from this cross-check which underlies the analysis of further cases, in order to increase their comparability" (p. 188). While the patterns of the first interviews provided an initial thematic structure, I modified this structure when as Flick says, "new and contradictory aspects emerge" (p. 188).

With this emergent design, I began to get a clearer picture of the teachers' perceptions than I had previously. I was able to better understand why some teachers feel that they should incorporate lesbian/gay issues in their literary discussion and why others do not.

Member Checking

Throughout the data collection process I continually made use of member checking with the informants. I did this by giving all participants an opportunity to read the transcripts of their interviews. More importantly, whether participants read over their transcripts or not (most did not), I went back to the informants repeatedly to confirm my interpretation of their interviews, classroom observations or informal observations. Two participants, Ford and Clare. agreed to read the entire draft of this manuscript and consulted with me regarding the conclusions I have drawn here.

## Credibility

The credibility of this study offers several challenges. First, one of my greatest strengths in conducting this research was also a liability. Because I am a gay teacher, I worried at times that informants might not tell me the truth about their feelings on this topic. Of course this can be a problem in any researcher's study. As Bernard (1995) says, "Don't be surprised if informants lie to you" (p. 168). In some ways, I feel that I was able to discern whether or not informants were lying better than an outside researcher would have. I have worked very closely with these informants for years, and I have already heard them voice their opinions about this issue quite vocally.

Another aspect that some might view as problematic is the fact that as a member of the department over the years I have developed friendships with these informants. Once again, what could be a liability, I hope was instead a strength. I do not believe any other researcher could have gotten the

participants of this study to be as open as they have been with me. Because I am a friend and a colleague, the participants realized that I would not be likely to term the teacher's who are reluctant to discuss the biographies of lesbian/gay authors as homophobes. Instead, I believe that these teachers realized that I would have even more of a reason than most researchers to look for more complex reasons behind their responses and to present an accurate and fair depiction of them.

While every research study is open to scrutiny and criticism, I hope that my years of working with this group of teachers give some sense of credibility to this study. Throughout this study, I was equally inspired by my loyalty to these friends and colleagues and my strong desire to improve the quality of literature instruction through the inclusion of lesbian and gay subject matter in literature.

I have always believed the best way to improve teachers approach to lesbian and gay subjects in literature is to engage them in a dialogue. Through this dialogue, I believe these teachers began to do their own analysis of how they have addressed lesbian/gay subject matter in the past and how they might do it differently in the future. As Saul Alinsky (1971) says, "Most people do not accumulate a body of experience. Most people go through life undergoing a series of happenings, which pass through their systems undigested. Happenings become experiences when they are digested, when they are reflected on, related to general patterns, and synthesized" (pp. 68-69). Through these interviews, I believe the participants in this study were able to spend more time reflecting on issues that they may have devoted little time to analyzing prior to this experience.

This type of reflection is also recommended by Paulo Freire (1970/1999). He states:

> Let me emphasize that my defense of the praxis implies no dichotomy by which this praxis could be divided into a prior stage of reflection and a subsequent stage of action. Action and reflection occur simultaneously. A critical analysis of reality may, however, reveal that a particular form of action is impossible or inappropriate *at the present time*. Those who through reflection perceive the infeasibility or inappropriateness of one or another form of action (which should accordingly be postponed or substituted) cannot thereby be accused of inaction. Critical reflection is also action. (p. 109)

It is this critical reflection that Freire speaks of that I was interested in bringing about. Although I feel that literature teachers should tell students about the author's sexual identity, if they feel after reflecting on the issue thoroughly that they still think it is unnecessary or inappropriate, it is not my intent to try to force them to do something they are uncomfortable with.

However, I believe that most of these teachers through thoughtful analysis did come to the conclusion that talking about an author's sexuality is an important thing to do. I realize that unless the people who work most directly with students come to view lesbian/gay issues as important, little real change will occur. This change can be as important to the transformation of the teachers as it is for the students. As Freire (1999/1970) says:

> To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. But the struggle to be more fully human has already begun in the authentic struggle to transform the situation. Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those who they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he

> dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle. (p. 29)

Most heterosexual teachers are unable to lead the kind of literary transformation that I want to initiate. First, they most likely do not have the desire to do so. Second, even if they did have the desire, it is unlikely that they would have the knowledge to carry this out. In informal conversations, one of the most frequent comments that I heard was "Well, I don't tell them some authors or lesbian or gay because I don't know myself." Through a more systematic and thoughtful raising of this issue, it is my hope that the participants benefited as much as the students and the researcher. This follows another principle outlined by Castell and Bryson (1998):

> One good way of talking about the daily work of queer ethnographers is that it seeks always to promote, as a normal state of things, ways of thinking and acting capable of taking the measure of difference - that is, of rendering difference more visible and audible, of creating circumstances in which it is nurtured and encouraged, and making those circumstances standard, common, customary. (p. 106)

It is my hope that as the participants of this study shared their philosophy about the education of lesbian/gay youth, they had a greater opportunity to reflect on the issues involved in this study. For some, it was undoubtedly one of the first times they had ever been asked to articulate a vision for educating this population of students.

# CHAPTER 4

# BIOGRAPHY OF INFORMANTS

Just as I have argued in the earlier chapters that the biography of the author is an important component of literary instruction, the biography of my informants for this study is equally important. With that in mind, I provide here biographical information that will help the reader contextualize both the statements that these informants make about their views of incorporating lesbian/gay subject matter in the literature classroom and the conclusions I draw about these statements.

I have compiled this information through a variety of means. With all informants I have made use of the informal conversations, informal observations and classroom observations that have taken place over the many years I have know them. With the primary informants, I also used life history interviews in every case except with Vanessa who left the department due to the birth of her child and who did not wish to continue with the study. I present these biographies here in the order that they appear in the next chapters.

Primary Informants

Vanessa.

Vanessa has been teaching only five years, but in that time she became an integral part of the culture of the English department. She was a teacher of the year, and often attended workshops where she was called on to learn different skills and then teach those skills to the other members of the department or to other teachers in the school.

In my own observations of Vanessa's teaching, I came to admire her abilities in the classroom. She was always well prepared, and her ability to make the lessons understandable and meaningful to her students was clearly evident. She frequently asked questions to monitor students' progress, and the students were engaged and prepared to answer these questions.

Vanessa's teaching methods are very traditional: lecture, questioning, and worksheets. This traditional style of teaching corresponds with her image because she presents herself as a very traditional person. From the start of her career, Vanessa made no secret of the fact that she would only teach until she got married and had children. She grew up in a household where her father worked and her mother stayed at home, and it was clear that her goal, with some small modifications, was to replicate this traditional family.

Her family, as part of their traditional way of life, is also very religious, and Vanessa remains faithful to the religious upbringing of her youth. Even from Vanessa's first days as a member of the department, her Christian beliefs became

apparent to everyone. Although she did not push these beliefs on others or even try to be particularly vocal about them, she, in a quiet way, made her belief in Christianity known. Shortly after she began teaching, she became the sponsor of a Christian student group.

Despite being much more conservative and traditional than other members of the English department, Vanessa got along well with everyone. In fact the only negative comments I ever heard regarding Vanessa had nothing to do with her conservatism. Instead, they were a reflection of the jealousy some members of the department felt about all the awards Vanessa received for her teaching ability. A few members of the department expressed anger that someone who had been teaching for such a short time should receive so many awards.

In classroom observations of Vanessa, I saw clearly how traditional her teaching methods were. I also saw clearly how she was struggling with the need to balance modern sensibilities with her traditional approach.

On one observation Vanessa was teaching a grammar lesson. Throughout the lesson she used metaphors to make her points more memorable. The students responded well to these metaphors, and they seemed to remember the grammar rules much better because of them. However, both Vanessa and the students seemed oblivious to how heterosexist many of these metaphors were.

For example, when Vanessa wanted to show how the subject and verb work together, she said, “See the subject and verb are a team. Like Bob (her husband) and I are a team.” She continued this illustration by choosing a student in the class as an example to bring her point home: “Katherine, I saw you and your boyfriend at the

mall the other day. You two are a team." Throughout the lesson, Vanessa used metaphors that were based on a traditional two parent household. While she did use other metaphors, mostly ones involving sports, the majority of the metaphors were ones that focused on heterosexual relationships and traditional family structures. I might not have characterized this as necessarily heterosexist if I had not observed Vanessa for some time. In talks with Vanessa after my observations of her classes, she stated that she knew these metaphors were somewhat outdated but that they had helped her remember grammar rules and she was sure that these metaphors would help her students remember these rules. For example, Vanessa was fond of the traditional analogy regarding the length of compositions: "An essay should be like a woman's skirt, long enough to cover the subject, but short enough to make it interesting."

Every teacher uses personal examples to bring points home, and Vanessa's personal life is that of a traditional, heterosexual woman. Given this fact, it is no great surprise that the metaphors and analogies Vanessa uses in class are based on her experiences as heterosexual woman. However, much of Vanessa's teaching style seemed to exclude any other model than that of the heterosexuality, and through this exclusion, she, seemed to validate only traditional family structures by holding them up as the universal example.

The only time that Vanessa showed any realization of other ways her lessons might be perceived, was when I unintentionally reacted to one of the metaphors she used. When describing the difference between the period and the semicolon, Vanessa described the semicolon as the female period. Thinking that she was

intending to use the menstrual cycle for a metaphor, I began to blush. She continued by saying, "I always think of the semicolon as the female period because you know how girls are. They are gossipy and always in everyone else's business. While males are kind of to themselves." As a department, we typically teach that the period represents a complete break between two independent clauses, while the semicolon represents that the writer recognizes that the clauses are independent but wants the reader to know that the thoughts expressed in each clause are closely connected. By asserting that males are independent like the period while females maintain close relationships like the semicolon, Vanessa reifies traditional stereotypes about gender. Clearly Vanessa recognized what she was doing here because as she noticed my face continuing to turn red, she stated, "I know this might be sexist, Mr. Fair, but it always helps me remember it." Presumably, if I had not been in the classroom that day or had not reacted to the metaphor, Vanessa would never have articulated the sexist nature of the comment.

After the class, when I saw Vanessa in the English office and we were discussing the class, she again stated that she knew the statement about the semicolon was sexist, but that she knew that using that metaphor would help the kids remember. When we began talking about how comfortable she would be talking about lesbian/gay relationships in class, she stated that she didn't feel comfortable with that because she didn't feel comfortable talking about sex in class.

Apparently she did not see her talking about her married life with Bob or her discussions of her student's relationship with her boyfriend as having anything to do with sexuality. However, she felt that talking about someone being lesbian or gay

automatically turned the discussion into a sexual one.

Ford.

Ford is gay man who has been teaching for twenty-five years. After hiding his sexuality for many years, Ford has become increasingly comfortable with being straightforward about his identity as a gay man. While once the subject was taboo for him, in the past few years he has been very open with other teachers about gay events he attends and generally about his life as a gay man.

Born in a small town in Tennessee, Ford, while growing up, identified closely with his mother. He has "feelings of warmth and gratitude" towards both of his parents; however, he believes that he is in many ways very much like his mother. Ford feels that his mother was somewhat a victim of her times: "In a way I'm sorry for my mother because she was a gifted, talented woman trapped in an area that didn't let her blossom like I think she could have blossomed. If anything she loved me too much. So it's complex. We were born on the same day." Some of the gifts that Ford admires his mother for were her skills at playing the piano and her linguistic skills: "She majored in Latin, French, and English." Ford believes his mother wasted her enormous potential because "she was a very passive, sweet person." He attributes these characteristics to both the time period she lived in, the forties, and the region of her birth, the South.

While Ford was never close to his father, Ford feels more empathy for his father as he gets older. He attributes some of the distance between him and his father to perhaps some jealousy on his father's part. Ford believes that because his father lost

his own mother at the age of five, he was somewhat resentful of the close relationship Ford and his mother developed. However, Ford as he has gotten older, has begun to be more appreciative of all the things his parents did to nurture and support him.

Ford enjoyed his school years fairly well: "I was a good student. I was the 'best little boy in the world.'" He graduated in the top five percent of his class and won many awards. It was in school that Ford first became interested in drama, and he was proud of his dramatic performances. Even as a child he acted in the local civic theater, and was proud of being a child surrounded by adult actors and actresses.

He describes his school years as happy, partially because of the complete support of his parents. He says that it was "a tranquil small town" not troubled by the problems of drugs and violence that often mar the lives of modern day teens. For Ford, and perhaps others, this tranquillity often masked deep internal struggles. Ford refers to this time with contradictory feelings characterizing it as: "the blissful ignorance of so many things including sexuality. The benevolent silence we'll call it."

Because Ford is gay, he had very mixed feelings about his high school and college days. He says, "the promise of romance hung in the air." However, these romances often eluded him because while "things seemed possible," the subject of homosexuality was "taboo." Because Ford feared his homosexuality being known, most of these romances remained crushes, and Ford experienced most of his romantic and sexual experiences vicariously through the adventures of his cousin, who was also gay.

Ford describes his own coming out experience as “like giving birth. It was partly painful.” When his cousin finally convinced him to visit a gay bar for the first time, he encountered two people he knew from college, and it worried him tremendously. Despite the fact that his cousin tried to rationalize with him and explain that if these two people were in the bar as well there was nothing to fear, Ford could not be consoled.

While Ford says that he “didn’t run around flagellating himself,” for being gay, he did always have a lingering feeling, albeit an often subconscious one, that it was wrong. Ford attributes shame about his homosexuality to his upbringing in the Church of Christ. Ford describes his church as very fundamentalist: “In those days it was even more fundamentalist than the Baptist Church because they believed everybody was going to hell unless you were in the Church of Christ. I know this sounds unbelievable.” Ford felt that the Church had a great deal of influence "because I was an impressionable little child, always a good student, listened to everything I was told.”

Ford describes as one of his most vivid memories of childhood a revival meeting he attended at the Church of Christ when he was thirteen. The topic of the sermon was the preacher’s condemnation of homosexuality: “I remember the preacher said, ‘I am going to talk about something that some people think shouldn’t even be talked about from the pulpit. And that is homosexuality.’” Ford remembers the church being deadly silent and looking around the church to see the reactions of the other members. Even as Ford recalls this incident all these years later, he starts to get angry and his voice begins to rise. While this was possibly the most dramatic

incident Ford encountered concerning homophobia, it was definitely not the only incident.

In fact, Ford attributes this sense of shame and this sense that he was not entitled to equal treatment to many of the struggles in his life. During the period of time when Ford was coming out, he saw and very much related to the movie The Boys in the Band. The play and the movie have been roundly criticized by lesbians and gays for their depiction of homosexuals as self-loathing and unhappy individuals incapable of leading fulfilling lives. In John Clum's (1995) essay, "Dramatic Literature: Modern Drama,' he says of The Boys in the Band:

> The Boys in the Band is the first commercial play to be set in a gay household. In a way, the play can be seen as a somewhat rotten slice of gay history in that it displays not only gay slang and manners of the period just before the Stonewall Rebellion, but it shows vividly the ways in which gay men suffered from internalized homophobia. There is no gay pride in Mart Crowley's play, only shame and self-hatred. Jealousy, bickering, alcoholism, and regret define the lives of these unhappy men, but at no point do they realize that the enemy is not themselves but the homophobia that shaped them. (p. 202)

Ford says, " I don't give a hoot in hell…you know… you know people can rant and rave these days about how the play is politically incorrect. The guy was right on. The person who wrote the play was from a small Southern town." While Ford found the play "hilariously funny" and "incredibly exciting" because he got to see gay men depicted on the screen for the first time, it was the depiction of the main characters as "largely unhappy" that resonated so completely for him.

The reason Ford first moved to the large Southern city where he now lives was his desire for anonymity. Because he was a gay man, he felt that it would be virtually impossible to have a happy life in the small town where he was born and

had grown up. Being in a larger city allowed him to be a part of a gay community and also allowed him to make homosexuality known to only those he chose to tell.

After a few years of teaching in this city, Ford decided to pursue a career in acting in New York, a city that he says "has always held a fascination for me." While there he won roles in off Broadway productions and what he calls off-off Broadway plays. He gave up his pursuit of a career in the theater after only two years. He partially attributes the abandonment of this goal to his lack of a sense of "entitlement" due to his conflicted feelings about his homosexuality. He contrasts himself with Madonna who came to the city the same year he did, although she was somewhat younger than he, "Nothing was going to stop her and nothing did and nothing has. But I after awhile it became difficult to make ends meet, and so I just stopped… I think it sabotages… this inner stuff this stuff that says, 'You are really not worthy of this. You are really not entitled to this.' It sabotages your desire." After leaving New York, Ford returned and resumed his teaching career.

Ford continued to feel guilty about his homosexuality, and much of this guilt was somewhat subconscious. As Ford says, "I didn't go home and flagellate myself. 'Ohh you shouldn't have done this. You've done something horrible or dirty.' I didn't do that… but you know what… in some strange way….[trails off]" Ford goes on to explain how much of his guilt and shame over his homosexuality, manifested itself in ways that he didn't at first recognize.

He came to terms with these negative feelings and with their manifestation, "drinking and other bad habits," when he came to terms with a new spiritual awareness. He joined a new thought/new age church where his homosexuality was

not an issue. He believes this new religion has brought about a change in the way he views himself, "I am a spiritual being having a human experience, and it's been very empowering."

This new spiritual awareness has also helped him come to terms with the devastating effect the AIDS crisis has had on his life. He has lost many, many close friends. Perhaps his most significant loss to this disease has been the death of his cousin who helped him come out and come to terms with his homosexuality. He counts as one of his proudest moments of his teaching career a play he directed that raised awareness of the AIDS crisis, "There were reverberations for literally years after that. People commented on it. They sneaked in even though they were freshmen and weren't supposed to see it."

Ford has said repeatedly that he believes that teaching "who you are" is more important than teaching facts. By this, he means that the teacher should model ways of behaving. He says the most important thing he does in teaching is "Just showing up. Just being there. Just being an example of kindness, of tolerance, of consideration and caring about other people. It's being who I am." By setting an example he believes he teaches his students how to be tolerant and humane toward one another. He also is interested in exposing students to cultural experiences of which they would otherwise be unaware.

Observing Ford's class, I noticed that the students found him interesting and entertaining. For example, during one observation Ford had the class working independently on a writing assignment while he entered grades. Ford found it difficult to enter his grades because so many students found reasons to interrupt him

with questions or just to tell him stories about what was going on in their lives.

Many of the students who were in Ford's classes were students I had taught during their ninth grade year. Each time I came to observe they told me how much they loved Ford's class, and how much they liked him as a person. In fact, Ford's classes were so popular that every seat in the room was filled.

Ford was very comfortable in sharing certain aspects of his life with the students. For example, during one class period Ford told the students how much he had enjoyed seeing the play Aida. He brought in music from the soundtrack and played it for the students. Then, Ford explained to the students what made this work valuable as a piece of art. He did much the same thing with the movie, Billy Elliot. He showed the students the movie, stopping it periodically to explain why he found certain scenes particularly moving and artistic.

In another class period, Ford discussed the novel, A Separate Peace. He provided the students with a handout that he had made entitled, "Metaphysical Connections to A Separate Peace." Throughout this class period, he used the handout to talk about Finny as the example of the self-actualized person. Ford focused on the scene where Finny puts on the pink shirt that is a gift from a relative: "You see Gene asks Finny if he isn't afraid to wear the shirt because people will think he is a homosexual. But Finny doesn't give a hoot about that. He just tells Gene, 'well you make a list of all my suitors," because Finny is comfortable with who he is." Ford continued with an analysis of Gene as the antithesis of Finny because Gene is insecure. Ford then lectured the students about Finny as a Christ figure and about how all of the students in the class had the same potential to become

like Finny.

Ford has decorated his classroom with posters of his favorite actors and actresses, creating what are practically shrines to some of his most loved actresses such as Barbra Streisand. Demonstrating his philosophy that students are more important than facts, Ford has his bulletin board covered with pictures of former students. There are really only two information based wall decorations in the room. One is an area of the wall dedicated to information about AIDS, and the other is a section of a wall dedicated to information about Matthew Shepard, the Wyoming college student who was killed by gay bashers. While undoubtedly both of these issues have greatly affected Ford's life, I feel that Ford focuses on these two issues because they are somewhat “safe” topics for him. He often makes the point that AIDS is not a gay disease and that it is something that all young people need to know about. While certainly this is true, I believe that Ford feels this fact gives him more leeway to discuss the homosexuality than he would otherwise have if this were something that only affected gay people.

The same is true of the Matthew Shepard issue. I know that Ford was greatly affected by the Shepard murder and the particularly horrible nature of the crime inspired him to use it as part of his lessons. I believe that part of Ford’s willingness to talk about this issue with his students is the way the topic was generally embraced by mainstream culture. I believe that because this crime received such a great deal of media attention and public outrage, Ford felt the topic was open to classroom discussions in a way that other lesbian/gay concerns are not.

Clare.

Clare's teaching style is the antithesis of Ford's. While Ford described himself as having a "nurturing… almost mothering instinct," Clare could probably best be described as a stoic. Like Ford, Clare cares deeply about her students. However, this caring side is not nearly as evident in her teaching style as is Ford's. Ford frequently talks to students one on one about the things that are going on in their personal lives, while Clare, for the most part, discourages students from revealing details of their personal lives and focuses her one on one interactions with students to discussion about literature or grades.

Clare's tendency to hide her emotions may come from her upbringing as an only child in a family where the father was largely absent. While Clare's relationship with her father was somewhat distant, her relationship with her mother was quite complex. Clare characterizes her mother in a very unusual way. While she says that everyone saw them as close, she says, "I am not all that sure that we were." The death of Clare's mother two years ago was a very traumatic and emotional time in her life even more so than for most because Clare still harbors feeling of quilt about the relationship.

Clare got a great deal of positive reinforcement from her schooling. Not a very good reader at first, Clare and her best friend were tutored by Clare's mother who taught them to read proficiently. Working with Dick and Jane books, Clare's mother spent a great deal of time with the two. Once Clare became proficient at reading, she fell in love with it. So much so, that her happiest times in school were in her English classes.

In fact two of Clare's favorite teachers were not surprisingly her high school English teachers, Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Green. Clare counts her time in Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Green's classes as some of her most positive times in high school. When asked what she liked so much about them, she replied, "I just loved the literature, and I loved the way they taught it, and I am sure they were very, very traditional teachers because everyone was back then." This account of Mrs. Green and Mrs. Davis might help to explain Clare's teaching style. Like Mrs. Green and Mrs. Davis she is very traditional in her teaching practices, favoring lecture and other teacher centered activities over student centered or group activities. This is not to say that Clare never uses group or student centered activities, but she does not use these types of activities nearly as much as questioning and lecture.

Clare loved the challenge of Mrs. Green and Mrs. Davis' classes. As Clare says, "I just enjoyed reading these different things and finding out about these different things." This might help explain Clare's love of factual information and trivia. She also loved the enthusiasm that these teachers had for their subject matter, and she even enjoyed doing her first ever research paper on Lord Jim. It was probably these two teachers and her mother's early efforts at teaching her to read that are responsible for Clare's love of intellectual pursuits.

While working on a paper in her English class, Clare discovered P.G. Woodehouse who became her favorite author. Throughout her life Clare has read over seventy P.G. Woodehouse novels, and the themes and subject matter of these novels are very telling about what Clare values. Clare describes the reasons for her love of Woodehouse:

> It was really funny. It was lightweight. It was satirical. It satirizes the class system. It is self referentially funny and he kind of makes fun… the characters kind of make fun of themselves. He makes fun of himself. I didn't really understand it all. The vocabulary was over my head at that time, but I was able to figure out what it meant in context.

The characteristics that Clare values in Woodehouse are the same qualities she values in her family, friends, and students. She loves people who are able to laugh at themselves, and she often does this as well. She loves wit and satire, and more than anything, she loves people and things that challenge her intellectually.

It is the lack of these intellectual endeavors that made her switch her undergraduate university. She changed from a major university to a commuter school because she felt that the students at the commuter school took their education more seriously. She felt that most of the students at the major university were just there to drink and party or to find husbands. Clare loved the student center where she could watch foreign films every afternoon for a quarter.

As her love of the student center and foreign films show, Clare carries her intellectualism into her personal life. One of the key reasons she fell in love with her husband was influenced by his love of learning. As she says, "He was daring and experimental without being ostentatiously so." These were some of the same qualities that they both brought to the choice of their neighborhood. This neighborhood is a good distance from the city where Clare teaches. But both she and her husband wanted to have the advantages that a large city affords. Their neighborhood was very diverse in terms of ethnic groups, socio-economic status and sexuality.

The neighborhood that Clare currently lives in is the same neighborhood that

she had grown up in. Other than her college years and a few years before her marriage, she lived in that same neighborhood her entire life. Living in an intown neighborhood has given Clare a great deal of exposure to lesbians and gays. While Clare was unaware of a gay presence in the neighborhood during her childhood, when she moved back to the neighborhood as an adult she knew that her neighborhood was very welcoming towards lesbians and gays and that the neighborhood that adjoined hers was somewhat of a "gay haven." Clare had been casual acquaintances with many lesbians and gays both through her home life and professional life, but she describes me as the first gay man she had become "really close with."

Like many of the people that live in her neighborhood, Clare describes herself as a democrat. Also because of the diverse makeup of her neighborhood, her atheism is probably much more accepted there than it would be in the city where she teaches. The neighborhood is also well suited for someone like Clare who developed much of her philosophy of life during the sixties. Despite her belief in much of the idealism of the sixties, Clare says, "I didn't burn my bra. I didn't help burn draft cards. I was never one of the people who marched or carried placards. I sympathized with the people who did, but I just never did." Clare describes herself as an observer of life and as a passive person: "I tend to be an observer of life rather than an adventurer."

Clare's concerns for the future center on the failures of her generation. She believes that the efforts undertaken in the sixties towards peace, oneness with the Earth, and social and racial equality have not seen fruition. She saw the world as

becoming a less peaceful place rather than a more peaceful one, and she worried over the fact that "we continue to be thoughtless about ourselves, about each other, and about our environment." Despite her fears about the future, she believed that there were more "opportunities to make things better," now than in the past.

In classroom observations of Clare, I found her to be an excellent instructor. She delivered the information in a organized and structured way. She was careful to monitor student progress by asking questions, and she provided closure by reviewing with the students the material that was most important. However, she was not without a humorous side, but she was very focused on "the facts." Throughout classroom observations and informal observations and discussions, I determined that Clare believes very strongly that there is a set body of knowledge that it is imperative that students know and understand. Of all the members of the English department, she is one of the staunchest supporters of the traditional Western Canon. To an outside observer, this conservative stance towards the teaching of literature is sometimes at odds with her extremely liberal attitude towards politics and life in general. Clare does not seem to find the two stances as contradictory because she believes strongly that the Western Canon includes literature that has universal themes of acceptance and understanding of humanity.

June.

June was born in a small town in rural Mississippi. Her father died when she was eight years old, and because of his "binge drinking," June did not have an extremely close relationship with him. June does have some fond memories of her

father though. Whenever she smells sawdust she is reminded of her father who worked in a sawmill. Whenever he came home he always had a special treat for June usually peanuts or candy. While she has warm feelings for her father, she sees him as a flawed human who was defeated by alcoholism and extra-marital affairs.

She was and is very close to her mother whom she describes as an "very strong female figure." She says her mother "has always been a model for me although she always defers to men." Much of June's admiration for her mother stems from the fact that her mother raised all three children by herself after June's father died. Despite the fact that June's mother never made more than fifteen thousand dollars a year, she insisted that all three children go to college. When June's brother wanted to stay home and work on the farm, June's mother refused to let him, and through her insistence, all three children eventually graduated from college with masters' degrees.

As the youngest child in the family, June was protected by her siblings. She remembers one incident in particular when as a young child she did something wrong at the dinner table. When her mother slapped her hand, her siblings rose and left the dinner table to protest their mother's actions. This set up for June feelings that she would always be protected by her brothers and sisters.

June started school earlier than most children at age five. She remembers fondly her mother's volunteer work at school. June loved to read perhaps because the mother that she calls a "model" for herself also loved to read. June describes her mother as always having a book with her in the kitchen as she cooked with one hand and read with the other. Since those early days of her youth, reading has always

been one of June's greatest pleasures: "We lived out in the country and when the bookmobile came it was so exciting to get to pick out a book to read." Perhaps because she loved to read, June always had warm feelings about school.

Despite these warm feelings, June says she became a teacher, "because I wanted to be the antithesis of every English teacher I ever had." While her English teachers pointed her the way to works she came to love such as the Romantics, they lacked, in June's opinion, the enthusiasm for the subject that June had. June suspects this might have been because in the rural setting where June grew up, there was not a division of students into honors and regular classes. Although one teacher did try to enrich the curriculum for her by assigning extra work, June believes that she might have gotten more from her high school course work if she had been challenged by her teachers more.

It was college that met June's intellectual needs: "I didn't know that I was smart in high school. That sounds conceited, but I didn't know that." June attributes the lack of reinforcement she received in high school to the fact that the school was a country school that did not produce incredible numbers of students who went to college. Another factor, in June's mind, is the fact that she was the child of a single mother, and her family was not financially well off.

In college, however, June began to get a great deal of positive reinforcement: "I absolutely loved it. I made good grades, and I did well. I got in touch with the academic side of myself." June received many awards for her intellectual pursuits in college. Although she had not applied for scholarships when she was in high school, professors began recommending June for scholarships, which she eventually

received.

It was in college that June "began to identify with out groups [groups of people who are outside the mainstream of society]." Attending Mississippi College for Women, social groups (elite societies) were a big part of campus life. As a freshman, June was a part of one of the social groups. The next year, when she became eligible and was invited to apply for a higher level of membership, she realized, "This is bullshit. I am not interested in anything that excludes people." This was perhaps a harbinger of June's entrée into a more radical political philosophy than she had previously been exposed to.

As a college student, June became involved in the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment. She had an opportunity to interview Thad Cochran a republican who was running for congress. At that time, " I voted the person. And all high school students tell you that now. They vote the person." During the interview, Cochran told June that he supported the ERA. June voted for Cochran because the democratic candidate had refused to support the amendment. After Cochran's election, "that bastard voted against it." This experience was somewhat disillusioning for June, and after that point she always voted along party lines and always for the democratic candidate. After this June began to work for the campaigns of democratic candidates throughout the remainder of her college years.

June began her teaching career as somewhat of a fluke. She had majored in English, and at first had not thought of teaching. At the time she thought she wanted to enter law school. When she found herself with extra time between finishing undergraduate school and beginning her masters program, a male professor who June

greatly admired talked her into doing a student teaching program: "I think this comes from the idea that teaching was a good profession for women. This was 1973. He said why don't you do student teaching. Even though you don't want to be a teacher, someday it might come in handy for you. Someday your life may change in some way." When June began student teaching she fell in love with it: "It was one of the most exciting things I had ever done." Despite the fact that June didn't like her supervising teacher, she loved the students. Although the professor that talked her into the student teaching program wanted her to pursue getting a Ph.D. and teach in college, June wanted to teach high school because, "I loved working with high school kids. They were just so open to new ideas, much more so than adults."

June's first year teaching was instrumental in further shaping her liberal ideology. A Black teacher at the school "took me under her wing." As June became friends with other Black teachers, she began to become more aware of racial issues. One of the Black teachers whom June had become friends with told her a story about the year Mississippi State's basketball team had won an invitation to tournament. The Mississippi State Legislature passed "some sort of thing" prohibiting the team from playing in the tournament because they did not want the Mississippi State basketball team to play against Black players. Had June not been a friend of the Black teachers at school, she would have been unaware of this racial injustice: "Of course I didn't know this. It wasn't in The Woodville Republican. It wasn't in The Natchez Democrat. All white owned, white run newspapers." June says this "sparked in me that I fight racism and sexism from the curriculum." June says this event let her know how sheltered she had been as a white person growing up in the

South.

When June ultimately moved to a large Southern city, she continued to shed her earlier sheltered upbringing. She moved to neighborhoods in the city that were diverse and somewhat edgy: "I always said when a neighborhood got chic, I moved on. There was something about me that liked living on the edge. I liked the diversity." Even now that June lives in a somewhat upscale community in the city, she counts as one of her neighborhood's greatest qualities its diverse ethnic and racial mix.

June married at a much later age than most people do. She was in her forties and was somewhat hesitant, "because I had always lived alone." However, her husband appealed to her because he shared her liberal philosophy: "one of the strong attractions is that most middle age white men are not liberal, and he is the first straight white male who is as liberal as I am." She described him as "knowledgeable and smart and keeps up with current events." Despite the fact that marriage challenged June's sense of independence, June felt strongly that marriage had been good for her because both she and her husband had worked on communicating with each other and had formed a strong partnership.

June describes herself as a spiritual person, but says that she rejected her Baptist upbringing because of her feminist beliefs. She felt that Christianity had been responsible for great wrongs towards women, and she couldn't be a part of a religion that "treated women like that." Although she is not a member of any formal religion, June's spiritual beliefs have an Eastern or New Age feel to them. She says that she believes in Karma, and thinks that whatever she gives out, she will get back.

She has great hope for the future and believes that kids today are smarter than they were when she was growing up. Perhaps because of this, she says, "I think that I see kids that might have the answers. My generation has screwed up a lot of things. You know we were hippies and all that. I think we have made a lot of mistakes." Many of these "mistakes" that June sees are centered on the lack of progress in "defeating racism, sexism, and intolerance in general." June believes that disaster is eminent if more progress isn't made, but she sees hope. She says that during the Clinton administration because there were so many women in various positions of power, she saw girls hoping for futures in jobs such as ambassadors, politicians and other roles that she had not previously seen.

June also sees progress being made in ending prejudice towards lesbians/gays. Part of this hope stems from a lesson she uses during the first part of each year. Given June's emphasis on interpersonal relationships, one aspect of her class is devoted to the students getting to know each other and feeling comfortable with each other before they begin the process of having literary discussions.

To achieve this sense of community in her classroom, she begins the year with some community building exercises. These exercises taper off as the year goes on and the students begin to know each other better. One of the early exercises June uses is a game where she makes use of "great literary couples." The students are given slips of paper with the name of a literary figure, and they have to find the person who has the slip with the name of their person's partner. For example, if one student has the name F. Scott Fitzgerald, that student must find the person who has the slip with Zelda Fitzgerald. Typically, the students who have the slip with the

names of males look for the names of females. As the lesson draws towards its conclusion, two students are left with the names of females that they can't find male partners for. These two students are left with the names Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and they quickly figure out that this is a lesbian couple.

June has used this lesson as one of her community building exercises for over ten years. When she first began using it, many of the students made remarks such as "Yuck" and "That's disgusting." However, June says that she has noticed that as times have changed far fewer students make negative remarks at the end of the lesson. Because at least a few students still make these negative comments each year, June has to end the lesson by telling these students that she does not find lesbians or gays disgusting and making it clear that she does support prejudice in her classroom.

Secondary Informants

Elizabeth has been teaching for 29 years. She is an excellent teacher who has been chosen in the past as teacher of the year. Because she has demonstrated a knowledge of the subject and an ability to teach, for much of that time she has taught ninth grade honors English. She considers herself to be an expert in Greek and Roman mythology, but she is also extremely knowledgeable of the other classical works that are a part of the ninth grade curriculum such as Romeo and Juliet which she has memorized virtually in its entirety.

She often characterizes herself as a child of Victorian parents. Elizabeth

believes this characterization of herself helps to explain her nature as someone who is prim, proper and sophisticated. Keeping with this image, and rather than living in the community that is a part of this school district, Elizabeth lives in one of the most affluent neighborhoods in the city about twenty-five miles from the school. Despite her depiction of herself as a sophisticated cosmopolite, Elizabeth can often behave in ways that are quite unsophisticated.

Along with being the sophisticated intellectual, at times she can be silly and childlike and at other times she can be controversial and confrontational. She sometimes interrupts department meetings by telling jokes or silly vignettes. At other department meetings, she becomes quite incensed by things that she sees as wrong. For example, when other teachers in the department rebelled against a writing program Elizabeth was in charge of, she became irate and dictatorial. Another example would be Elizabeth's handling of her disagreement with the school's conduct policy. Believing that the school should give conduct as well as academic grades, Elizabeth brought up the idea at a faculty meeting. When administrators dismissed her idea, Elizabeth became relentless and did not let the issue drop even after the meeting. She pursued this point with administrators for weeks on end, meeting with them during her planning period to argue her case. She interacts the same way in her classroom as she does in faculty and departmental meetings, alternating at times between being silly, confrontational, dictatorial, understanding, and intellectual.

Despite Elizabeth's fiery nature and unwillingness to give up when pursuing her beliefs, Elizabeth sees herself as non-confrontational. She claims to avoid

controversial issues because of her desire to never make trouble. Despite these claims, in her classroom Elizabeth often brings up topics and carries out activities that some would consider controversial. For example, one of the most powerful, although tacitly stated, rules of teaching high school is that school property should be protected; in one of Elizabeth's classes, the activity for the day had the students removing the ceiling tiles. Elizabeth then instructed each student to paint each tile with a depiction from literature. When the students were done with their paintings, they replaced the tiles. Elizabeth conducted this activity on the spur of the moment because she felt that the classroom was ugly and boring.

In some ways this story of the ceiling tiles sums up Elizabeth's personality. While many teachers would never dream of allowing students to use school property in this way, Elizabeth did not see this as controversial at all. So while Elizabeth avoids things "that will get her in trouble," she often is unaware of how many of the things she does and says in class others see as controversial.

Lily is one of the most dynamic members of the department. She values change more highly than most members of the department. Lily has been responsible for many of the experimental programs the school has attempted over the years, block scheduling, total quality management, read right now, and the ninth grade village (an effort to locate all ninth grade classes in one separate area of the campus). In fact many of the teachers in the department have told me of their resentment of Lily's attempts to constantly change what they see as an already quite advanced, high school program.

Lily ignores these complaints from the other teachers because she believes that

she is on the cutting edge of education reform, and she truly believes that all of these programs will greatly benefit students. Accordingly, Lily believes in a student-centered classroom. She favors group work, cooperative learning, projects and portfolios over the more traditionally oriented lecture, worksheets, or reading out loud. She prides herself on having students enter the classroom, get their assignment, and break into their groups to begin work without teacher direction.

Lily has thirty-two years of both teaching and administrative experience. While the members of department sometimes resent her, for the most part they do see her as an academician. In fact, it is her scholarship that is the source of much of the resentment. Many members of the department have told me that they see Lily as someone who knows more about the theoretical aspects of teaching than the practical, pragmatic day to day methods that are necessary to conduct a class.

Lily does have a pragmatic side however. A disagreement that I had with her illustrates this point. Instituting a new program that trains students to be peer mentors in order to teach diversity, the school system decided purposely to leave sexual orientation out of the non-discrimination clause that was included for recruiting students for the program. When I brought this point up, Lily explained that the school system wouldn't fund the program if the organizers included sexual orientation in the non-discrimination policy. When I voiced my opinion that we shouldn't be conducting the program if sexual orientation could not be included, she argued that it was better to go ahead and accept the funding for the program and quietly include sexual orientation rather than simply reject the funds to make a political statement. This sense of pragmatism is not always evident in Lily because

she when she is determined to make one of her programs work, she brushes off teachers who complain that the program will not work. An example of this is Lily's relentless efforts to implement block scheduling. Armed with a mound of data that showed that block scheduling is beneficial to students, Lily shrugged off teachers who complained that block scheduling was impractical until the clamor rose to a level that was impossible to ignore.

This determination to carry through a program not matter how virulent the objections of the faculty is characteristic of every program Lily has initiated. When a psychologist gave some members of the faculty a personality inventory, Lily's results showed that she is a person who cares more about ideas than about implementing them. This is certainly true of the programs Lily has initiated since I have been at the school. While Lily often comes up with the grand scheme, she always expects the other teachers to carry out the details of making the program work.

Through the years, Lily and I have clashed as often as we have agreed over lesbian/gay controversies that have arisen at the school. Lily is a lesbian, but while the fact is not exactly hidden, she is somewhat private about her life with her partner. Many faculty members have stated to me that they believe that she would already be a principal if not for the fact that she is a lesbian. Lily has expressed to me that she admires my openness, but because she grew up in different time, she feels that is often better to remain quiet about ones homosexuality.

William has been teaching for twenty-eight years. Most members of the

department see William as one of the most intellectual members of the department. Evidence of this is the extremely large number of teachers and students who rely on William for advice and direction. Because William is seen as both an intellectual and an excellent teacher, he has taught all of the advanced placement English classes for many years. He is often selected by the star student (the student with the highest SAT score) as the star teacher of the year, and he has been selected as the seniors choice for favorite teacher of the year repeatedly.

William is extremely religious, but he is somewhat quiet about his religious convictions. He regularly attends Temple, and each year he takes days off to observe all of the traditional Jewish holidays. Because he is Jewish, William is somewhat of an outsider at this school where the Fellowship of Christian Athletes is by far the largest club. While the overwhelming majority of students and teachers like and admire him as evidenced by his winning of the favorite teacher of the year award, he has experienced at times the under current of anti-Semitism.

Perhaps because of the high status of respect he has earned over the years, he is one of the least fearful members of the department when it comes to job security. He never seems to be in a hurry and often whistles or sings when walking around the school. Sometimes on Friday he brings his guitar and spends his planning period "jamming" with students who are at lunch. Although for the most part he is easygoing and seemingly carefree, when it comes to school issues, he does not hold back with his opinions and beliefs. One incident that occurred in his class illustrates this point. The subject of homosexuality came up through the discussion of literature. William was letting students air their views about homosexuality, but

when one student said he thought that homosexuality was caused by a disease, William became irate and told him to be quiet. As the discussion continued, the student again tried to assert his position that homosexuality was a disease. William became visibly angry, and his face turned red. He forbade the student from saying anything for the rest of the period and continued the discussion with the rest of the class.

Many of the other teachers in the department would have been reluctant to tell this student that he could not express his beliefs. We have had many incidents in the past, especially with the yearly writing contest, Reflections, where we have as a department debated the issue of free speech. Virtually every teacher in the department has aired his/her belief that students always have a right to state their opinion, but that the teacher has the same right to challenge it. I believe that most teachers in the department would have handled this discussion by letting the student give his opinion, but then stating their disagreement with it, or the teacher would have cut the discussion off altogether to avoid letting the student have a forum to voice his prejudice. William is one of the very few teachers in the department who would believe that they had a right to silence the student.

Sylvia has been teaching for eighteen years, and is in my opinion one of the brightest members of the department. In conversations with her, I have often been amazed by her knowledge of literature. She has a firm grasp on literary concepts, time periods, and theory. Despite her great wealth of knowledge, Sylvia is not as well respected in the department as she possibly could be. This is due to the fact

that for at least the last eight years, Sylvia has been unable to teach for a full year due to health problems.

Sylvia because of her health problems has generated a certain amount of resentment and animosity from other members of the department. Members of the department have told me that one reason for their resentment is that they have been called on to use their planning periods to cover Sylvia' classes when she has been out. Another reason that members of the department have aired is their belief that it is wrong that Sylvia gets paid the same amount as they do when she only works part of the school year.

As I have gotten to know Sylvia over the years, I have come to understand at least part of the reason for her vast knowledge of literature. Sylvia comes from a family that has been highly involved with the arts for several generations. Her grandmother was very active in the theater and was a personal friend of many luminaries in that field. Possibly the most famous of these theatrical friends of Sylvia' grandmother was Tennessee Williams. As a child Sylvia met Williams and was surrounded by her grandmother's literary circle many of whom were homosexual.

Despite her early exposure to homosexuality through the friends of her grandmother's, Sylvia, until recent years, has always maintained an antipathy to homosexuality. Sylvia is a conservative republican when it comes to politics, and those conservative politics have been the basis for much of her previous homophobia. However, in recent years she has radically changed her view of homosexuality. This is due in large part to her friendship with a gay man she met

in one of her treatment programs. As her friendship with this man grew, she discovered many of the difficulties he has faced throughout his life: alienation from friends, abandonment by his family, and finally the contraction of AIDS. Because of her friendship with this man, Sylvia has come to regret her earlier views regarding homosexuality. She has become increasingly interested in the topic and has begun reading books about homosexuality, questioning her preconceived stereotypes, and asking me questions she has about the topic.

Sylvia has come to the conclusion that the topic should be a part of the literature curriculum, and she is working on ways that she can incorporate the subject more. She has vowed to overcome her earlier approach in which she avoided the topic for fear of what students might say. This is a major shift in thinking for Sylvia considering that she is the teacher who several years ago confronted me because I had told my students that some of the Shakespearean Sonnets were written by one man to another. At that time, she told me in no uncertain terms that she didn't appreciate that I was "leading students to believe that Shakespeare was a homosexual, and there is absolutely no way he possibly could have been."

Ruth has been teaching for fifteen years. Unlike many members of the department who have either been teacher of the year or been nominated as teacher of the year, Ruth does not have perhaps as much academic influence as other members of the department. However, she has a great deal of social influence on both the department and the school. For twelve years she has been the senior class sponsor and as such is responsible for many activities around the school. These activities

include things such as graduation, senior parties, senior meetings, and senior field trips.

In the classroom Ruth has a relaxed style. Her classes usually follow a set routine with Ruth beginning the class with a lecture or a discussion, which generally lasts about thirty minutes. Then Ruth typically expects students to work independently for the remainder of the class. This last period of the class typically consists of the students reading silently, answering a worksheet, or writing a paper. If students would rather do their independent work at home, they are free to sit and talk quietly with each other.

Ruth has in general a liberal ideology. In informal discussions she has expressed liberal positions on issues far more than she has voiced conservative ones. For example, she often talks about political matters and virtually always supports the democratic candidate. Like many other members of the department, Ruth lives in the city rather than the suburb that surrounds the school because she finds the population to be more diverse. This liberal attitude extends to sexuality as well; Ruth is heterosexual and single, but most of her closest friends are gay males.

Ruth is very open with her students about her acceptance of homosexuality. She frequently tells the students stories about her next door neighbors, and she routinely reveals that these two men are a gay couple. She also speaks openly about her friendship with the trainer from her gym who is also a gay man. Here again, she makes no attempts to disguise this man's homosexuality and typically she brings up this fact without the students asking about it.

Sally has been teaching for 22 years. She might very well be the only teacher at the school who knows virtually every teacher at the school because for the last fifteen of those years she has also been the sponsor of the yearbook. This sponsorship of the yearbook is just one way that Sally demonstrates her excellence at working with students. Since she took over as sponsor, the yearbook has won numerous national awards and is consistently chosen by the publishing company to be the model for other schools.

In the classroom, Sally's style is perhaps one of the most personal of all the teachers in the department. She makes it a point to share parts of her personal life with the students, and she encourages them to share their personal lives with her as well. One example of this is Sally's use of vacation slides as a class activity. Every summer Sally travels to someplace in the world that she has not visited previously. When she returns, she has the pictures that she takes turned into slides that she brings in and shows to her students. Sometimes this is a part of a literature discussion such as when she shows the students her slides of Greece as an introduction to the study of Medea. Other times she uses these slides merely to introduce students to different cultures and different places, and she does not feel that they necessarily have to be connected to a literary activity.

Just as Sally feels comfortable sharing her life with her students, her students feel comfortable sharing their life with her. When Sally has students working independently on worksheets or silent reading, I have witnessed many occasions where students approach Sally to discuss personal matters with her. Sometimes this is merely to relate a story, but often it is to ask for personal advice. This exchange of

personal information might make many teachers uncomfortable, but Sally feels it is perfectly appropriate and even enjoys the fact that students feel like they can be this open with her.

One of the reasons that students might feel this personal connection to Sally is she is one of a relatively few faculty members who actually lives in the community. Her home is only a few blocks from the school, and her husband is the father of one of her former students. When this student was in Sally's class, she learned of Sally's divorce. Since the student's father was recently divorced and because she felt that Sally and her father had a great deal in common, she arranged for the two to meet.

Like most members of the department, Sally is a liberal in her political stance and routinely votes for democratic candidates. She has many gay friends and has had since her high school days when she learned that two of her best, male friends were gay. She credits these early relationships with these two men for helping to shape her attitude of acceptance of homosexuality.

Of all the teachers in the department Sally is the perhaps the most likely to connect literature and popular culture. One example of this is her unit on Medea. When teaching this unit, Sally brings in newspaper articles about Susan Smith, the woman who murdered her children by placing them in her car and pushing the car into the lake. In the discussion that ensues, Sally asks the students to compare and contrast Medea to Susan Smith. Her students typically characterize both women as evil because they kill their children, but Sally challenges her students to avoid easy answers and to think about the reasons Medea resorts to the extreme actions she

takes.

It is this same sense of desire to challenge easy answers that Sally brings to her discussions of homosexuality. When students make statements that Sally believes are not well thought out, she forces the students to challenge their preconceived notions. For example, I have seen her stop students who have used words like "fag" and ask them why they are doing that. Rather than just telling these students to stop what they are doing, she stops and makes them question why they are using these words.

I have also seen her use this strategy with lesbian/gay students. When these lesbian and gay students come to her to tell them of the difficulties they are experiencing, she sympathizes with them first, but then she asks them to contemplate their future. She tells them that things will radically change for them once they are able to leave high school and go to college or out into the world where they will be able to have much greater choice in who they associate with.

While it would be easy to characterize this strategy of Sally asking the students to reflect on how things might get better as her way of avoiding trying to change the culture that currently exists at the high school, I believe it would be wrong to do so. I have seen the lesbian and gay students that Sally speaks to like this come away with a sense of hope. I believe they also feel a strong sense of connection with Sally because they realize that she shares with them a sense that the culture that presently exists is wrong.

# CHAPTER 5

## PERCEPTIONS OF PRIMARY INFORMANTS

I believe that the English department represents a culture within a culture in this school. From my informal observations I have observed that the teachers in the English department are far more liberal than most of the teachers at the school. Also the members of the English department have formed their own cliques, English teachers typically sit together at department meetings, eat lunch together, and socialize with each other outside of school. In fact the two social studies teachers who frequently join these gatherings of the English teachers refer to themselves as honorary members of the English department.

In order to describe the range of perceptions of the teachers in this English department with regards to the integration of lesbian/gay studies in the English curriculum, it becomes necessary for me to create categories. I do not see this categories as fixed, and it is not my intent to construct these informants as solidified in their identity. As I create this categories and present the perceptions these English teachers shared, I keep in mind the words of Luigi Pirandello (1970/ 1921):

> For me the whole drama lies in this one thing: that each of us believes himself to be a single person. It isn't true. With some people we are one person, with others we are quite a different person altogether. But to ourselves we retain the illusion of being always the same person to everyone. And we realize it isn't true when suddenly, to our horror, we are caught up into the air by some giant hook, frozen

> in time, suspended for all to see. Then we recognize that all of us was not in that particular action, that it would be an atrocious injustice to judge us by that action alone… keeping us suspended in pillory, as if our life was made up of only that action alone. (p. 605)

I do not mean to be the "giant hook" freezing these informants in place. However, for the purposes of description, I must distinguish the differences that I have seen between the informants by creating categories.

I feel that the ten teachers that participated can be generally divided into four categories based on their comfort level in talking about lesbian/gay subject matter and the likelihood that they have or would in the future talk about lesbian/gay studies in their classrooms. I call these categories: the unlikely and uncomfortable, the likely but uncomfortable, the comfortable but the uninformed, and the comfortable and informed. I will describe briefly in the next few paragraphs the criteria I used for grouping these teachers, and then, I will use one teacher from the department to represent each category and give a more detailed description of that teacher's perceptions about including lesbian/gay studies in the literature classroom.

The unlikely and uncomfortable group would be the teachers that had not intentionally included discussions of lesbian/gay subject matter in the classroom. When homosexuality did come up routinely in classroom discussions, these teachers were reluctant to allow the discussions to go forward. While I would be reluctant to say exactly how large this group of teachers is, they certainly seem to make up a small portion of the department as a whole. I would be reluctant to give any specific number for this group because some teachers who would probably fall into this

group would also have reason to hide their beliefs from a gay researcher. For example, one woman repeatedly canceled when we had set up interview times. From my informal observations and her repeated cancellations, I came to the conclusion that this woman was trying to hide her homophobia. However, I have no way to confirm that assumption.

The likely and uncomfortable would be the teachers that either wanted to talk about lesbian/gay subject matter or at least had no personal or professional objection to talking about homosexuality. However, for a variety of reasons, those teachers in this group had not done so. Given assurances that the school administration would support them and that they wouldn't have problems with the parents, the teachers in this group seemed very likely to start including lesbian/gay studies on a regular basis. In some cases, the teachers in this group had included lesbian/gay subject matter to some degree. In the case of the teacher profiled here while he was already including lesbian/gay subject matter in some ways, with administrative support I believe he would start to include the lesbian/gay studies in wider range of ways than they had previously done so.

Teachers in the comfortable and uniformed group seemed to have no problem discussing lesbian/gay studies in the classroom. They were not concerned, as were the previous two groups, that administrators or parents would object. However, they were concerned that they lacked the knowledge necessary to consistently include discussions of lesbian/gay studies in the classroom. With the right amount of

preparation, the teachers in this group seemed very likely to change their previous practice of rarely including these discussions.

Teachers in this group regularly included lesbian/gay studies in their classrooms. They either were not concerned about negative reactions from parents and administrators, or they felt that fighting homophobia was important enough to hazard such reactions. These teachers, although perhaps not as knowledgeable as they would like to be, felt that they had enough knowledge of homosexuality to include it on a regular basis.

In what follows, I will present a representative from each group. I chose the representative because he/she had the qualities that best exemplified the members of that group. Along with the presentation of the group's representative I will include the comments of other members of the group to show how these other members shared this teacher's views.

Unlikely and Uncomfortable

"I would be more uncomfortable talking about lesbian/gay issues in the classroom solely because… I would just be uncomfortable…" - Vanessa

The teacher I chose to represent this group, Vanessa, was someone who I believed to be particularly honest and forthcoming with me. As paradoxical as it

may sound, Vanessa was consistently contradictory, and it was that quality that I felt made her the ideal representative for this group. Early on, I sensed that Vanessa's contradictions came from her own conflicting feelings about homosexuality and not because she was trying to hide her feelings from me.

In the interview, Vanessa demonstrated these contradictory points of view in even greater detail. She expressed strong feeling that a work of literature should be placed in context and that knowing details about the author's life could help do that. However, she was ambivalent about whether revealing an author's homosexuality could help with any understanding of the literature. She expressed a desire to have open discussion in her classroom, but she discouraged talk of homosexuality when students brought it up. She was unsure as to whether she would be comfortable teaching a gay adolescent story and didn't know what she might do if a student ever came out to her.

Placing Literature in Context.

Vanessa expressed a strong desire to give students contextual details that would aid in their understanding of the literature. However, she wanted to be careful about when she gave out details and which details she discussed before the reading and which she revealed at the end. She wanted to be careful that the contextual information didn't "give the novel away." She spoke at great length about a novel she teaches, The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath:

> I am not real big on … I tell kids about authors and things when I think … I never really do before hand, but I do after. And we will have discussions after, and I will have students read articles on authors… so maybe some issues will come up… like Sylvia Plath, the suicide issue. I didn't mention a thing about her until the end of the novel and that's something they all wanted to know. The kids have heard things… rumors, rumors, rumors and that will kind of taint the way we read the novel if we just focus on that… on their sexuality or on her… she eventually kills herself… or on his… what he does in life. Let's look at the novel as it is, and then maybe we can learn a little more about the author and place this in the context of the author's life. That's kind of how I look at it.

Despite the fact that she said she didn't talk about the authors' lives before hand, she did feel that this information should be brought out at the end. She also wanted to make sure that the students did have some contextual information beforehand. She clarifies what and how she reveals contextual information while again discussing her approach to The Bell Jar:

> I set up the novel for them. I just don't go in a say, "Well, she eventually has a nervous breakdown and eventually kills herself at age thirty." I just feel like if you do that at the beginning of the novel, then the kids leave the novel with a sense of no hope… and the novel ends hopeful. The bell jar, the thing that suffocates her… she was maniac depressive… and I tell them that ahead of time. I say, "Sylvia Plath and you will learn this in the novel… her father died when she was eight and she lived in Connecticut." Exactly what we did this year is we looked at the fifties versus looking at Sylvia Plath, and we watched a clip from Pleasantville. So we set the novel in context because I feel like the novel is a strong fifties sort of mentality especially the idea that a woman has to marry immediately and the whole idea that a woman has two lives, either she gets married or she can become a secretary. It's like with my mom, and I bring my mom into it. I tell them that she was supposed to go overseas. She got a scholarship, and my dad said, "Well what do you want to do that for." And so that's the mentality I get them into, and then I introduce Sylvia Plath and the novel more. So that when we enter the novel, then they appreciate the novel for what it is. And then they can learn

> about Sylvia Plath's life and realize that some people… and then a sensitive topic we talk about with that novel is manic depression, and people who are chemically imbalanced, and people we like to call psycho or crazy, and it could be you or me. To me it is just that some people feel pressures more than others, and in The Catcher in the Rye, some people like to chalk Holden off as crazy. And it is much easier for them to say that he is crazy than for them to realize that any of us could be like Holden and could feel that same kind of pressure.

Vanessa clearly felt that talking about depression and suicide was a sensitive issue, and she wanted to make sure that this issue was handled delicately. She wanted to ensure that her students took the issue seriously and remained open minded about the issue. She also wanted to challenge the students' stereotypes about mental illness. It was also clear that she wanted the students to develop a sense of empathy with statements such as, "and it could be you or me." Through informal and classroom observations, I also witnessed Vanessa's desire to remain open minded and to instill this quality in her students. For example, when Vanessa witnessed students using profanity in the halls, she corrected them, but then let them know that her disapproval of their behavior did not change the way she felt about them as people. The same thing occurred when students talked about drinking in front of Vanessa. She was quick to express that she did not agree with their underage drinking, but she still made sure she treated them like all her other students.

Vanessa also showed a willingness to share her opinions as well as her personal life with her students. She demonstrated her desire to be open with her feelings with statement such as, "to me it is just that some people feel pressures more than others." She also showed a desire to at least get students to understand her opinions. For example, she asserted her belief that students shouldn't write Holden off as "crazy."

Vanessa also showed a willingness to use personal examples to help bring her views to light for the students. When trying to get the students to empathize with Sylvia Plath's plight, she used an example from her mother's life. By using this real life example, she perceived that students would be able to understand the novel and relate to Plath.

Ambivalence about Lesbian/Gay Authors.

While Vanessa demonstrated that she was completely at ease with talking about what she deemed the sensitive issues in Plath's work, she showed a great uneasiness when the talk turned to discussing an author's homosexuality. Vanessa indicated that most often she didn't know which authors were lesbian/gay, and that she didn't see homosexuality as being a contributing factor in the development of the literature. Even if she did know an author was lesbian/gay and felt that the author's homosexuality was important to the development of the literature being studied, she was uncertain as to whether she would tell the students about it.

Since Vanessa teaches American Literature, I asked her if she tells students about Walt Whitman's homosexuality when teaching his work. She replied:

> I didn't know he was actually. But no I wouldn't and probably… and I hadn't and not necessarily would. Not too many authors do I um… Well I give very little background and talk more about the context and the movement in American literature and the time period and why he wrote. I don't get into personal issues, and I know that might contradict the whole Sylvia Plath thing. But I focus in that

> instance more about the context issues that might affect the themes and the writing, and if I felt like… If I had known Walt Whitman was homosexual, and I felt like those themes were evident in his works… like "Song of Myself," etc., but since I didn't know… But I do talk about the context of when he wrote and possibly some struggles that he went through that might also come up in his poetry that would help them make a connection… Especially American Literature… that would help them make a connection between the time period and the context of the literature that was written. I feel very strongly about helping kids see contextually if its important with a novel the context, culture etc.

Just as Vanessa showed some contradictions with her classroom discussion of the semicolon as the "female period," she demonstrated some conflicting opinions with her discussions of Whitman. Although she says that she always talks about: "the context of when he wrote and possibly some struggles that he went through," she apparently does not entertain the idea that Whitman's homosexuality could be one of those contextual issues or struggles that might have shaped his writing or could have aided the students in making a connection.

Vanessa felt that talking about an author's homosexuality would be a "personal issue" that she would not want to get into in a classroom discussion. But even she acknowledges: "that might contradict the whole Sylvia Plath thing." Of course it does contradict the philosophy she used in teaching Plath's work. Even when asked if she would tell the students of an author's homosexuality if she did think it was important to the understanding of the work, she could only say, "Possibly."

Discourages Students When They Bring Up the Topic of Homosexuality.

Vanessa was not only uncomfortable bringing up the subject of homosexuality

herself, when students brought up homosexuality, she changed the subject or discounted it. Despite saying that she wanted the students to feel free to talk about issues, she was clearly only allowing them as much freedom as her personal comfort level allowed. This comfort level did not include talking at any length about homosexuality.

In one example, Vanessa pointed out that students always question whether the character Gene in A Separate Peace is supposed to be a gay character. Vanessa explains how she handles that:

> I have strong beliefs, but I don't want to make kids feel I am sort of thwarting someone who feels differently than me. So when I deal with any issues that arise in literature, let's say a kid says, "Well, I heard such and such about so and so." Or they will say, "Is Gene gay in A Separate Peace?" And I will say I don't know… and it would be fine if he was and he might be. But that's not necessarily what the author is trying to get across here." And I might use that as a way to talk about how our society tends to stereotype people based on a male who has emotional feelings and shows some sort of admiration for another male… like he is a good looking. They automatically think that that person has to be gay to have those feelings, so we talk. And that's how I handle issues… by trying to help them open up their mind… to not be so stereotypical and perceive things sort of like, "Here's the issue. What's this?" So I don't necessarily steer into gay/lesbian issues. A lot of times I might not know or have read a lot and know the background and someone might mention it, and I might say, "Well I didn't know that."

While on the surface Vanessa's discussion with the students about the character, Gene, appears to be an attempt to open up the minds of the students, it actually in many ways may do the opposite. Although she does offer the statement that if Gene is meant to be a gay character, "that would be fine," she goes on in an attempt to prove that Gene is not a gay character and that other characters (or people) that the

students might perceive to be gay are really not. While this might help destroy some myths, for example the myth that seeing someone of the same sex as attractive automatically makes one a homosexual, it may also reaffirm other negative perceptions about homosexuality. Her treatment of the subject of Gene's possible homosexuality might make the students believe that either homosexuals don't really exist or that to talk about homosexuality is inappropriate.

Vanessa's statement, "So I don't necessarily steer into gay/lesbian issues," is really a mischaracterization of her teaching. Not only does she "not necessarily steer" the discussions to the topic of homosexuality, she consciously steers them away from the subject. For example, when students bring up facts that they know about homosexuality, Vanessa dismisses the discussion that might ensue by cutting it off with the response, "Well I didn't know that."

This denial of the presence of homosexuality, while somewhat subtle in the case of the discussion of the character, Gene, becomes more pronounced in other discussions Vanessa has with the students. The dismissive way she handles the situation when students bring up the homosexuality of authors: "Well I didn't know that," besides cutting off the discussion may send the message that this information is unimportant or inappropriate.

Since Vanessa indicated that every year she teaches A Separate Peace she has students ask her whether or not Gene is gay, I asked her what she thought might happen if she broached that topic at the beginning of the novel. By doing this she might approach the novel in the same way she approached the reading of The Bell Jar, bringing up a topic that she knew students were likely to have an interest in.

Vanessa indicated that she felt this would be inappropriate:

> I don't feel like… I feel like if I do then that becomes the… the kids are going to… that becomes a focal point… themes… and I don't tell kids about themes before we read a novel. I like for themes to emerge, and if a kid has a problem with a theme or if something controversial comes up, I like for us to deal with it, and I like for us to discuss it. Rather than me sort of set the tone for certain discussions. Does that make sense?

Vanessa's hesitation throughout this part of the interview demonstrates that she is growing increasingly uncomfortable. Despite the fact that she says, "I like for us to discuss it," as shown earlier, she deflects the discussion rather than opening it up. She indicated that talking about the students' perception of Gene as gay would be inappropriate in her view because she considered that a theme, and while she did give background information before starting a novel, she did not discuss themes. I attempted to get her to analyze the contradiction between the way she treated this novel and the way she had treated The Bell Jar. I pointed out that she had prepared students to discuss themes in that novel as well and reminded her of the possible feminist themes she prepared students for with the discussion of her mother and father's relationship. After reminding her of this, I asked how the two were different:

> Well I don't know. Well I would if I felt like… Well I would if I felt like that was a strong message coming through the novel that Gene was homosexual and that he and Finny have this sort of… I think that… Personally, I don't think that that is what comes out in the novel, so I guess you could say my personal opinion comes into play here because I don't think that's the strong… I don't think… if I focused on that… I don't think that ties in that much with that novel. It is not a link … that is sort of made… I think I would be stretching it a bit

Again Vanessa showed a certain amount of hesitation in her remarks, and while she says, “I don’t think that comes out in the novel,” the fact that her students bring it up each year seems to indicate that they feel that it does come out in the novel. While she indicated earlier in the interview that she wanted to help the students “make a connection,” in this discussion she says, “it is not a link… that is sort of made.” This despite the fact that every year her students do make this link.

If students, as Vanessa says, bring it up every year and if Vanessa wants her classroom to be a place where “open” discussions regularly occur, it seems that some class time might be given to examining why students see gay aspects coming out of the novel. I am not implying here that Vanessa should force herself to see a gay theme just because her students do, but I think that the class might benefit from a discussion of where and why students see a gay theme coming through in the novel.

Comfort Level with Teaching a Lesbian/gay Adolescent Work.

Vanessa was uncomfortable with talking about the homosexuality of authors and the possibility that a character in a novel might be gay, and she was even more uncomfortable with the idea of teaching a work that would overtly explore topics that dealt directly with homosexuality. Vanessa had somewhat more freedom to include a work about lesbian/gay youth since one of the courses that Vanessa had established herself as somewhat of an expert in was a senior level class called Pacesetters. This course includes a unit called, Stranger in the Village.

While the Stranger in the Village unit seems a natural fit for a lesbian or gay

short story or novel since it explores works that feature characters that feel they are outside the mainstream, Vanessa was very reluctant to say that she would feel comfortable teaching a lesbian/gay work in this unit. Even if the curriculum specifically called for a work that featured lesbians or gay men, Vanessa indicated that she might be uncomfortable teaching it:

> To be honest with you… I don't know. Not that I… I don't know… I think I would have to feel strongly about the piece of literature as a piece of literature…and then… um… I would have to feel like there was value beyond … does that make sense… like I feel like the pieces of literature we read… like we have a piece… a Mexican-American piece and a piece from a disabled person, and we focus on the threads between the students and the piece. And then talk about the context of it. So I would have to feel that, just like anything we pick for that unit, that the piece of literature stands on its own, and the kids will make some connection to it. Does that make sense? Just reading it for another… I try to choose pieces that are not just strangers in the village. "Let's expose the kids to different strangers." No. Let's help them realize that they have a connection to this person in some way shape or form. It might not be the exact connection. I might not be Mexican-American, but you can relate to… And if I felt like the novel had a strong message and tied into kids… Then obviously I would consider using it. I don't know… like a lot of sensitive issues I think that is one that would arouse lots of interesting conversations for sure.

On the surface this exchange may make it appear that Vanessa is opening up to the idea of talking about homosexuality. She does after all say, "Then obviously I would consider using it." Also, the introduction of a lesbian/gay work would as Vanessa says meet one of her major requirements for choosing a piece of literature, "I think that is one that would raise lots of interesting conversations for sure." However, her earlier statement, "I think I would have to feel strongly about the piece of literature as a piece of literature," and her hesitation throughout demonstrates that Vanessa would have great difficulty ever seeing a lesbian/gay work as "real"

literature. She also indicates that she would want a piece of literature that "kids will make some connection to." Despite the fact that her students every year have already indicated a desire to talk about homosexuality with the discussion of A Separate Peace, Vanessa still feels that they would possibly not be able to make connections with a lesbian/gay work. In doubting this, she is denying the very real probability that she teaches lesbian/gay students each year who might be better able to make a connection to a lesbian/gay work than the traditionally, always assumed, straight literature that Vanessa currently teaches. Also it shows a reluctance on Vanessa's part to believe that straight children could find commonality with a lesbian/gay character.

When I pressed Vanessa further on her reasons for seeing a lesbian/gay work differently from the other self described sensitive works she currently uses, it became even more apparent that Vanessa perceived the two differently because of her personal discomfort with homosexuality. When asked more directly about her hesitation to use a lesbian/gay piece, she stated:

> I probably wouldn't feel as comfortable leading… I think the conversation…. I wouldn't want to get into… my fear… I wouldn't want to get into… um… umm… I wouldn't want my personal sort of… umm… It's a touchy issue because kids have very strong parental or their own personal opinions about certain sensitive issues, and I wouldn't want to feel like I am telling them how to believe or feel. If I was going to use it, I would want to use it as a way to open their minds and realize the emotions behind… It's like grouping manic depressives into groups and labeling them crazy. And so helping them understand the person behind that façade or that label that is what the stranger in the village unit is. So I think I would want to use it that way versus using it to discuss whether being gay or lesbian is right or wrong. And so that would be an issue I wouldn't feel very comfortable talking about in the classroom. But if I came at it through.. um … the standpoint of this is a sensitive topic that we need to make you aware of and need to talk about and there's labels that don't accurately (trails off).

Vanessa seems to assume here that a lesbian/gay piece of literature would always bring about a discussion of "whether being gay or lesbian is right or wrong." She worries that a lesbian/gay work could not be discussed by looking at the universal aspects of the work, and she feels that the only way to approach a lesbian/gay work is by treating it "as a sensitive topic that we need to make you aware of and need to talk about." Rather than seeing a lesbian/gay work as a valid literary work that might be approached from many different angles, Vanessa perceives lesbian/gay literature as only useful as an example of the exotic "other."

Here again, Vanessa's hesitation in this part of the interview shows how uncomfortable she feels with lesbian/gay literature. It is clear that her discomfort stems from her personal views about homosexuality, "I wouldn't want my personal sort of ummm…" She also voices a fear that the students or their parents might not want her to share what she calls her "personal" views about homosexuality. She says, "I wouldn't want to feel like I am telling them how to believe or feel." This is contradicted by her earlier statements about the way she deals with Catcher in the Rye and The Bell Jar and by later comments about her approach to religious discussion:

> I would be more uncomfortable talking about lesbian/gay issues in the classroom solely because… I would just be uncomfortable… but I am not uncomfortable about religious issues. I just don't want to make kids feel like they should know. I would just open them up to the literature aspects of Biblical perspectives. In a lot of things we have read, there is a great deal of religious imagery, and kids will mention it. And I will be like, "Yeah. That's a definite tie."

Vanessa does not see any contradiction in the way she approaches Biblical issues and

the way she approaches homosexuality. She feels it is right to talk about Biblical issues because the students themselves have made that "tie" or connection. However as her earlier statements show, she discounts the "ties" or connections students make to lesbian/gay aspects of novels. She tries to clarify this seeming contradiction in a later part of the interview:

> We talk about a lot of issues like is man the decider of his own destiny or is it fate etc. etc. If kids wanted to say, "Is there a God or not?" I would definitely have discussions about that. But I would feel… I have very strong beliefs that there is, so I would probably put my two cents in. But I would acknowledge the kids. As an educator, I feel it is my duty to open kids' minds and help them see past their own narrow viewpoint. They need to open and broaden their perspective on things, and so that would be my purpose in talking about issues. Versus this is what I believe or what you should believe. But I am sure it comes out. You know I will tell kids up front that I don't think they should be smoking and drinking in high school and so I will preach to them a little bit. It always… Funny little things will come out, and maybe that's not right. But I sort of feel… I don't know… but I always make fun of it so the kids won't feel bad.

Even in this clarification, Vanessa doesn't see her somewhat obvious contradictions. She says that when her students question whether or not there is a God, she would "probably put her two cents in." However, she said she avoided lesbian/gay topics because, "I wouldn't want to feel like I am telling them how to believe or feel." Despite her feeling that "it is my duty to open kids minds and help them see past their own narrow viewpoint," when it comes to lesbian/gay topics, she doesn't feel that she is capable or desirous of having discussions that might open up the students' minds.

Treatment of Students Who Come Out.

Vanessa had never had a student come out to her, and she was unsure what she might do if a student did. She showed the signs of hesitation as she did earlier in the interview when she became uncomfortable: "You know Randy, I don't know… um… I do and I don't… because umm… I think that is where personal… I don't know." Obviously I would want to talk to the kid. I don't know if my… I don't know." Vanessa's was obviously struggling to form a response. She clearly had not thought about what she might do in the event that a student should come out to her. Her statement, "I do and I don't," was the only time in the entire interview that I felt Vanessa was deliberately trying to hide her feelings from me.

After some prompting on my part, she did say she might refer a child who had come out to her to a counselor:

> I probably would. Just because they are going through… um… You know I think it is like anything. If a kid came up to me and told me they were thinking about suicide, I don't know if I would feel comfortable. I obviously wouldn't be the one to talk them out of that. I think that's an issue… And I think when kids are struggling with an identity crisis which in some ways… if you are struggling with your sexuality that is an identity crisis. Or if a kid came up to me… like if a girl came up to me and said I might be pregnant… I would want to help them feel comfortable. Which obviously they would feel comfortable enough to tell me. But I would also want to get them to someone who could help them work through this stage in their life… rather than me working through… (trails off)

Vanessa is clearly struggling here between her desire to accept all students and her feelings of discomfort regarding homosexuality. When she trails off in her statement, "I think that is where personal…," I believe she does so because she is

struggling with her religious beliefs about homosexuality. I think this might also be what she is considering when she says, "I do and I don't." Through informal observations I saw how Vanessa made every effort to let her students know that she cared for them and wanted to accept them. I also saw how sometimes this acceptance of all students could become a moral dilemma for Vanessa. Here, when Vanessa speaks of a child telling her that she is pregnant, I can imagine the difficulties Vanessa would have in such a situation. On the one hand, in her role as sponsor of the Christian group on campus, she had already tacitly voiced a certain sense of morality that would presumably disapprove of a woman having a child out of wedlock. On the other hand, she would want this young woman to "feel comfortable." Just as with this issue of teenage pregnancy, a student's coming out would pose for Vanessa a moral dilemma possibly placing her religious views and her desire to help all her students into serious conflict. Possibly because of her religious beliefs, Vanessa obviously had no concept that a student coming out could be anything other than a serious psychological issue, the equivalent of suicide or teenage pregnancy. Because she viewed it as such a severe issue, she felt that the student would always be in need of some sort of professional assistance.

Likely But Uncomfortable

"I look forward to the day when one doesn't have to be so circumspect and careful…" Ford

While Elizabeth and to a lesser degree Lily could possibly fit into the group,

likely but uncomfortable, I felt that Ford was the most interesting representative for this group. Ford had a strong desire to include lesbian/gay studies in his classroom, but doing so made him very uncomfortable. Despite the fact that he was sometimes uncomfortable with lesbian/gay discussions, Ford had these discussions regularly in his class.

Several themes emerged during Ford's interview, but perhaps most prominent was just how deeply conflicted Ford was regarding homosexuality. He had a strong desire to discuss lesbian/gay subject matter when the curriculum provided space for it. He felt that discussions about homosexuality are important. There were times when he absolutely would discuss homosexuality such as mentioned above with the AIDS crisis or the Matthew Shepard issue. Also, he was adamant that he wouldn't allow students to use epithets such as faggot or dyke in his classroom. However, in both formal and informal discussions, he stated his fears that discussing lesbian/gay studies in other cases, such as telling the students about an author's sexuality or reading a lesbian/gay work with the students, would open him up to charges of attempting to "recruit" students in order to make them become lesbian or gay.

He also worried that bringing up homosexuality would turn the students off to the literature or create a negative perception of lesbians/gays. As the formal interview went on, Ford began to change his opinion about whether teachers should tell students that authors are lesbian or gay. While he came to the conclusion that teachers should tell students about an author's homosexuality, he felt strongly that if teachers did this they should do so after the students read the work. This was very different than the way he approached the race or ethnicity of the author.

Conflicting Feelings About Integrating Lesbian/Gay Subject Matter.

Prior to this formal interview, Ford had not told students about an author's homosexuality unless the students brought it up. As the interview went on, Ford was clearly feeling somewhat guilty about the way he had approached the teaching of the works of lesbian/gay authors in the past. This might have simply been because he was discussing this with an openly gay researcher. However, I think it is more probable that both Ford's growing comfort level with his identity as a gay man and the incredible changes taking place in our society regarding homosexuality were responsible. Ford's interview clearly shows his strong desire to do more with the discussion of lesbian/gay studies, his fear about doing so, and his guilt about not doing more. Ford demonstrates this most clearly with his response when I asked if he tells the students that Tennessee Williams (one of Ford's favorite authors to teach) was a gay man:

> I certainly used to… yes and no. To be perfectly honest with you… I do not deny it… His gayness if it comes up… Every once in awhile there is someone who is aware… I do not … I did not… So, no, I do not teach Tennessee Williams as a gay author… in that sense… "So now we are going to study"… I don't do that. On the other hand… we deal, if this counts… For example in Streetcar… which is the one I have always concentrated on the most heavily… we deal… The play deals with gay issues. It was written… the play was written fifty years ago, but it has stuff in it… that I like to… that I do a little spiel for tolerance and understanding… and against ignorance… which caused that boy in the play as you may recall to kill himself. Gay issues are brought up… especially when we teach Streetcar. It is just unavoidable… but no… and I kinda wish I had done more… I mean about saying that Tennesse Williams… If it comes up, I… What I really have done… I've said, "Well you know…" I don't deny it… I just say… I want to be honest with

> you… I just say… it's not really relevant. Which I am not too proud of… But that's what I've said. I haven't said that exactly, but I will say, "Well some say yes, some say no." What's important is the work and so… so no… I haven't really, but I didn't deny. But I didn't teach them that he is a gay author. I didn't do that.

Ford's guilt is evident as he continues to reflect and change his answer throughout the interview. From his very first line, "I certainly used to… yes and no. To be perfectly honest with you… I do not deny it… His gayness if it comes up… Every once in awhile there is someone who is aware… I do not … I did not…" it is clear that he wishes he had been more open with past discussions about the topic and about Williams identity as a gay man. Showing his concern about how I might view his approach, he is also very adamant throughout that I know that he never denied Williams' homosexuality when students brought it up.

However, when he clarifies at the end that he responds to students' questions about Williams' homosexuality by saying, "Well some say yes, some say no," even he realizes that while he did not deny Williams' homosexuality outright, he did somewhat confuse it by allowing students to believe that possibly Williams was not "really" a homosexual. As he says himself, "I just say… it's not really relevant. Which I am not too proud of… But that's what I've said." Ford clearly wishes that he had done more and could do more. His denial of the author's homosexuality is not unlike his denial of his own homosexuality during his adolescence and early adulthood.

Constructing Lesbians and Gays in Literature as Victims.

The differences between what Ford did in his classroom regarding the subject of homosexuality and what Vanessa did when the subject came up are very different. Ford clearly wanted to be able to talk about homosexuality more openly in the classroom while Vanessa wanted to avoid topic. When Vanessa's students brought up an author's homosexuality, she cut the discussion off with, "I didn't know that." Ford on the other hand, acknowledged that he is somewhat aware of this information: "Some say yes. Some say no." But where the differences between Vanessa's treatment of the subject and Ford's really differ is with the treatment of a character's homosexuality or possible homosexuality.

During the discussion of A Separate Peace in Vanessa's class, when students wondered about Gene's possible homosexuality, Vanessa used that as an opportunity to show that it is wrong to incorrectly identify someone as a homosexual, thus in some ways she denies the possibility of Gene's homosexuality. Ford, on the other, hand brings homosexuality up himself with his discussion of A Streetcar Named Desire. As Ford says, "it is just unavoidable." Clearly Ford overtly discusses homosexuality: "The play deals with gay issues. It was written… the play was written fifty years ago, but it has stuff in it… that I like to… that I do a little spiel for tolerance and understanding… and against ignorance… which caused that boy in the play as you may recall to kill himself. Gay issues are brought up…" While Ford sees his discussion of this topic as "unavoidable" because of the play's subject matter, I know that many teachers in this school teach A Streetcar Named Desire without having a discussion of homosexuality which really is mentioned only in subtle ways and is somewhat obscured in the play. For evidence of how obscured the

subject of homosexuality is in the play, the reader might look to John Clum's (1995) entry on Williams in the Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage:

> Tennessee Williams's work poses fascinating problems for the gay reader. At his best, Williams wrote some of the greatest American plays, but though homosexuals are mentioned, they are dead, closeted safely in the exposition but never appearing on stage. In his post-Stonewall plays, in which openly homosexual characters appear, they serve only to dramatize Williams's negative feelings about his own homosexuality. (p. 751)

A Streetcar Named Desire is a pre-Stonewall work in which the homosexual character (Blanche's husband) is not only dead but also "closeted safely in the exposition."

While Ford discussed homosexuality in the classroom much more than Vanessa did, the ways Ford incorporates homosexuality into the curriculum are often limiting. It seemed to me, that all of the times that Ford thought it important to talk about lesbian/gay concerns were times when gays were presented as victims. As shown above, he talked about the gay boy who kills himself in A Streetcar Named Desire and gives his "spiel for tolerance and understanding." While this might be a valid way to incorporate gays into the curriculum, the gay man in the story is presented for the purpose of eliciting pathos. Ford also will talk about homosexuality with discussions of AIDS or the Matthew Shepard story, again two subjects that invite students to feel sorry for gay men. Another way the subject comes up in Ford's class is through the use of epithets:

> Occasionally if I hear somebody refer to somebody as a faggot I uh… I will say that's the same thing… when you're denigrating another human being… that's the same thing as using the word nigger. That just brings them up short because they're not going to do that. I will say that even if there are black people in the class, and

> they immediately, because it is a way of denigrating even demonizing human beings… If you want to say getting personal, but epithets like that… Whatever they are dago, nigger… I will say, "Not in my class. We don't use words that denigrate other human beings."

The discussion about the use of epithets, like the discussions about Streetcar, Shephard and AIDS, allow Ford an opportunity to advocate one of his primary lessons, tolerance. Whenever the topic of homosexuality came up in class, it was in this context, and because Ford regularly uses the topic of homosexuality to teach tolerance, he most often places the gay person in the role of victim. This might be due to the time period in which Ford came out as a gay man, his own losses due to the AIDS crisis, negative reactions he had received from family or friends or other personal concerns.

This is a perfect example of a time when identifying authors who are homosexual, might in some ways counteract the construction of homosexual as victim that I saw taking place in Ford's class. For example, I wondered if telling the students that Tennessee Williams was a gay man might give them an example of someone who was successful and who was one of the greatest of all American authors. The knowledge of Williams' success might counteract Williams' creation of pathetic gay characters. If Ford revealed the homosexuality of all the lesbian/gay authors in his curriculum and still had the discussion about AIDS and Shephard, students might get a more rounded picture of at least some of the possibilities for gay men.

Fear of Being Charged with Recruiting.

Showing images of lesbians and gays who are healthy and well adjusted might be troublesome for Ford because of one of his greatest fears regarding his homosexuality. Ford worried that great care would need to be taken in presenting lesbian/gay studies because parents might become concerned that he was trying to recruit his students to become lesbian or gay. To the question of whether or not he felt lesbian/gay subject matter has a place in the literature classroom, he responded:

> Yeah, I think they do have a place properly presented… Obviously some people are worried about … I don't mean in a promotional sense…. Some people are hysterically worried about…. But I absolutely do think… If I were to look at one thing in recent years that makes me more firmly believe that, it is the Matthew Shepard tragedy. More than any single thing in recent years… Although I have become more convinced… We have to teach values and compassion… You know… for all people… if we consider ourselves teachers. I mean the Nazis had Ph.D.s who designed the … Education without compassion, without morals is of no value and so… gay people, black people… Yes, the answer is yes. I have a tendency to ramble.

Ford is careful in his class that discussions of lesbian/gay topics are seen as promoting tolerance while not encouraging homosexuality. By only showing lesbian and gays as victims of an intolerant and hostile society, Ford can be sure that he is not seen as an advocate of a homosexual "lifestyle." As Ford shows here, he would like to do more with lesbian/gay studies, but makes it clear that, "I don't mean in a promotional sense." This is not unlike Vanessa's fears: "It's a touchy issue because kids have very strong parental or their own personal opinions about certain sensitive issues, and I wouldn't want to feel like I am telling them how to believe or feel." Like Vanessa, Ford didn't want his discussion of homosexuality to be seen as a personal viewpoint. By couching the conversation in terms of a general ideal such as

tolerance, Ford avoided the charge that he was advocating homosexuality. Ford's fear of being accused of recruiting or advocating homosexuality is based on a long running argument by conservatives that gay teachers are out to persuade children to "become" homosexual. Karen Harbeck (1997) documents this charge throughout her study, Gay and Lesbian Educators: "The threat of molestation and recruitment of young children remained the most powerful emotional conservative themes" (p. 56). While Vanessa most likely wouldn't have discussed homosexuality even if she weren't worried about angering parents, it was clear that Ford avoided certain discussions because of his perception that parents wouldn't approve.

Negative Perceptions.

In addition to worrying about what parents thought, Ford was also concerned that knowing that an author was lesbian or gay might make the students discount the work of literature. Because of this, he was convinced that if teachers told students about an author's sexuality, they should do so only after the work had been read and discussed. When asked if he thought that knowing Tennessee Williams was a gay man would give students added insight into his works, he replied:

> Really … that's a good question… I would say in the year 2000… I think yes. I think possibly… Well, a part of me definitely thinks yes… When you say… When we are talking about gay issues… Tennesse Williams… On the other hand Randy, because I feel real strongly about… See I'm thinking about… Well for example, the closeted scared gay teenager sitting in the room… I feel more strongly about the issues… than I do… About their developing tolerance and some understanding about the complexity of human sexuality and about how all things are not black and all things are not white. I feel more strongly about those kinds of things than I do

> about announcing that Tennessee Williams was gay himself… because I am… I have been kind of afraid that that will turn people off, and they will just stop thinking about the issues. You know… and maybe that's just my paranoia… But maybe some people will say, "He's gay so naturally he had this distorted point of view," then if I thought that… I think I would kind of stick more to these issues that I am talking about that could open their eyes toward the reality of human beings and human sexuality that Tennessee does if you allow it… So for that reason, over the years I've kind of been hesitant about biasing somebody against the play because… because well ….. (trails off)

Despite the fact that Ford believes that knowing Tennessee Williams was gay would give the students added insight, "Well, a part of me definitely thinks yes," he worries about what the students might think of that revelation. He worries that students won't get the message of the play if they know beforehand that Williams is gay, "But maybe some people will say, 'He's gay so naturally he had this distorted point of view.'" He even thinks that knowing this might be "biasing somebody against the play."

Ford is also fearful for, "the closeted scared gay teenager sitting in the room." He believes strongly that the discussions he has had with students in the past, have led to them becoming more tolerant of others. As he stated in the interview, he feels that revealing that Tennessee Williams was gay would make the students believe that only a gay man could advocate tolerance of homosexuality.

However, he started to change his thoughts about this as the interview went on. He began to believe that it might be worthwhile to risk alienating some of the students in order to add to their understanding of the work. When I asked him if he felt sure that students' knowledge of Tennessee Williams being a gay man would take away from their appreciation of the work, he said:

> Yes. Sadly in the minds of some of them it would. So I care really more ultimately about… I guess you might say about affecting the education of their humanity and their understanding about the person sitting next to them who might or might not be gay… And again, I am not saying… If someone said something about it… I wouldn't deny it. I just think it isn't the most… this is what I have thought… That it is not the most important issue… Well I still think that… But now upon rethinking it… If I were to teach it again… I think it is time really that a little more attention be given to that.

While he changed his opinion and now believed that it might be important to tell the students that Williams was gay, he was adamant that the students not be told before they read the work:

> What I would probably do… I think is… I might work it in. I would not start the play with that, "We're going to do a gay playwright." You know the way the human mind works in categories… Because you see that eliminates the need for much thinking… You see we can just put people into categories. So if I did it now, "By the way, Tennessee was himself gay." Yes, after those powerful points and those beautiful epiphanies, and those amazing words he wrote… After they had their effect. Then… I think that is the time… If I were in small performing arts school… I wouldn't necessarily… But being as we are a big fat old public school, I think that is the way I would think. I'd work it in later.

While he might do it differently if he were in a more liberal institution, like a performing arts school, in the more conservative setting where he presently works, he feels that negative reaction from the students would be so strong that he should wait until after the students have read and discussed the play before he reveals Williams' homosexuality. This way the students would not discount what he feels is the powerful message for tolerance the play engenders. He is also convinced the way to do it is to present it without discussion almost as an afterthought, "By the way, Tennessee was himself gay."

Comfort Level with Teaching a Lesbian/gay Adolescent Work.

When it came to teaching a work that specifically dealt with homosexuality, Ford, unlike Vanessa, had a strong desire to do so. He had never taught such a work, but he believed that sometime in the future, teachers might be able to teach works that have lesbians and gays as central characters:

> I look forward to the day when one doesn't have to be so circumspect and careful… And at some schools, I suppose you could start a unit where you said… Paul Monette article, a brilliant writer who won the national book award and has much to say about the human condition… I would love to read Becoming a Man, which is a superb work or about the aids crisis Borrowed Time. I would love to start… Wouldn't that be great… and I don't know… in a way… it's kind of odd… but in a way… Like Paul Monette, he died, so he is safe. You know we are not going to be well… he died of AIDS.

Towards the end of this exchange, Ford is starting to consider the possibility that he might be able to teach a work that deals openly with lesbian/gay topics. However, he believes he would be careful in his choice of works. When I asked him what he meant by the line, "He died, so he is safe," he replied:

> Well I wonder what you think about that? We can't be threatened so much by someone that's dead. Like if I were to say this person's alive and writing good gay literature right now… I think by the fact that… You know as Harvey Fierstien said in Torch Song Trilogy, "The thing about dead people is they make so few mistakes."

Ford felt strongly that a work by a current lesbian or gay author would generate controversy, but a work by one who is dead might be deemed more acceptable. Both works he mentions as works he would like to teach are works about people who were

victims of AIDS. In David Roman's (1995) essay on Monette he says of Borrowed Time:

> Monette's life changed drastically when Roger Horowitz [Monette's lover for over twenty years] was diagnosed with AIDS in the early 1980's. After Horowitz's death in 1986, Monette wrote extensively about the years of their battles with AIDS (Borrowed Time) and how he himself coped with losing a lover to AIDS. (p. 495)

Of Becoming a Man Roman says:

> Before the publication and success of his memoir, Becoming a Man, it seemed inevitable that Monette would be remembered most for his writings on AIDS. Becoming a Man, however, focuses on the dilemmas of growing up gay. It provides at once an unsparing account of the nightmare of the closet and a moving and often humorous depiction of the struggle to come out. (p. 496)

In both of these works, Monette writes of his struggles with AIDS or with coming out. Here again, I feel that Ford's choice of possible works shows his belief that constructing gay men as victims is somewhat more acceptable to the general public than works that show lesbians and gays in positions where they are empowered..

Ford's desire to teach any work that deals openly with topics, even if they are only ones that portray gay men as victims, shows that he is still far more comfortable with the subject than Vanessa. While Vanessa expressed that she was unsure if she would ever be able to teach a lesbian/gay work, Ford has a strong desire to teach at least some of these works. He was especially desirous of teaching Paul Monette's work, Becoming A Man:

> I would like to… Because, now that I think about it… He is such a fine writer. He is one of my favorites, like Gore Vidal, who is one of my all time favorites… to just… I would hope the day would come and soon when… Because you know gay artists, gay writers are some of our finest so there is no need… Well, to deny that fact is pointless… Just like when a teacher died some years ago of AIDS… A lot of students knew it, but the announcement… They said it was

> something else… You know.

Since Ford had such a strong desire to teach this work, I wondered if he had ever attempted to do so. Like Vanessa, he teaches the Pacesetters course which contains a unit titled, Stranger in the Village. Because a lesbian/gay work seems a natural fit for such a unit, I asked Ford if the school system would allow him to teach Becoming A Man in this course. He replied:

> You know I bet they just might… Especially now that we are doing Pacesetters which stresses multiculturalism… which stresses… well it's against exclusivity of any kind… pretty much stresses… I really think I could. Uh… I think I could make a pretty good case that would make a person look pretty damn foolish if they said no to… It would make them look pretty damn bigoted and hypocritical if they said no… There is nothing in that novel or biography that is salacious or you know…

When I asked him if he thought he might ask the department head to order a classroom set of Becoming A Man so he could start teaching it, he said:

> Yeah…If I keep teaching… I just might… You have given me a good idea. No, actually I would… I really, really would… If I keep teaching the Pacesetters… That's a promise because it ought to be done… I just read an article in the New York Times yesterday that talks about how AIDS continues to decimate Africa and people just go on with their heads stuck in the sand… you know… But meanwhile this pandemic rages… So the AIDS crisis more than any single thing demands that we get over this them and us mentality… It's not them and us… These cute straight teenagers can go to Panama City, and I think about that… unbridled heterosexuality and can come back with AIDS if they're not careful… You know it's not… to use a cliché, a gay disease. But it started out that way… Well I mean in this country.

Ford's clearly has an overwhelming concern with the issue of AIDS and an overwhelming feeling that even straight students need to know as much as possible about it. He also believes that Paul Monette's novel could be instructive for students

both gay and straight. Despite these facts, he did not attempt to order the novel, largely due, perhaps, because of his impeding retirement.

Treatment of Students Who Come Out.

Unlike Vanessa who had not had any students come out, Ford knew of at least a few students who were lesbian or gay. Ford felt that his teaching style was a factor in having these students come out to him. He felt that because he taught about tolerance, students knew he would be accepting of them:

> I recall in the eighties just encouraging these students… It's odd when that happens. They just know somehow that I am going to be comfortable with it. That I am not going to be threatened with it… or assume that I am gay myself… And so I remember in the past… I have said… "You know in this age of AIDS, you have to be careful… You've got to be careful." I feel a moral responsibility to say that. I mean for example for any gay guy. I don't want… who came out to me… I knew a gay girl years ago. She didn't exactly come out to me… But she had a gay boyfriend and they pal'd around. It was just… They were out to me… It just kind of happened. It wasn't any dramatic thing… Where they, "Mr. Harris , Mr. Fair, I'm gay." We all knew… When I say we, I mean the parties concerned… not all the students. I don't think I have had… It's funny though… I haven't had any dramatic… Like you've told me stories about a girl that's taken you aside and wanted to meet with you. It never happened like that. It is just kind of like… Well of course… In the past, well, I don't go out much anymore. But you would see someone out in a public gay place… like say a bookstore… or a bar… Sometimes… Like graduates come out to you.

As demonstrated here, Ford had only a few students come out to him while they were in school. Most of the students he knew of as being lesbian/gay, came out to him when they saw him in a gay space such as a gay bar or bookstore. Of the very few gay students who had come out to him while still in school, he felt his first and most important response to these students should be, "You know in this age of

AIDS, you have to be careful… You've got to be careful." This is consistent with his overwhelming concerns about the devastation caused by this disease.

Unlike Vanessa who had never had the experience of having a student come out and was unsure how she would handle it if one did, Ford, possibly because he is gay himself, had some students come out to him, but the students did not come out to him in any formal way. Rather, there was just an understanding on the part of Ford that these students were gay. Just as the students made no formal declaration to Ford, he did not feel any need to discuss his sexuality with them, "They just know somehow that I am going to be comfortable with it. That I am not going to be threatened with it… or assume that I am gay myself." This, while shared among the three of them, was not shared with the other students. In this way, the students had someone they could be comfortable with, but whom they knew would not give away their "secret."

Ford was also much more clear on how he thought he should handle students who came out. Also, Ford felt confident about the way he had handled students coming out to him and the way he would handle it in the future:

> I treat it as a natural part of life. I treat as a perfectly natural way of life and one that is acceptable to me. And they are aware that it is not acceptable as "normal" by the majority of people. Even though that's changing… that's changing. I am not sure what, but something's going on where people just… I read this article the other day... A lot of people… A lot of young people who are secure in themselves… They just don't give a hoot. Now the people who are insecure… The people who don't feel good about themselves… You know they are looking for scapegoats. They are looking for someone they can be better than… or maybe say something bad against… But the cool students… The ones who are secure enough to and have been raised in a tolerant atmosphere… The ones who have a good and happy lives… It doesn't affect them… They don't care… You know… So that didn't use to be that way.

Ford's reaction to a student's coming out is very different from the hypothetical way Vanessa imagined she might handle the situation. Not only did Ford say he felt like it should be treated, "as a perfectly natural way of life and one that is acceptable to me," he did not even mention as Vanessa did after some prompting that he would recommend professional counseling. While Vanessa seemed sure that professional counseling would be in order, Ford did not see the a student's coming out as any indication that the student was in need of therapeutic help. Although Ford was quick to point out that counseling might be in order, he indicated that this counseling need not be done by a professional, but rather anyone who could show the child that she or he was valued and accepted. He also indicated that he had a desire to do this counseling himself:

> I would like to be more involved in a counseling way if I could … a way that national organizations encourage… but you an I both know that to have job security you just can't wear a banner and say I am gay myself… so uh… I try to be supportive if that happens… if a student makes it known that they are one way or another. I am supportive, nurturing empathetic.

Clearly just as Ford wanted to be more open about lesbian/gay aspects of the literature, he also wanted to do more to help students who came out. However, he felt that he could not do either of these things because to do so might jeopardize his job.

While Ford pointed out the fears that he had regarding job security, he also pointed out that he feels that the students have become more accepting in their attitudes towards homosexuality. However, he felt that this change in attitude was really only among, "a lot of young people who are secure in themselves." While

Ford clearly thinks that attitudes have changed and are rapidly changing from when he first started teaching, he still acknowledges that students who come out even now know, "that it is not acceptable as quote normal unquote by the majority of people." Ford felt that it was important for gay/lesbian students to know that someone accepts them, even if the "majority of people" do not.

While the numbers of students who had come out to Ford were not exceptionally high, he reported more incidents of students coming out to him than all but two other English teachers in the study. He thought this might be in some ways because of the way he approached the literature and his message of tolerance for and nurturing of all students:

> The more I teach, the more I realize that when I teach, I use everything that I am. They come out to me partly because of who I am… And by that I don't mean whether I am gay or straight… It's just that… I am giving these people… I have come to realize… pretty much… I don't mean the private aspects of my life… But I am giving these people the totality of my being… I do have this kind of nurturing… almost mothering instinct I guess. So it makes them comfortable… It's because of who I am… It makes them comfortable… More than the way I teach literature… But you see the way I teach literature is involved in who I am.

While Ford doesn't believe that his approach to literature that is completely responsible for the higher numbers of students who have come out to him, he does think that is part of it and finds it impossible to separate his approach to literature with other factors.

## Comfortable But Uninformed

"I want them to see the literature as a jewel with a lot of different things and a lot of

different sides with a lot that it can give them." - Clare

I chose Clare to represent the group of the comfortable but uninformed. Clare's perceptions of introducing lesbian/gay studies is very different from Vanessa's or Ford's. Clare, like Ford, feels that lesbian/gay studies is important. Unlike Ford who had not revealed to his students that authors were lesbian or gay, Clare had told her students about the homosexuality of authors when she felt that it was important to a fuller understanding of the literature. However, Clare felt that she did not know enough about which authors were lesbian or gay to include this knowledge on a regular basis.

Clare's interview was incredibly consistent with her classroom behavior. Just as she focused strongly on the facts in her classroom, she believed that the sexuality of an author was a fact like any other and that she should reveal those facts when she knew them. Clare believed strongly that in some cases knowing about an author's homosexuality could contribute to a deeper understanding of the work of literature.

However, she worried that she didn't always know which authors were lesbian or gay and the way this information might add insigh to their work. Clare has been teaching for thirty years, and despite the commonly held belief that the subject of homosexuality was completely taboo until recent times, Clare remembers her college professors discussing the homosexuality of some authors. However, her college professors mentioned the homosexuality of authors who were well known to be homosexual, and that was only a very few authors.

The way Clare approached African-American authors was somewhat different

from the way she approached lesbian/gay authors. However, Clare believed this was due to the fact that she was much more aware of who the African-American authors were. There were two reasons for this. One was the fact that in the anthologies, African-American authors are often grouped together. The other was that her college professors had been more forthcoming in talking about the race of authors than they had been with their sexuality.

More than any other participant in the study, Clare seemed very concerned with what might happen in the future if lesbian/gay studies were more formally integrated into the literature classroom. From her observations of how African-American literature has been included in high school textbooks, she speculated that editors of anthologies might someday include lesbian/gay studies in the same way. She worried about this because she did not want to see lesbian/gay authors included in a single unit in the way that African-American authors are currently only included in the Harlem Renaissance unit.

When Clare uses the works of authors she knows to be lesbian/gay, she brings up the author's sexuality with the students but only under certain conditions. She feels most comfortable bringing the topic up with older students because she believes that students in grades eleven and twelve are better able to handle discussions of homosexuality. She also believes that it should be presented without "making an issue" out of it. In other words, Clare wanted to make sure that the topic of homosexuality did not become sensationalized.

Unlike some of the other participants including all the ones discussed up to this point, Clare was unconcerned with parent reaction to identifying an author as

lesbian or gay or talking about homosexuality in the classroom. Instead of negative reactions from parents, Clare worried more about negative reactions from students. However, she was not concerned, as the other participants were, with fears about job security. Instead, she was worried that negative comments from some students would hurt the self-esteem of closeted lesbian and gay students in the class. Even though Clare is a heterosexual, she also worried that the negative comments students might make about lesbians and gays would offend her personally.

Clare had known of several students who were lesbian or gay, but none of them had formally come out to her. She speculated that if a student did come out to her, she would treat it as an everyday fact unless the student seemed to be experiencing emotional pain because of difficulty dealing with her/his sexuality. In many ways this was very similar to the way Ford handled students who came out.

Deeper Understanding of the Work.

Like Vanessa, Clare felt that literature should be placed in context, and like Vanessa she expressed her belief that giving students facts about the time period or the author's life should be part of placing literature in context. Clare had clearly been thinking about what aspects of an author's life were important enough to be worthy of classroom discussion. She felt that revealing an author's homosexuality was an important thing to do, but only if this revelation gives students a deeper understanding of the work. When I asked her if lesbian/gay studies had a place in the literature classroom, she responded:

> Well… it depends on what you mean by "a place." Whether you

> mean should we teach it formally… uh… my instinct would be to say no because I don't really teach about anybody's personal life that much… Unless… anyone's personal sexual life that much… But yeah should. We should if we think it impacted on their writing. Yeah… if we know about a way that it impacted on their writing, we probably should.

While at first Clare seems hesitant to say that lesbian/gay studies have a place in the classroom, she is not against introduction of the topic. Her hesitation stemmed more from her concerns about how teachers might treat the topic. She did not want the topic to be introduced as merely a way of labeling an author for the purpose of showing another example of a minority author. Instead, she wanted to make sure that her identification of an author as lesbian or gay man would add insight into the literature.

Unsure of Which Authors Were Lesbian/Gay.

Clare differed from Vanessa as far as her feelings about revealing an author's sexuality. Vanessa felt that she didn't know or want to know which authors were homosexual. Clare also had a somewhat different stance than did Ford. Ford felt that he knew about the homosexuality of many of the authors, and he felt that it was relevant and beneficial for the students to know about the sexuality of these authors. However, because he feared repercussions, he was somewhat reluctant to reveal these facts to the students. While Clare did talk about the homosexuality of authors when she knew it, she felt that she was often unaware of which authors were lesbian and gay and how that fact might influence their works. Clare stated, "In my case in many cases I don't know… Some of the authors that I have taught for years I didn't

know were gay or lesbian. Of course some I do, but some I don't." Clare felt that she would talk about the authors' homosexuality more if she was aware of it and if she believed that it had some influence on the authors' works.

Differences Between Ethnicity of Authors and Homosexuality of Authors.

Clare also had a very different position than either Vanessa or Ford regarding the differences between revealing an author's ethnicity and revealing an author's homosexuality. In this case, Clare was somewhat closer to Vanessa's stance than she was towards Ford's. Ford felt that the Stranger in the Village unit he taught as a part of the Pacesetters course was a great place to include lesbian/gay stories. While he wanted students to understand the universal qualities embodied in the story, he felt that just exposing the students to works by and about people from a different ethnic group or sexuality than themselves were beneficial for that fact alone. Exposing students to someone of a different race or sexuality presented an opportunity for Ford to carry out his major teaching goal, to teach tolerance.

Clare, like Vanessa, felt that works should not be included just because their authors represented different groups of people or explored themes of difference. Vanessa stated, "I try to choose pieces that are not just strangers in the village. 'Let's expose the kids to different strangers.' No. Let's help them realize that they have a connection to this person in some way shape or form." This was somewhat similar to the statements of Clare:

> What frustrates me a little bit… The way the curriculum treats the black authors… The only works we have from these authors are

> about being black… Specifically… Not about anything else… Or having any other thing to talk about other than the black experience in America. And there are people out there who are writing about things other than what it feels like to be colored me… You know… Zora Neale Hurston… And those are important things and very valid things, but it is a shame that the curriculum ignores everything but that… And I guess, maybe they are doing that because they know the kids might not ever see these authors in any other context. And they need to know what the black experience is like and they need to know… Hurston's essay, "What It Feels Like to Be Colored Me." Because these kids probably won't go beyond that.

Like Vanessa, Clare is ambivalent about how authors from minority groups are currently being presented in the curriculum. Clare struggles here because her liberal ideology, as evidenced by the neighborhood she lives in, her comments on growing up in the sixties and my general knowledge of her over eight years of observation and friendship conflicts with her much more conservative views regarding literature and the traditional canon.

In trying to explore what I see as the hypocrisy between the way most minority authors are treated and the way lesbian/gay authors are treated, I asked all the participants in the study if they reveal an author's ethnicity. Vanessa, Ford, and Clare all expressed the belief that it was impossible not to reveal the ethnicity of the authors because of the way they are presented in the books. Both Vanessa and Clare were concerned about this. As Clare said:

> The way our book does it of course… They sort of group all those authors together. So it's real obvious who is and who isn't… It is sort of like "The Black Authors." It's the Harlem Renaissance and everything that goes along with it… And all those authors even though they aren't Harlem Renaissance authors are all in the same unit… It is sort of like, "duh." And they don't have a gay/lesbian unit. That is definitely true.

Clare expressed great concern that African-American pieces were not more fully

integrated into the curriculum. While African-American authors were included, she felt that grouping them all together inhibited the exploration of universal themes and limited the works to a single theme of alienation. Clare worried that the students resented these groupings, began to see the works as one dimensional and began to expect them to always be about characters who were alienated:

> Everything we read in our curriculum is specifically… Not just the idea of being different or being and outsider… Or seeing things from a different view… but being black. As if 100% of their identity and the only thing they were interested in is the fact that they were black. And I think sometimes our kids roll their eyes and say, "Ah, yeah, it's one of those authors again." Not that they have anything against black writers, but that we are going to hear about what it is like to be black. Sort of like, "Well it's February, it most be Black history month." It can't be anything else, and I think that is kind of a disservice.

While Clare's comments here seem to indicate that she is supportive of incorporating authors from varying ethnicity in the literature classroom, because our informal conversations I believe that this is not exactly her stance. She has expressed resentment many times about her belief that the school system's push for multiculturalism has destroyed the traditional curriculum. While I definitely do not believe that she is a racist, I believe that any authors who are not part of the Western canon are devalued by Clare. Ironically, as problematic as Clare found the books identification of the authors as African-American, when I asked, "If you taught a work that was by an African-American but it wasn't obvious that the author was African-American would you tell the students that the author was African-American?" Clare indicated that she would:

> Especially if it was not what it feels like to be colored me… You know, I am black, look at the prejudice look at the suffering. If it

> were an African- American writer that didn't do that I would definitely say that. I would say yeah. I wouldn't make a big deal out of it. But I would say, "Yeah, she is an African- American writer," because that would be something that is atypical of a lot of the work that is in our book.

As resentful as Clare was regarding the way she saw African-Americans as being treated as one-dimensional figures, surprisingly, she thought that including a unit in the book that focused on lesbian/gay authors "would be a good thing." As the interview continued, Clare recognized the contradiction in this. When I asked her why she didn't have the same reservations about grouping lesbian/gay authors the way she did about African-American authors, she replied:

> I think the reason I have a problem with that is because that is the only way they are ever presented. We get them in every book. But they are always presented as capital B black authors with capital I issues about being capital B black… and nothing else, and I think that limits these people and their voices. [long pause] I am not being consistent, am I?

As Clare began working out the reasons for her inconsistencies, she began to explain why she saw a difference in grouping lesbian/gay works and grouping African-American works:

> The kids are constantly told who is black, but they aren't told who is gay or lesbian. It is because we don't know, and there are lots of reasons why. But it is really hard to walk down the street and not be obviously black or have your picture in the book and not be obviously black. But we don't know who is gay or lesbian. So, yeah, I think that would be a good thing, but… It depends on the selections they put in the book… And I would hope that… But you know, they are always arranged thematically, and so I am sure there would have to be some sort of thematic link. So they would probably pick selections that were about being gay or lesbian… like they choose selections about being black. So I wouldn't have any trouble teaching that as a unit, but I wouldn't want my students to think that the only thing gay or lesbian writers write about is the problems of being gay. Just like I don't want my students to think the only thing a woman can write about is the problem of being a woman in a

patriarchal society.

Vanessa, Ford, and Clare all expressed the idea that race or ethnicity couldn't be hidden while being lesbian or gay could. While all three to different degrees seemed concerned that students need to find something universal in each work of literature, Clare seemed far more concerned than any of the others about the possibility that works by minority authors might be limited to a single theme of oppression or alienation. Since Clare said that she didn't want her students "to think the only thing a woman can write about is the problem of being a woman in a patriarchal society," I asked her if she could name a work where the gender of the author wouldn't matter. She replied:

> Yeah it does. But there are so many other things in a work of literature if it is good work of literature other than that. I don't want them [her students] to see it as a one-dimensional… I want them to see the literature as a jewel with a lot of different things and a lot of different sides with a lot that it can give them. So if we pile the literature together and say this is the one issue that we want you to get out of these stories, then the kids miss a lot of things and they are not perhaps at this age insightful enough to get anything else.

Just as Ford's desire to teach tolerance influenced everything he did in the classroom, Clare's desire to teach literature as a multi-faceted "jewel" colored everything she did in her classroom. This accounted for much of her views about lesbian/gay studies in the classroom. While Clare viewed an author's homosexuality as a fact that was most likely responsible for shaping some of that author's views and the themes of the author's work, she saw this as just one facet of the work. While it might be an important fact, Clare felt that other facts were just as important and could bring just as much insight into the work. Therefore, when she

knew that an author was homosexual and knew that it influenced that author's work (as with Whitman), she brought it up. But if she didn't know that fact, she looked for other sides to the "jewel" that she was aware of and explored the literature in that way.

Avoiding Sensationalism of the Topic of Homosexuality.

When Clare did know of an author's homosexuality, she introduces this fact in a couple of different ways. When she feels that it has a significant impact on the writing of the work, she goes into a great deal of detail about how the author's sexuality impacted the writing of the work. When she feels that the author's homosexuality is not as important to the writing, she often mentioned it as a side note to the discussion. In other words, Clare treats facts about an author's homosexuality just as she would any other fact.

One author whose homosexuality Clare felt was very important to the literary discussion of his works was Walt Whitman. From the very start of the interview, Clare was emphatic that it was impossible to separate Walt Whitman's work from his sexuality; "Certainly, I talk about that with Walt Whitman." She went into great detail about how the discussions of Whitman's poetry led to inevitable discussions of sexuality:

> Well of course we don't do a lot of the poetry … We don't really do any of the poetry… because the book is really selective. The "Calamus" poems are definitely… They definitely have homerotic images in them. He talks a lot about the body and about body parts… And he talks equally about the beauty of the body parts of the male and the female. So when he does that… Sometimes a kid

> will say, "Was he gay?" And they will… They feel by the second semester… They feel comfortable enough with me that they can ask that question. But they also know they better not act like it is some awful thing, and you know, then I will say he probably was either gay or bisexual. We don't know. I am not sure, and I will say I don't really know and probably nobody knows, but definitely he was attracted to both male and female both. And if they go uggggh or they make a face… Then I say, "Well the nice thing about Whitman's poetry is that it shows the beauty of … every… body. And it shows how every body both physically and emotionally and mentally and the beauty of all these different things… And he has this wonderful insight and you can see it in some of the poems, and it is not any of the ones that we read in class." But I say, "You can really see in his poems he can really feel… He appears to be able to feel things… uh… In that nineteenth century context again… The way women feel… The way men feel… He celebrates the body. He celebrates the mind. He celebrates the spirit. The beauty of everybody… the common man … Some of his poems refer to prostitutes, but not in the sense that he is going to talk about pornographic issues about sex and prostitution and all that. But he is going to talk about the beauty of their lives and their souls and their spirits and this works right into transcendentalism which we will be talking about. The oversoul and the beauty of every individual. His sexuality perhaps helped him have an entrée into these emotions that a lot of people don't have, and helped him express those feelings." And either we have talked about by then or we will talk about how his poetry at the time was so scandalous. We are talking about a time period when you couldn't say the word leg because… And they laugh at that because they think that is absurd, and then they read a couple of poems and they think, "Well this is not nasty."

Perhaps more strongly than anything else, what comes through in this passage is Clare's belief that Whitman's sexuality was an advantage not an obstacle to be overcome. She shares with the students her belief that Whitman's sexuality allowed him to see things that perhaps others could not. When students react negatively to the revelation of Whitman's sexuality, Clare redirects them to see how Whitman's sexuality was a positive not negative thing; "Well the nice thing about Whitman's poetry is that it shows the beauty of … every… body." In doing this, Clare is challenging many preconceived notions. First, by merely showing her enthusiasm

and enjoyment of an author's work who she identifies as possibly being gay, she is challenging the idea that homosexuality is disgusting or immoral. Second of all, by pointing out Whitman's love for the male and female body, she is challenging the idea held by many teenage males, that only people of the opposite sex can or should be viewed as beautiful or attractive.

Students who identify as anything other than heterosexual might be greatly heartened and affirmed by this kind of classroom discussion. However, there is something else that Clare is also providing for students who are not heterosexual. Clare hints that some of the poems that are more obviously homoerotic are omitted from the textbook: "And he has this wonderful insight and you can see it in some of the poems, and it is not any of the ones that we read in class." Even though Clare does not have prolonged discussions of these works, in doing this, Clare gives students who might be looking for works of literature that include people of different sexualities a place to begin or continue their search. Students, no matter how they identify sexually, might be stimulated through this discussion to read the "Calamus" poems of which Clare speaks. Therefore, Clare's discussion might open up an area that would otherwise be closed because of the decisions of the editors of the anthology.

While the discussion of Whitman's sexuality was extensive, Clare also introduced the sexuality of authors as a side note when talking about authors' lives. One example of this was the way Clare handled the introduction of Gertrude Stein's lesbianism. This occurred when Clare was discussing the origins of the term "lost generation":

> I was talking about Alice B. Tolkas… I don't even know why… We were talking about the jazz age and the lost generation. And I said I had heard that that was really Getrude Stein's car mechanic who really said that, and that she took credit for it. And we were talking about the salons, and then, I mentioned her lover and her companion Alice B. Tolkas. And I said the neatest thing I know about Alice B. Toklas is that she was a great cook, and you can tell it because Getrude Stein was really fat (laughter). And I tell them her favorite recipe was a brownie recipe because it had a secret ingredient in it… It was marijuana of course. But I mentioned just in passing through that whole issue that Alice B. Toklas was her longtime companion. And the kids didn't even blink which I thought was nice. But that was a way that I could insert that in there, and let them know that I didn't think that was a big deal, but it was worthy of mentioning but it was in the context of something else. Rather than making an issue out of it. Especially since we weren't really talking about Getrude Stein or Alice B. Toklas literature at the moment. Does that make sense… So when I talk about things like that, I try to make it as if it is just one more thing.

By mentioning Stein's lesbianism as just an interesting side note, no different from the introduction of the Toklas' love of cooking or the facts about the brownies, Clare avoids sensationalism because she does not treat Stein as the exotic other. In fact Clare's treatment of Stein and Toklas follows in many ways the criteria Louise Rosenblatt lays out in Literature as Exploration:

> The significant thing is not that a book tells how the Eskimo fishes, builds his house, and wins his mate, but whether the book presents the Eskimo as a remote being of a different species or as another human being who happens to have worked out different patterns of behavior. (p. 248)

She also avoids a prolonged discussion of the morality of homosexual behavior and presents Toklas and Stein as people who have "worked out different patterns of behavior. In doing this she avoids discussion which might in this case detract from the literary discussion. Also, by identifying Stein as a lesbian, Clare is doing

something similar to what she was doing with her discussion of Whitman. She introduces Toklas as Stein's lover just as she might talk about the relationship between a heterosexual author and her/his partner. Students who might not have previously known of Stein's lesbianism might pursue further study by reading biographies of Stein of Toklas or by reading Stein's works.

Comfort Level With Teaching Lesbian/Gay Adolescent Work.

Not surprisingly, Clare's main concern about teaching a work that specifically dealt with the concerns of lesbian/gay adolescents was that she wanted to be sure that the work was not sensationalized. She felt that she would be most comfortable teaching a work where a character "just happened to be gay," rather than one where being gay was the central focus of the work:

> I am not sure how comfortable I would be. It would depend more on the quality of the story than the subject. I don't much care for teenage angst stories when they are maudlin "adolescent fiction" stuff, as you know. I would rather teach such stories as "misunderstood outcast" issues or as a story in which the main or secondary character just happens to be gay/lesbian - in a "so what" sort of mode. For example, I find some of David Sedaris' stuff clever, pointed, and perhaps teachable as stories in terms of content and writing quality. For the classroom, I like some of Sedaris' stories about his childhood years, such as the one about his "speech impediment" and his speech teacher, for example. It addresses the issue of his gayness squarely but does so in the context of how high school outcasts feel in general, and it is both funny and poignant and something the kids can identify with beyond his gayness. I know there are other stories and writers whom I can't think of at the moment.

In one sense, Vanessa and Clare share a similar concern about the quality of the work. Both wanted to be sure that the work would be of high quality. However,

Vanessa believed that even if the work was of high quality, she might still be uncomfortable using a lesbian/gay work in the classroom. Like Ford, Clare was able to mention a specific work that she felt would be appropriate for classroom reading and discussion. While both Ford and Clare knew of lesbian/gay works that were not only appropriate but valuable for classroom use, neither had used these works.

Ensure That Discussions of Lesbian/Gay Subject Matter Are Age Appropriate.

While Clare felt that lesbian/gay studies were important to literary discussions and felt far more comfortable than Ford or Vanessa in conducting these discussions, she felt that these discussions were best carried out with older students who were more mature. Clare was concerned that younger students might not be able to handle discussions of homosexuality. While at first she suggested that these discussions would be best for students in grades eleven and twelve, she later indicated that she had at times carried out discussions of lesbian/gay concerns with students as young as tenth grade:

> Now I only do that [discuss homosexuality] with my older students… My more sophisticated students… Kids that I think are probably… That we have built up a sort of trust… uh… a sense that we can talk about things [such as homosexuality] with a… uh… a sense that we are all adults here. And we are going to be objective, and we aren't going to be silly or babyish… Then I will mention it [homosexuality]. Like I don't have any problem with my juniors talking about things like that [homosexuality]… Sometimes even with the tenth graders.

As Clare demonstrates here, while she feels that the students should be older before they engage in discussions of homosexuality, she is unsure what the appropriate age might be. In fact, it may be that more than the age or maturity of the students, it might be the nature and the extent of the relationship that Clare has developed with the students that might truly be the deciding factor on whether or not these discussions take place. As Clare says, these discussions might be most effective only after her and her students "have built up a sort of trust."

Clare felt that she was able to build up this trust with some classes better than with others. She felt that it was easier to have discussions about homosexuality with her honors level juniors than it was with her regular level tenth graders. She speculated that this might be because the honors student were more advanced intellectually, older and more mature, and included more females than males. As Clare says:

> Well again, I don't broach those kinds of issues early on or with the younger kids. But by the time I do that, they are ok with it. Some of the guys [sigh} I think in our culture and with the teenagers, the males seem to be more homophobic than girls do. And males seem to have more of a problem with homosexuality and being repulsed by it. Whether it is gay or lesbian. I think the guys just think it is macho to say that… And the girls don't say anything. They just… the guys sometimes do… And I just… It depends on who it is and the extent of how they are doing it. But I let them know right away that without lecturing at them that I think it is silly to be that way [repulsed by homosexuality]… That I don't think it [homosexuality] is a big deal. And I try to sort of gloss over it [homosexuality] and don't give them a chance to really… Have much of a chance to say anything negative… They say well… Because most of them don't… I think they take a cue from me and from everyone else in the school because for the most part I think we have an environment here that is accepting or at least officially accepting. And so I think they know it is not ok to have a big fit about it [homosexuality]… And I think many of them… gradually as time goes by… Begin to feel that it [homosexuality] is not anything they have to be upset by or disturbed

> by… Which I think is good.

Not only did Clare feel that she had to create a certain level of trust between her students and herself, she also felt that students would "take a cue" from her as far as what was acceptable and unacceptable. Despite feeling that she had established this tone early on with students, students sill occasionally made negative remarks regarding lesbians and gays. Clare, as she states here, handles these negative comments by reprimanding the students by telling them that she thinks what they are saying is wrong or in her words "silly." She states that she does this "without lecturing them." Because Clare feels that the school culture is as she states, "officially accepting" of homosexuality, she believes that the students are not in need of a prolonged reprimand because she feels that even the offending students know what they are doing is unacceptable.

No Fear Of Parents.

While all of the participants mentioned so far, had a fear of how parents might react to the inclusion of homosexuality in classroom discussions, Clare insisted that she had never even had such a concern. In fact, when I brought it up in connection with her discussion of Whitman, she seemed shocked by the very idea of it:

> No. That has never occurred to me. I don't do it [talk about homosexuality] in a way that I feel is promoting one… promoting any lifestyle one way or the other… But on the other hand, it never occurred to me to worry when I say to my kids that his way of seeing things was good for him because he was able to see both sides of issues. Or that he was able to turn that issue [homosexuality] into writing creatively about the spirit. Because I always connect it back to the individual and the value of everybody and the oversoul and transcendentalism… and… and how can anybody… It never

> occurred to me that I might have a parent get upset about that [homosexuality]. Gosh. I never thought about it that way. I never have… Because I don't say he was better.

While Clare had never thought about parents' reactions before, as she starts to think about them in this section of the interview, it is clear that she thinks the primary objection parents might have is the charge that the teacher is promoting homosexuality. This is not unlike Ford's fears about bringing up the topic of homosexuality. Since Clare's feels that her discussions do not favor homosexuality over heterosexuality, she seems dumbfounded that parents might object. Also, Clare felt that the way she connected Whitman's sexuality to his works insulated her from any charges of wrongdoing.

Rather than worrying about the parents, Clare was more concerned with the reaction of the students. Unlike others who feared loss of job security, Clare's fears were that she might have to waste class time issuing reprimands to students making negative remarks or detracting from the ongoing literary discussion because of debates over the morality of homosexuality. When I asked if Clare feared the reaction of parents when talking about authors other than Whitman, such as her discussion of Stein, she stated:

> No. I swear that has never occurred to me. [laughter] Maybe it should. Gosh… No… If I am skiddish about anything it's that the kids… Some of the guys will get all squirrelly about it [homosexuality], and I will hear some things like fag or things like that. And emotionally I will want to roll my eyes and say, "Get over it [fears and issues regarding homosexuality]." But you don't want to act like that in front of the kids or just get off on issues that I don't think are terribly relevant.

Clare seemed to want her students to take her revelation of the authors' sexuality as

facts as innocuous as any of the other facts that she frequently gave about the authors she taught. However, she feared that this might not always occur, and so she sometimes was afraid of mentioning the subject at all because she did not want to give students the chance to make rude or derogatory comments.

Treatment of Students Who Come Out.

Consistent with her views about discussing homosexuality in the classroom, Clare felt that in most cases it was best to treat students who come out as if it were "no big deal." Unlike Vanessa, but similar to Ford, Clare knew she had taught lesbian or gay students but none had formally come out to her: "I have had a couple of students who I absolutely was 100% sure they were gay. But they never came to me and said, 'I'm gay or lesbian.' And they could have. It would have been perfectly fine and I would have been supportive." This in many ways echoes Ford's comments about the lesbian/gay students of whom he was aware. When asked how she knew these students were lesbian or gay, she replied:

> Because of some of the things they wrote. Not that they wrote anything directly… But between the lines some of things they wrote… The other kids they would hang around with… Their attitude in some of the classroom discussions when we were talking about authors' works and some of the things other kids and other teachers said to me.

When Clare speculated on how she would handle a student coming out to her, she at first stated that she would approach the student's coming out as if it were not very significant. However, she added that her reaction might depend on how and why this

student made the revelation:

> Well if I already suspected it, I would say, "Yeah I kind of thought so." You know… "Yeah, and your point is." Kind of like, "Yeah, so that's fine." It depends on the kid. If he were stressed, and it was like the big confession, and he was… If he needed a lot of emotional support about it or something like that… Then I would try to be very… "Well is there anything I can do to help? Are you having issues? Are you having problems? Is there any thing I can do? Are you being picked on?" If that is what it looked liked. It was… um… You know something like that. But if he just mentioned, "Hey I want you to know that I am gay," or if a girl said, "I am a lesbian," then I would just say, "Yeah I thought you might be."

While at first Clare seems to be somewhat cavalier in the way she would approach a student who came out, this approach was consistent with Clare's stoic demeanor and with the way she treated the lesbian/gay studies in literature. For Clare, just as an author's being lesbian/gay was a fact like anything else, the student coming out to her was revealing a fact like many others that wasn't particularly significant. Clare explained this approach further: "I would take my cue from the kid's attitude because I don't want to act like it is a big deal if the kid doesn't think it is a big deal." Clare went on to express her belief that lesbian/gay students are very careful about whom they come out to:

> The kids that age or going to have a lot of social pressure. I don't think a kid would come and tell me that unless he wanted me to be supportive. I don't think he would tell me that [he is gay] if he thought I was going to be hostile, or negative, or non-supportive. But you know kids are very careful about who they tell. And I think they have to really feel that they are going to get the reaction they want or need before they are going to tell anyone, and everybody around them might have figured it out way before they did.

While Clare's recognition of students who she perceived to be lesbian/gay is similar to Ford's, Clare's speculation of the way she would handle students who came out

was very different from Vanessa's and Ford's. While Clare felt it was best to be nonchalant unless the student seemed to be in distress, Vanessa could not at first even speculate what she might do. After some prompting, Vanessa suggested that she might refer the student to a counselor. Both Clare and Ford saw no need for a counselor. However, Ford did feel that the student should be warned about the AIDS crisis. Clare saw no need for any intervention, either through formal counseling or warnings from her, unless the student seemed to be having emotional difficulty. In other words, Clare did not see the revelation of a lesbian/gay identity as necessarily indicating some sort of emotional difficulty or struggle.

Comfortable and Informed

> Every kid needs to hear different voices because it's a diverse world, and you go out into the workplace or into the world in general and there will be people who are gay and lesbian. And there will be people who are Black, people who are of other ethnic and cultural heritages, and we need to be able to get along and to be tolerant of that. - June

I chose June to represent the group comfortable and informed because she was one of only two teachers in this department who knew enough about lesbian/gay subject matter to include this subject on a regular basis in her classroom. Like the four teachers grouped in the category Comfortable But Uninformed, June felt that lesbian/gay studies were important to the teaching of literature. Also other than Ford, June was the only teacher who knew of many authors who were lesbian or gay. Therefore, June was able to include discussions of homosexuality in many different ways in her classroom.

From the interview, it was evident that June's belief "that I fight racism and

sexism from the curriculum," also included fighting homophobia. While all of the teachers could name some places where discussions of homosexuality came up in their classrooms, June could name many instances where homosexuality came up. If the topic of homosexuality did not come up on its own, June would bring it up because she believes that students need to see a wide range of diversity in literature. Also, June expressed a concern that because of the homophobia of their classmates, lesbian and gay students are limited in the ways that they can respond in literary discussions.

Just as other teachers in the study, June had experienced negative reactions from students regarding the revelation that an author is lesbian or gay. June continued to reveal the homosexuality of authors despite the negative reactions, and she revealed the author's homosexuality whether it had a direct influence on the work being studied or not. However, because of the negative reactions from students, June varied when she made this revelation, telling them sometimes before, sometimes during and sometimes after reading the work.

June feels comfortable teaching a work that focuses specifically on lesbian/gay concerns, and even has one in mind that she had not used prior to the interview but now includes on her reading list. However, she felt that parents might be more likely to complain about a lesbian/gay adolescent novel than they would the revelation that an author was lesbian or gay. Even though June thought that parents might complain, she notes that teaching a lesbian/gay adolescent novel would be far more effective than revealing an author's homosexuality.

June addressed derogatory comments in a different way than other teachers

had. Not only did she comment on the prejudice, but she also asked them to consider the possibility that other students in the room might be lesbian or gay. She also had many students come out to her over the years. She had possibly as many as one a year, and she had many more students that she believed to be lesbian or gay who did not formally come out to her.

Places For Lesbian/Gay Issues in Literature.

Other than Ford, the other participants in this study, even when willing, were able to include lesbian/gay studies only rarely because of a lack of knowledge on their part. On the other hand June was able to include the topic of homosexuality frequently and gave multiple examples of how she had done so:

> When I knew you were going to interview me I tried to think of places… You know if I have some way of working this in or whether it's organic. It's organic. It comes out of the discussion, and it comes up frequently. Whenever we study Tennessee Williams, I always tell the students that he is gay. When we talk about Anne Sexton, Anne Sexton had relationships with both males and females. In British Lit. of course Oscar Wilde, but Byron had relationships with men as well as women. And I want kids to know when you look at a literature book everybody is not a heterosexual. Adrienne Rich… you know I always try to talk about Adrienne Rich's view that heterosexuality is a requirement and that all the models we see in the world are heterosexual, and what kind of impact that has on… you know the population… Although I think that is changing somewhat. TV has a little bit now, but… But yes and also I think back to my original point. Every kid needs to hear different voices because it's a diverse world, and you go out into the workplace or into the world in general and there will be people who are gay and lesbian. And there will be people who are Black, people who are of other ethnic and cultural heritages, and we need to be able to get along and to be tolerant of that.

June's belief that the inclusion of homosexuality is "organic," was not shared by any

other participants in the study. Also, June's desire to fully integrate lesbian gay studies: "I want kids to know when you look at a literature book everybody is not a heterosexual," was stronger than any of the other participants. While other participants, Ford and William are two examples, spoke of the importance of teaching tolerance and conducted discussions to promote this goal, none of the other participants expressed as strong a belief as June did that the way to accomplish this goal was through the literature.

Different Voices.

June expressed a belief that it is of utmost importance that a literature class include a wide range of authors from diverse backgrounds: "One of my philosophies is that every kid should hear different voices." When discussing the similarities between the way she teaches works by other minority authors and how she teaches works by lesbian/gay authors, June again expressed her belief that the way to promote tolerance is through literature:

> I think that knowledge is a powerful thing, and you know I started off this interview telling you that I think voice…. Kids hearing different voices is important. It is one of the greatest gifts I give them that they come out of high school having heard a variety of voices from a variety of different kinds of people. And I do think that one of my responsibilities as an educator is to introduce kids and make them more tolerant. You know I mean we have to learn to get along, and I think if kids aren't exposed to other lifestyles, then they won't ever be tolerant. You know I am one of those teachers who teaches going with where the discussion goes because I am student-centered. So, I am probably not going to do a discussion, and then the next day go, "You know the author of "Those Winter Sundays" is Black… Although I do, because that poem is not from the Black experience. You know it is about a boy who realizes that he never thanked his

> father. So I want kids to know that all Black writers don't write from the Black experience. No it's the human experience. And it is the same thing I think they need to know about gay and lesbian authors. It's the human condition.

These comments, "No. It's the human experience," were very similar in some ways to the comments of Vanessa: "Let's help them realize that they have a connection to this person in some way shape or form." However, Vanessa used this point to validate her view that race, ethnicity, sexuality etc. were inconsequential. June used this philosophical point to show students how they are connected to people of a different race, ethnicity, sexuality and other markers of identity.

All of the teachers in one form or another expressed a belief that good literature should have some sort of universal quality or theme that all people could relate to. However, while June's belief that it is "one of my responsibilities as an educator is to introduce kids and make them more tolerant," Vanessa, and most of the other participants, did not indicate that part of their duty as a literature teacher was to make students more tolerant. Ford did say that he cared about "affecting the education of their humanity," however this made Ford less likely to reveal an author was lesbian or gay than more likely to although Ford did say his view on that was beginning to change.

Lesbians/Gays Left Out of Literary Discussions.

June also expressed another view that was unique among the participants in this

study. Because June is a proponent of reader response theory, at least a part of her class is devoted to students finding a personal connection with literature. She worried that lesbian/gay students were often unable to participate fully in these discussions:

> I mean they look around at all these kids, and they are talking about who they are going to the prom with and who they went out with on Saturday night, and they're different. And it is hard I think for them to discuss issues that are relevant to their lives in a classroom. And in a literature classroom that is what we are doing connecting literature to life. And so many of these kids have only so much they can say because they aren't willing, and I can certainly understand why, to say something about their partner or their problems in front of a whole classroom of kids. That would be exposing this part of themselves that some person over here might say, "yuck" and teenagers are so…. Still forming their little personalities and getting their foundations and self-esteem and all that, and I think it is very difficult for a kid to be honest about that.

Because June feels that it is unlikely that lesbian/gay students will be able to full share their personal connections to literature, she feels that they often feel alienated in the classroom. At least a part of her desire to reveal the homosexuality of the author was an attempt to let lesbian/gay students know that they are not alone.

Negative Comments.

Perhaps because of June's focus on interpersonal relationships, her way of dealing with negative comments from students regarding lesbians and gays was

somewhat different from other participants. While most of the other participants handled negative reactions by cutting off the conversation, lecturing about tolerance, or referring offending students to the rules in the student handbook, June's way of dealing with these comments was to try to raise awareness of the hurtful nature of the comments. She did this by reminding students that there might be lesbian/gay students in the room:

> We are in a world… Well I tell my kids all the time that one in ten people are gay or lesbian. And when someone says something negative in a high school classroom, I always say don't you realize that you could be talking about someone you know. And how would you feel if someone said that about you. Because I always want them to think that there is probably someone in the classroom that is gay or lesbian. In my second period class there are two gay kids in there. I am absolutely certain of it. So if someone says that, I want them to know that they could be talking about [Bill] and what a stab that would be.

This approach is consistent with June's overall philosophy. She believes that her message will be stronger if she appeals to the students' sense of humanity than if she points out that it violates rules.

Revealed Homosexuality of Authors Despite Negative Reactions.

June continued to reveal an author's homosexuality because she felt that the good that could be done from this outweighed any uncomfortable feelings she or others in the class might have about the comments. She gave one example of how these discussions were sometimes uncomfortable:

> Last year I had a kid named [Scott] who is very bright, but one of

> the most conservative kids I have ever taught. And we had a discussion about gay/lesbian literature. I can't remember what the context was, but it was the entire period. I mean kids stayed after class and so [Scot] stayed until everyone else left, and said, "I want you to know that you give more time to the kids who support your view that being gay or lesbian is O.K., than you do to kids like me that think they should burn in hell," or whatever… he said something very… I don't know, but he is one of those kids who thinks that AIDS is the curse on homosexuals for their lifestyle.

Despite the fact that the student here feels that he has been wronged by June because she doesn't give as much time for him to air negative views about lesbians and gays as she does to those who are against this kind of prejudice, he still feels that June is open to hearing his criticism of her discussion practices.

When To Reveal the Homosexuality of an Author.

Because of students like the conservative young man that stayed after class and because June feels that part of her responsibility as a teacher is to combat racism, sexism, and homophobia, she questioned when she should reveal an author's homosexuality. June worried that telling students before they read the work might make the homophobic students reject the work entirely. Speaking of the student who stayed after in her class, June said:

> If I said the first day that Tennessee Williams is gay, then he would not pay any attention to… anything that happened and I wouldn't be able to reach him. And so I do think that with some kids it's better, and I wonder if… and I hope this isn't true… This is what I hold on to… That if I tell them afterwards, it becomes more of this thing, "Well, they are just like me. He has the same emotions and feelings that I have they just happen to be about another man," and so ummm… So I think… I hope… Well I hope because that… I think that literature is the way to see those things, and I know it is. Maybe

> not for every kid… But it was for me. Literature opened me up to things that I would have never gotten to see in rural Mississippi ever. I think and I hope… and Willa Cather is a good example of that… The stories we have in our book by Willa Cather are, let's see, "The Sculptor's Funeral" where the body comes home. He was a poet. He was an artist. And then "Wagner Matinee" where the woman is living her life in a rural setting, and she isn't touched by art. Music is what has been eliminated in her life. She has lived… She's had to live with that part of her life shut down. And I want kids to read that story first, before they know that Cather is a lesbian. Because I want them to see that all of us shut down parts of our life in certain situations, and we all have things we feel like we can't share with other people and of course for her that's was her thing. I mean that was one of her things. I mean frontier women and all that… but that was one of the things that for her time… as a woman that wasn't something that she was, you know, able to go out and be open about. And I want kids to make that connection with that kind of thing.

More than any other participant in this study, as June shows here, she is very much focused on using literature to change the beliefs of her students. She suggests that by withholding the information that Cather is a lesbian, students will connect to her writings in their own way. Once those connections have been made, June is hopeful that her students will be able to see Cather as very much like themselves.

Despite the fact that June asserts here that revealing an author's homosexuality might be best done after the students have read the work, she actually has done it at different times, and suggests that there might be times when it would best to reveal it before or during the reading of the work:

> I do it different ways. It comes up in the discussion. I almost never give a five or ten minute lecture about an author before we read the work. I usually… I would say mostly read the work and after the first time we discuss it then we talk a little about the author. Because I think literature stands on it's own, but I also think that the things the writer brings to the piece of literature just like the things we bring to the literature certainly affect the beliefs and the content of it.

While June expresses the same belief that most participants in this study stated, "I

think literature stands on it's own," this belief did not lead her to the same conclusion that some of the other participants expressed. Some of the others, such as Vanessa, felt that if literature stands on its own, it shouldn't matter the race, gender, or sexuality of the author. However, June countered her belief that literature stands on its own with her reader response philosophy that what the writer and the reader both bring affect the beliefs and the content of it. Because she saw both philosophies as important, June approached the revelation in different ways.

> So I would say I do it in a variety of ways… Sometimes with Tennessee Williams… I tell you in these honors classes the kids… some kid will know, and so oftentimes the kid will say, "Wasn't he a homosexual?" and then it will bring about a discussion…. Particularly with Tennessee Williams… When we are talking about Blanche… I let them meet Blanche Dubois in A Streetcar Named Desire, and then I say that Tennessee Williams said there is a little bit of Blanche in all of us. And that usually brings about a discussion.

June's response here is reminiscent of Ford's discussion of the same work. However, Ford felt that the best way to bring about a discussion of homosexuality through the discussion of this novel was to talk about a character that is really not in the play, but is briefly mentioned, Blanche's husband who killed himself because of his inability to deal with his homosexuality. June felt that the best way to bring about a discussion of homosexuality was through the biography of the author:

> I like to tell the kids… And I can't remember if I do this every year… When I was in college when I was working on my master's thesis about Tennessee Williams, I read his memoirs. And in it he discusses Frank Murlow, his longtime partner who died of lung cancer. And you know if you had deleted the names and had just read an excerpt of this book, you would have thought that it was any couple. I mean it was the same isssues that heterosexual couples have. And the fact that it was two men made absolutely no difference in the love story in the angst, in the passion, and I just cried when I read it [begins crying] because it is just so tender. I mean he loved this

> man and he watched him die [still crying], so I do cry with my kids. But I like for my kids to know that. Because, yeah, they have this immediate aversion whey you say Tennessee Williams is gay. And they go oooh yuck or whatever, and, I mean it was just like any other person. It was the same kind of feeling that they have for the person they go to the prom with. And I like for them to know that because ummmm because I think it makes them connect. It is another way for them to connect with a writer. So with Tennessee Williams, it usually comes out after we talk about Blanche. She is uhhh… Well she really is a victim of her times in many ways.

This desire of June's to change students life is not strictly emotional, as it might seem at first glance. June combines the emotional approach she brings as she speaks of the sympathy and empathy she has for Tennessee Williams and Blanche with an intellectual approach as well. By pointing out that Blanche is a victim of her time, just as Tennessee Williams was, she explores a theme that is central to the play. In doing this, June feels it is likely that her students will be better able to see how the work connects to their own life and will possibly view the work as more memorable and meaningful.

While June felt the best way to approach Williams' work was to talk about it as the discussion took place or after the reading of the work, she dealt with the sexuality of other authors in a variety of ways:

> Anne Sexton, we read her first because she has so many poems about being a mother and about being a woman and so usually that is something I tell them because she had such a crazy life. Oscar Wilde I probably tell them first, I would bet, because <u>The Importance of Being Earnest</u> is a different play if you know you know his history. And Adrienne Rich, I usually begin with something that is not so political with her because she often pisses kids off because she is so hostile with her poems. Her feminist poems like "Rape" and "Trying to Talk with a Man" and stuff like that… So I usually start of with something like "Storm Warnings" which is a regular poem about emotion turmoil and kids love that. And get them hooked on her and then lead them into the radical poems and let them see the sort of the scope of her poetry. Because I think sometimes if they get hooked on

it, then the lesbianism doesn't seem…

June really only gives one case of where she would tell the students in advance about an author's homosexuality, Oscar Wilde. In this case, the reason is a literary one: "The Importance of Being Earnest is a different play if you know his history." When there is not an obvious literary reason for doing so, June suggests the best way might be to tell the students after the work or at least after they have read some of the work. She recounts the story of teaching a racist student and draws parallels to the teaching of works by lesbians and gays:

> I remember this is not about gay and lesbian issues… But I remember teaching the Harlem Renaissance poems to a kid at [Johnson High], and there was this… this kid that was very hostile towards blacks. And the first poem that we read, he had this piece of paper, and he wrote the word Nigger in gigantic letters on this piece of paper and slid it across the table. I had tables… and slid it across the table so I would see. You know… and so… he was instantly… Literature was a block, and so I wasn't reaching him because he had this block. And so I like to do it in a variety of ways because I think that sometimes kids… You know, can get hooked and realize, "Hey wait a minute." It is like reading Shakespeare, the sonnets and you don't tell them at first that they're written to a man. You know they think that "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day" or "When in Disgrace With Fortune and Men's Eyes I Alone Beweep My Outcast State"… I mean they don't know that it was written to a man, and so I wait until we have talked about it a little bit, and then tell them that. Sometimes I wonder if because I am dealing with a lot of different levels of kids… Kids that are totally accepting… Well maybe not totally accepting, but more accepting, and kids who would say uhhh Tennessee Williams is gay I am not going to pay any attention to what he says… and so I think in order to reach kids, I need to do it in a variety of ways.

June's experiences with the negative reactions of students in the past has changed how she approaches the literature. Despite this fact, June still chose to reveal the sexuality of the author but now did so in a different way. In a sense, June's way of

handling the revelation of the author's sexuality is somewhat subversive. She first allows the students to make a connection with the work, and then disrupts their preconceived ideas by introducing new information that will make them challenge their already formed ideas.

Comfort Level With Lesbian/Gay Adolescent Novel.

Like the other participants in the study, June was not currently teaching a work that focused on lesbian/gay characters. However, her feelings about teaching one were somewhat different than the other teachers in the study. While some of the other teachers said that they would be comfortable teaching a work that focused on lesbian/gay characters, they did so with the caveat that they would have to feel that the work was of high quality. June did not express any concerns about the quality of the work, and felt that such a work might be highly effective:

> I think… And maybe this may be hopeful on my part… I think kids would be blown away by what it feels like to be a gay teenager in a homophobic environment. And when I think about different schools, I would have to say that all of them are very unfriendly to gay classmates. You know… you always have some asshole who says … regardless of what kind of classroom it is…you know regular or honors… and so I would have to steel myself for their reaction.

Unlike Clare, who felt that honors classes tended to be less homophobic, June felt that both groups were equally homophobic. Also, while June hoped for a good reaction from the students, one that would raise their awareness of lesbian/gay people, she feared a negative reaction. She compared the resistance she thought she might encounter with teaching a lesbian/gay work to the resistance she saw when the first attempts were made to integrate the curriculum with other minority authors:

> These statistics are probably old, but I… In women's literature, I read some years ago that 98% of the literature in textbooks is white male… Not in our new textbook… And when more than 10% of a curriculum gets to be multi-cultural, that white males have a terrible reaction. And an example is Kate Chopin's, The Awakening… such hostility… [Sarah] came to me and said, "You know, The Awakening still comes up in our discussions"… She said, "Why is that? Why are these men, these boys, so angry? They talk about how stupid she is, and how she should have been happy with her life." And I asked her who it was because… Basically they are so angry that in order to be who she is, she has to leave her kids, and that pisses them off. They don't like that because it is so much stepping out of the traditionally role of a female, that it makes them angry, and they cannot get over that. And the same thing would happen with a gay or lesbian novel. I mean there would be kids that would be so incredibly angry. Every year I take a barrage of, "ohhh ohhhh" about "The Awakening", and they tell me how much they hate it. And they get so angry about doing these pieces, and this is a female… you know… But too bad. It is an important work as far as the development of women's literature. And I think the same thing would be true of a gay or lesbian novel. I think it would be… I think every teacher would have to be able to handle it. It would be like the masturbation scene in The Chocolate War. But literature is controversial. It is.

June's distress over her experience with The Awakening, gives her some concern about what the reaction would be if she taught a work that was focused on lesbian/gay characters. Because she believes that women's issues are somewhat more socially acceptable by the mainstream than discussions of homosexuality and because some of her students still react negatively to this feminist work so many months after the teaching of it, she speculates that students might be even more adamant in their hostile reactions to a lesbian/gay adolescent work. June's fears about how the teachers might handle a lesbian/gay work are illustrated with her example of the masturbation scene in The Chocolate War. While many of the English teachers have taught the work, there has been a wide range of results. Some have taught it without receiving any parent complaints and have felt that it was a

valuable experience for the students. However, other teachers have drawn fire from angry parents and have quit teaching the work because of the controversy.

Lesbian/Gay Adolescent Work More Effective.

Despite June's fears that a lesbian/gay work might bring about negative reactions from students, she thought that such a work would offer greater teaching opportunities than just the revelation of an author being lesbian or gay. While she acknowledged that revealing an author's homosexuality was "safer" for the teacher, she felt like this revelation did not give the students enough insight into the lesbian/gay experience. When asked if she thought it would be easier to reveal an author's homosexuality than it would to teach a lesbian/gay novel, she replied:

> Yeah it would be easier, but it would be more effective if it came from the literature. Because in a way telling about the author's life, because I am telling them, I am the one that knows about it, that's an intellectual kind of thing. And I think if they read it, you know, I think we could have more of an impact because each kid could have a different view of it. It would depend on what the piece is, but hopefully they could find a little piece of something in the work that they could connect to.

Again, this is consistent with June's teaching philosophy. She feels that to connect to a piece of literature only on an intellectual level is not enough, and she wants her students to connect on an emotional level as well. Her belief that the students could find something to connect with, is also a part of her teaching strategy. She believes that once students have made the connection, they can see the commonality of human experience rather than the differences. Again, her words echo some of the same statements that Vanessa and Ford made. However, despite Vanessa's belief that students can and need to connect across lines of difference, she didn't feel

comfortable with teaching a lesbian/gay work. Like Ford who wanted to teach a gay work, Becoming A Man, June stated in the interview that she would add a gay work, Breakfast With Scot to her reading list this year to see what the reaction from students would be.

No Fear of Parents.

Despite the fact that June had been talking about lesbian/gay studies in her class for many years, she never had any real fear of negative reactions from parents, administrators or members of the community. She had never had any complaints about including lesbian/gay studies in the past, and while she says she thinks about the possibility of complaints more now than in the past, she doesn't really fear them:

> Literature is controversial. You know, first year teachers I caution them about things like The Chocolate War and the masturbation scene… and stuff like that… because I don't know if they have the experience. But as a first year, second year teacher, I never even gave those things a second thought. I had this kid come up to me when I first started teaching and said you know you talk so openly about gays and lesbians, we are all wondering if you are lesbian. But somebody said you date men, and we are all confused about you. [laughter] And he was the only Jewish kid in the entire school, so I think he was looking for another outsider position because he was clearly was an outsider. It was very waspish. You know this is funny, I think that I worry more about it now than I did then because as a first year teacher I was so wide open. I don't think I am worried about it… I am more conscious of it now than I was then because I want to be more conscious about the things I communicate to kids… You know… And I guess after I went to that thing you organized, that GLSTN workshop, I realized how much more troubled gay and lesbian kids are statistically. And so it has made more conscious of making sure I do that and that I have those kinds of discussions because I think they need to be there.

While June vacillates somewhat in whether she is more worried now than when she

first started teaching, her fear is not of negative reactions from parents. Her fear is that if she doesn't have these conversations, lesbian/gay students may suffer. She mentions a conference she attended organized by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Teachers Network. At the time, I was co-chair of the chapter of the local group. June, Lily, and Clare, all attended the workshop, and June was particular moved by a group of teenagers that spoke about the homophobia they had felt in high school. While June had been talking about lesbian/gay studies for many years prior to hearing these students speak, she now became even more conscious of the problems faced by lesbian/gay teens.

Derogatory Comments.

Just as her responses to the other questions varied considerably from the other participants, June's way of handling derogatory comments was somewhat unique as well. Rather than refer them to the rules in the student handbook as Clare had done, lecture them about tolerance as Ford had done, June appealed to their sense of humanity. June feels that this is a more effective way of dealing with the topic of homosexuality than other methods she might have used. In her usually optimistic spirit and her desire to see only the best in her students, she fervently believes that students would stop making derogatory comments if they realized they might be harming others.

Treatment of Students Who Come Out.

Unlike the other participants, the numbers of students who have come out to June is overwhelmingly high. She estimates that possibly as many as one a year for twenty-six years, and there have been other students who did not come out whom she believed to be lesbian or gay. In fact, it was possibly the first student that came out to her, that was responsible for shaping some of June's attitudes towards homosexuality:

> I wanted to think about the first student who ever came out to me, and it was my first year teaching, and her name is [Lisa]. And [Lisa] was just a terrific kid, very smart, very achieving, the perfect student never did anything wrong. If there was homework due, I always got hers ahead of time… just a real, real, great kid. And she had an affection for me from the get go. She lived across the street from the school, and she always wanted to talk to me. And we continued the relationship after I left Natchez. Now she didn't tell me my first year teaching that she was lesbian… I don't think she knew… She was in ninth grade… I made a point of always seeing that child every time I went home to see my mother. I always had lunch with her. I don't remember the circumstances, but at some point she told me she was a lesbian and told me her how her uncle had been sexually abusing her for years and threatened her. And she wanted advice about whether to tell her parents or not… and I of course wanted to tear him apart. We went through that and she did eventually tell her parents.

June was clearly moved by this experience which took place in 1976. Because her experience with the hardships that this student faced, June gained some insight into what the lesbian/gay experience might be like. June described another coming out story when she talked about the importance of teaching in her life:

> It must have been 1990, and the phone rang one day out of the clear blue, and this male voice said is this Ms. Smith, and I said yes. And he said is this the June Smith that taught at _____ high school. And I said yes, and he said well you probably don't remember me, but my name is [Chris Smith]. And I said of course I remember you. We went to Mexico together, and he said yeah right and I lost my camera. And I said right, and he said well I am in New York now and

> I am doing theater hair. And uhh… He said… ummm… I said tell me about your life. He had joined the navy and done lots of other things. And he said the reason I am calling is I'm gay and I never told you that in high school. And he said I went into the navy and got married and tried to deny it all. But he said I never told you, but I always knew I could tell you [starts to cry]. I am going to cry. And he said it was important to me to know that there was one person I could tell that to. If I ever needed to or wanted to, I knew I could look you up in the phone book and tell you that. And that's the kind of stuff… That's enough to keep me teaching for twenty years. That's the kind of stuff you want as a teacher… The connections you make… It is for me… Knowing that somebody in the world cares about you as an individual, that's important. So that's the kind of thing that keeps me in teaching.

Perhaps what makes this story even more powerful than it already is, is the fact that it was not elicited by a question about students coming out. This story was the response to a question during the life history interview, when June was asked, "What is important about your work?" For me, it seemed clear that the extremely high numbers of students who have come out to June and the powerful coming out stories she has to tell are due to the way she integrates lesbian/gay studies into her classroom discussions. June wasn't sure this was totally responsible at first, but then came to the conclusion that it might be: "I think that is one part of it. It has to be the literature because if we didn't have those discussions my views about gays and lesbians might not come out."

# CHAPTER 6

# CROSS CASE ANALYSIS

While the previous chapter highlighted the perceptions of one principal informant to illustrate each category, in this chapter I will use the perceptions of secondary informants to demonstrate that the themes that emerged in the perceptions of the primary informants were not isolated cases. Instead, these or very similar perceptions were shared by at least some other members of the department. I have divided the secondary informants based on the perceptions they shared into the same categories as I divided the principal informants. Because these categories are not fixed, I have included the perceptions of two of the secondary informants, Lily and Elizabeth, in two different categories. Lily and Elizabeth expressed at times some of the same perceptions as Vanessa, but at other times they seemed much more like Ford in their stance. Therefore, I have used their perceptions in both the category of the uncomfortable and unlikely and in the category of likely but uncomfortable. William, Ruth, and Sylvia all shared similar perceptions to Clare, and so I have included them in the category, likely but uninformed. Only one other participant shared similar views to June, so this informant, Sally, I have included in the category comfortable and informed. Throughout this chapter, using cross-case analysis I will

show the similarities between the perceptions of the secondary informants and those of the primary informants.

Uncomfortable and Unlikely

Vanessa was one of the very few people in the department that I felt would never be comfortable dealing with lesbian/gay studies in literature or dealing with lesbian/gay students. I felt that there was very little likelihood that Vanessa would have a student come out to her because it was clear from her treatment of the literature that she was uncomfortable with the subject in general. Another factor that might make lesbian/gay students reluctant to tell Vanessa about their sexuality is her strong religious background. While Vanessa speaks of her desire to show students that she is open to different ways of thinking other than her own, lesbian/gay students might fear talking to her about their sexuality because they might be unsure what her reaction might be.

I am reluctant to see Vanessa as simply homophobic. The contradictions that I discerned result from her attempt to reconcile her strong religious beliefs with her desire to be tolerant of others. She has demonstrated this in many ways. She was the only person who was completely open about the fact that she was uncomfortable with the topic of homosexuality. Despite this fact, she still agreed to be a part of this study even though she knew it meant discussing her views with an openly gay man.

Fear of Parents.

Also, some of Vanessa's concerns were voiced by others whom I did not feel were particularly homophobic. Their fear was not, at least entirely, of homosexuality. Their fear came from the threat of parents and administrators. Vanessa voiced this concern when she said, "It's a touchy issue because kids have very strong parental or their own personal opinions about certain sensitive issues, and I wouldn't want to feel like I am telling them how to believe or feel."

Another teacher, Elizabeth, expressed this same concern. Both, Vanessa and Elizabeth, expressed the belief that parents would disapprove of the discussion of homosexuality in the classroom, and therefore both felt it was a topic they should shy away from. Elizabeth, who like Vanessa had also been a teacher of the year, told the story of her first year of teaching. She explained that she had been teaching The Crucible, and she brought up the issue of McCarthyism. A student's parent called the principal, and Elizabeth was called into the principal's office:

> All of the sudden I am told by my principal that I am not supposed to be talking about politics in an English class, and it was a little bit frightening. I think when you are a young teacher, and you get into a situation, you know in your head and heart that things are fine. But you still want to keep your job, and you don't want to get fired. So issues that have anything to do with anything that people would refer to as controversial …

Elizabeth went on to express how this fear of controversy shaped the way she viewed gay and lesbian studies in the classroom; "So in terms of gay and lesbian issues, the same thing applies." Clearly, she felt that the discussion of homosexuality would create the same type of controversy that her discussion of McCarthyism had created.

She felt certain that the school system shared her belief that homosexuality should not be discussed. When asked if she felt comfortable with classroom discussions surrounding the topic of homosexuality, she replied, "Until recently, I felt that there was a tacit or practically written rule that says don't talk about sex in class." Like Vanessa, Elizabeth viewed discussion of homosexuality as being about sex and not about identity. She further expressed her belief that the school system deliberately avoided this topic; "They (the school system) just haven't seen fit to put it in the curriculum, and they are scared to put it in the curriculum." She indicated that until the school system expressly called for the discussion of homosexuality she would feel a certain amount of apprehension about discussing the topic in class. While Elizabeth's fear was much the same as Vanessa, the two diverged when it came to issues of the curriculum. As shown here, Elizabeth felt that if lesbian/gay studies were a part of the curriculum, she would feel comfortable discussing them. However, Vanessa felt that even if the curriculum called for the discussion of these topics, she would still feel uncomfortable.

However, both teachers were comfortable discussing other social issues not necessarily covered in the curriculum. Vanessa stated that she felt comfortable talking about mental illness and feminist issues with her discussion of The Bell Jar. Elizabeth also indicated that she was very amenable to discussing issues of feminism. While discussing the methods she uses to teach My Antonia, she stated that she would not tell the students that Willa Cather was a lesbian. However, she stated, "One thing I do let them talk about, and I will bring it up if they don't, is why a woman in the late 1800's would prefer to be a man." Clearly, this teacher felt

confident that discussing feminist issues would not engender the same controversy that discussing homosexuality would.

Another teacher, Lily, echoed many of the fears of Elizabeth and Vanessa. She also expressed her belief that discussion of gay and lesbian literature was controversial; " I think you run a fine line in any classroom dealing with controversial issues, and like it or not, I think this is still a controversial issue." Lily, like Elizabeth, also expressed a feeling that teachers might lose their jobs if they discussed homosexuality in class; "People don't feel strongly about the issue because it doesn't affect them. They (teachers) are not willing to put their security on the line for something that is so controversial it is sure to draw fire." All three teachers felt very strongly that the school system would not support them if they discussed the topic of homosexuality.

Importance of Author's Biography.

Vanessa expressed a feeling that the details about the author's life were not of much importance in the teaching of literature: "Not too many authors do I um… Well I give very little background and talk more about the context and the movement in American literature and the time period and why he wrote. I don't get into personal issues." Both Elizabeth and Lily expressed a strong belief that literature has universal themes, that a work of art stands alone, and that because of this the biographical facts of an author's life are inconsequential. Because of this belief, both Elizabeth and at first Lily stated that knowing that an author is lesbian or gay is not really important to the study of literature.

Elizabeth was adamant throughout the interview that students did not need to know about the author's life:

> This may be an old fashioned view of literature. But my personal view of literature is that a piece of literature should stand on its own. And although it might be interesting to know things about the person who wrote it, that's not what is important. It's not important to know when you read My Antonia that Willa Cather is a lesbian. I don't think it's important when you read The Grapes of Wrath to know that Steinbeck was a communist.

Her feelings that literature should stand on its own strengthened her belief that this is a topic that she should shy away from.

Because Elizabeth sees very little real value in knowing about the author's life, she is not going to risk having a book banned or causing herself problems by addressing controversial aspects of the author's background. As she stated, "I say this about everything. I say, 'it's very interesting to know about an author's background and to understand the context and the fabric of society of when that person was living , but I think that is icing on the cake.'" Because she feels strongly that knowing about the author's perspective is additional, but not necessary material, Elizabeth concludes that it does not need to be addressed.

Lily at first also expressed the belief that literature is universal, and so students have no real need to know about the sexual orientation of an author. She stated:

> Literature is a jumping off point for discussion. I'm not sure you know that if a teacher teaches Walt Whitman and says, "Ok Whitman was a homosexual, Whitman was gay," if that makes his work more wonderful than it already is. Surely if you read some of his poetry, you're hard pressed not to figure it out. I think back to when I was in school and studying all these things, and whether the issue of the author's sexuality came up or not, and I don't think it did. But it didn't diminish the work of literature.

With this first statement, Lily seemed confident that discussing this aspect of an author's life was unnecessary, but as the interview continued, she began to change her stance somewhat.

When asked if she would use the same standard she had expressed about Whitman's work when teaching Langston Hughes, she began drawing different conclusions. Asked to hypothesize on whether or not she would tell students that Hughes was Black when discussing his themes of alienation, she said that she would tell them about his race but would go beyond that to broaden the discussion of alienation to make the theme more universal.

In a follow up question I asked Lily if she were exploring themes of alienation in the works of Oscar Wilde or Willa Cather, if she would she mention their sexual orientation. At first she was hesitant to say that she would. But as the conversation continued she stated:

> I'm hedging the question. Sure, I guess sexual orientation creates alienation for you in society. And it may be a worse alienation than the color of your skin because no one can tell that you have any reason to be alienated. You know, I don't know what I would do. I think I would use it as an opportunity to …. You know I am real into pluralism in education. I think I would use that as an opportunity to talk about alienation created by sexuality.

These words demonstrate a change from the views she expressed earlier in the interview and show an entirely different attitude than that of Vanessa and Elizabeth. While Lily came to a different conclusion during the interview process, Elizabeth and Vanessa remained adamant that the biography of the author is not an important part of the literary discussion. While Vanessa recognizes that this is contradicted by her comments about the way she teaches Plath's work and while Elizabeth feels that

it might be included as a little extra detail, “the icing on the cake,” both held fast to their belief that a work of art stands on its own.

Contradictory Feelings About Inclusion of Lesbian/Gay Subject Matter.

Although Lily and Elizabeth shared some of the same fears as Vanessa, they diverged in one significant way from Vanessa. Lily and Elizabeth both expressed strong beliefs that homosexuality should be discussed, but they both felt that they had to avoid the subject of homosexuality because of the possibility of controversy. Both feared that parents or members of the community might complain if they discovered that teachers were discussing the subject of homosexuality. However, if students brought up the topic Elizabeth and Lily would allow limited discussion of homosexuality. Since they had never received any complaints when students brought the topic up, Elizabeth and Lily believe that the best way to handle the situation is to let the students bring up the topic. However, as previously shown, Vanessa was uncomfortable even if the students brought the topic up.

Elizabeth shared some of the contradictory feelings that Vanessa expressed. She was clearly conflicted in her attitudes about the discussion of homosexuality. She stated:

> I try to let people express their viewpoints. I try to be fair. But I don’t encourage a lot of talk about sex. In other words I might joke, just quickly, but I don’t encourage a whole lot of talk about issues that could come back to haunt me by parents who might become upset that English class is a place where this went on. Although, I do feel that English class is where it should go on. So, I try to both discourage and encourage, and that is very difficult to do.

Not only does she makes the assumption that identifying an author as lesbian or gay

would be controversial, but she also concludes that this revelation would make the discussion turn into a discussion about sex rather than identity.

Lily also asserted contradictory feelings about the topic of homosexuality. She felt even more strongly that homosexuality should be addressed, but was also hesitant to address the topic because of fear or repercussions. She stated:

> I am not so sure that by ignoring and staying away from the issue, we as educators don't inadvertently perpetuate prejudice because it is such a hush hush issue. Now gay and lesbian literature - Would we teach Rita Mae Brown's, Ruby Fruit Jungle to a whole class full of students. I don't know how I feel about that. The media center - It ought not to be a decision we have to think about. It's like any other piece of literature. We ought to be able to say we are going to discuss this girl's coming of age and the discovery of her sexuality, the same way we study Holden Caufield and The Catcher in the Rye or any other literary figure. Unfortunately the sign of our times is such that the Christian Coalition is so strong on issues today and has such a foothold in the legislature that not many people would feel comfortable doing it.

Although Lily felt that discussions about homosexuality had a place in classroom discussions, like Elizabeth, she felt conflicted about what should be done and what the reality of the situation would allow. She articulated this feeling again when she said, "On the one hand we have this push for pluralism, and on the other hand we have this group saying wait a minute we don't want our children to learn about this. I'm not sure what the answer is." Because Lily has been a long time proponent of multicultural education this topic raised particularly strong feelings for her.

When discussing the sexuality of authors and whether that should be a part of the classroom discussion, Lily's feelings were somewhat different from those of the Vanessa and Elizabeth because she did have a much stronger desire to address the topic of homosexuality. However, like Vanessa and Elizabeth, she stated that she

would not bring up an author's orientation, even though, she did feel that it was important and relevant. Although at first she was reluctant to embrace the idea that identifying an author as gay or lesbian is a valid part of literature studies, after sorting through her feelings during the interview, she came to the conclusion when asked again about whether she would ever feel that she could identify an author as lesbian or gay, "No. I probably wouldn't, and yes, I probably should." Once again she expressed a feeling that if teachers brought this up as a topic, they might be subjected to angry calls from parents or from members or the religious community. She feared that this anger might lead to some sort of action against the teacher.

Although Lily and Elizabeth shared much in common with Vanessa, Lily was probably closer to Vanessa's position in the sense that Lily was more likely to always avoid the topic of homosexuality. Lily's comment, "No, I probably wouldn't, and yes, I probably should," indicates her feeling that, like Vanessa, see would most likely never be comfortable with the idea of discussing lesbian/gay studies. Elizabeth, on the other hand, not only was more likely than the other two, as indicated by the fact that after our interview she did introduce the topic. Shortly after our discussion, she taught My Antonia again. She decided that she would tell the students that Willa Cather was a lesbian and see what happened. She was delighted to find out that she had no parents or administrators complain, and she felt like the students handled the discussion well, and it had opened up the novel to the exploration of even more themes than had earlier discussions of the novel. So while Elizabeth shared many of Vanessa's fears, she might be more correctly placed in the second group, the likely but uncomfortable. It is more difficult to decide where to

place Lily in terms of the categories I have established here. While on the one hand, she seems unlikely to ever include the topic, she has a strong desire to do so.

Likely But Uncomfortable

Ford, while much more eager to include lesbian and gay studies in his class than Vanessa, did share some things in common with her. They both feared parental or administrative objections to including discussions of homosexuality. They both felt that lesbian/gay students who came out were in need of counseling, although they differed on what type of counseling would be appropriate. Vanessa felt that the lesbian/gay students coming out must be having an "identity crisis" and were in need of psychological help. Ford, on the other hand, felt that the counseling need not necessarily be of a psychological nature. Rather, he felt this counseling might be conducted by anyone who could assure the students that being lesbian or gay was acceptable.

The differences between Ford's approach and Vanessa's were striking. Ford felt much more strongly that lesbian/gay studies was important. Vanessa was much less likely to see lesbian/gay studies as relevant. While Ford had included some discussion of lesbian/gay topics, he was somewhat uncomfortable doing so because he feared repercussions from parents or administrators. In this sense, he was much closer to Elizabeth and Lily who also expressed fears about including the topic, but who both felt that the topic should be included. Lily demonstrated her belief that lesbian/gay studies should be included with her comment regarding telling students about the homosexuality of authors, "No. I probably wouldn't, and yes, I probably

should." Elizabeth demonstrated her belief that lesbian/gay stuides were important when she changed her previous practice and told students that Willa Cather was a lesbian.

Negative Reaction From Students.

Another perception that Ford, Elizabeth, and Lily all shared was their fear that students would view lesbian/gay subjects in a negative light. As Ford said, "I have been kind of afraid that that will turn people off, and they will just stop thinking about the issues." Elizabeth expressed similar concerns about creating negative images of lesbians and gay men. When teaching My Antonia at first she thought that Cather's method of looking at Antonia by creating a male narrator had nothing to do with Cather's lesbianism. (As mentioned earlier, she later changed her view about this.) Because at that point she thought that Cather's lesbianism wasn't relevant, she only saw one incident in the novel as involving homosexuality:

> There is not gay lesbian going on in that book. Not really. Unless you count Peter and Pavel. And that's why I wouldn't want to bring it up. Peter and Pavel threw the bride and groom out of the sled so they could survive, and they were hounded out of Russia for it. So it's not like I would want to use them. Like here's our happy, gay couple. They threw the bride and groom out of the sled.

Clearly, Elizabeth was concerned that if she identified Peter and Pavel as a gay couple, it would create a negative association and perpetuate stereotypes the students may already have.

Lily also expressed this feeling that the gays and lesbians depicted in literature and the gay and lesbian authors might not provide good examples. Her feelings were

however, somewhat more ambivalent than Ford's:

> You have to be real careful what you do. The media and the movies have so portrayed gays and lesbians that while you are trying to create role models, you can do damage. If you look at the roles of gay men in the movies… there is a documentary of gays in the movies and the images are of very effeminate men. You know, real campy. So all you saw in the movies for a long time were real twinkies. You know, there weren't really any positive role models.

The concerns about the quality of the role models they would be providing if they identified these authors and characters contributes to their reasons for being hesitant about gay and lesbian studies as a topic for classroom discussion. Not only do these teachers have to be fearful of parents, administrators and conservative groups, they also fear that they may be doing the wrong thing for their gay and lesbian students. All of these factors work together to create a paradoxical situation. These three teachers believe they should address gay and lesbian studies in the classroom, but they also feel that they cannot do that with impunity, and they are uncertain about whether doing it would be helpful or harmful to the gay and lesbian students.

Treatment of Students Who Come Out.

Although Vanessa and Ford were very different from each other in their

attitudes towards how they would approach a student who came out, they both shared some things in common with Lily's and Elizabeth's approach.

While Vanessa was uncertain about what she might do if a student came out, Elizabeth dealt with the only a student who came out to her with an attitude of indifference. This student came out because other students were teasing him about being gay. She approached the situation by talking to him outside the classroom:

> I told him, you know honey, to me sex is just something people do, and it embarrasses me if it is a man/man, man/woman, or whatever it is. I just think that sex is extremely private. It just tickles the heck out of me, and I just find it extremely amusing. And I said, whatever you turn out to be, you're O.K., and you shouldn't let these people bother you.

While the student was obviously harassed by his peers severely enough for Elizabeth to feel she had to address this topic with him, when she did, her way of handling it was to tell him that his sexual identity did not matter. Evidently, his sexual identity did make a difference in the eyes of his peers because it caused them to treat him in a different manner than they might treat other students. Some of Elizabeth's comments such as, "You shouldn't let these people bother you," must have been comforting to the student. However other comments such as, "Whatever you turn out to be, you're O.K.," might cause some distress. Elizabeth's use of the term, "whatever you turn out to be," dismisses the idea that the child already "is" and implies that the student is incapable at this age of deciding about his sexual identity.

Remarkably, the words this teacher used in her discussion with the student were quite similar to the words she used when describing her feelings about discussing an author's orientation. When discussing whether she would discuss themes that had do

with an author's sexuality, she stated:

> It used to be that if anybody brought up anything to do with that (homosexuality), it was negative, and everybody would just sit there. I would have to be the one to say, folks what difference does who someone sleeps with… what difference does someone's sexual orientation have to… what are you afraid of? And I would be the only one saying it.

Through this teacher's words it is clear that she is not a homophobe. However, her comments reveal that her attitude towards homosexuality is that it is a sexual issue, not an issue of identity. Rather than recognizing that a student's sexual identity might have a big impact on his/her life or that an author's sexual identity might have a huge impact on the perspective and themes of the work, she chooses to ignore the importance of the topic.

Lily shared some similarities with Elizabeth, but she had a somewhat different attitude towards identifying gay and lesbian authors, and consequently had a different attitude towards students who came out to her. Lily probably shared more similarities with Ford than she did with Elizabeth, and Lily's stance was very different from Vanessa's although Vanessa and Lily both believed that counseling might be in order.

When discussing how she had handled and would handle students who came out to her, Lily stated:

> My first reaction would be to ask how are you dealing with this? And you are very young and maybe going through a questioning period and may end up on the other side before it's over with, and do you have friends? How have you handled this with your parents? Do they know and are you aware of the Youth Pride group? There are people you can talk to. Probably, if they were having emotional problems dealing with it, I would refer to a counselor. I think I would have to say, you know there are lots of other gays and lesbians in the

world. You are not alone.

Lily's response is like Elizabeth's and Ford's in the sense that she would try to reassure the child: "You are not alone." Also, just as Elizabeth suggested, "Whatever you turn out to be," Lily would state, "You are very young and maybe going through a questioning period and may end up on the other side before it's over with." Lily's words here also share something in common with Vanessa. Vanessa felt, "if you are struggling with your sexuality that is an identity crisis." Lily indicates with her words, "You are very young and maybe going through a questioning period," that she also feels that a child's coming out may indicate an identity crisis.

Comfort Level With Teaching a Lesbian/Gay Adolescent Work.

Vanessa, Ford, Elizabeth, and Lily all expressed concern about teaching a lesbian/gay adolescent work. A large part of this fear had to do with their fear of parent complaints. When asked if she would ever be comfortable teaching a work that focused on lesbian/gay concerns, Vanessa responded, "to be honest with you… I don't know." This was very different from Ford who wanted to teach a work that focused on gay topics that primarily concern gay men. However, Ford worried about the reactions this might cause from parents: "I look forward to the day when one

doesn't have to be so circumspect and careful."

Ford's fears about parental reactions to a lesbian/gay work of fiction were also voiced by Elizabeth:

> First of all I have a [reading] list. I'm sure there are… You know I never sat down and said I better do a representation of gay people here… Cause I don't really do that with other… I mean it's not like I think… hmmm… I better beef this up with more Black authors. I mean I put books that I think kids would like. So I… What I always do… They pick 'em and I write them back and say… You know this is rated R. Will this bother anybody? Cause again, you see… I am always trying to be careful… about protecting my own… Cause I had a woman that went berserk over The Handmaiden's Tale. She copied some pages and took em to the principal.

While Elizabeth deflects the question of whether or not she would be comfortable teaching a lesbian/gay work by asserting that she doesn't choose books because of the identity of the author, she indicates her fear of adding a lesbian/gay work by talking about the censorship of other works on her reading list.

Lily also voices this belief that parents would intercede if teachers attempted to include works that dealt overtly with lesbian/gay concerns:

> I think what you run into Randy is self-preservation by teachers in the classroom. People don't feel strongly enough. I mean let's face it, gays and lesbians are 10% of the population. Who knows if that is true or not true? You obviously can't do a survey. People won't answer honestly for obvious reasons. I think it is a self-preservation thing. People don't feel strongly enough about the issue because it doesn't affect them. Teachers aren't affected by the alienation because they're not… the vast majority of them. So they are not willing to put their security on the line for something that is so controversial it is sure to draw fire. Just a simple example of that would be last year when we did our multicultural play. I had a young lady who wanted to do a monologue on being a lesbian. And I couldn't look at that child and say, because she was a lesbian, and say, "Oh no we can't let you talk about how you feel," because that would have said to her, "You're not O.K." What I did do was tell her that she had… Talk to her about making that sort of declaration to the

> student body, and tell her that she had to have parental permission to do it

Lily's comments here are somewhat similar to Elizabeth's and Ford's in the sense that they all fear parental complaints, and they all allow this fear to shape their choice of literature. They also shared the belief that teachers were not willing to "put their security on the line for something that is so controversial it is sure to draw fire."

Comfortable But Uninformed

There were two striking differences between Clare's perceptions and the perceptions of Vanessa, Ford, Elizabeth and Lily regarding the inclusion of lesbian and gay studies in the literature classroom. One was Clare's comfort level in acknowledging the homosexuality of authors and discussing how their homosexuality contributed to the literature. The other major difference was related to the issue of comfort. Clare did not have any concerns at all about negative reactions from parents, administrators or members of the community.

Vanessa, Ford, Lily and Elizabeth all expressed concerns that they would "get in trouble" if they talked about lesbian and gay authors or topics. In fact, the major reason that Ford, Lily and Elizabeth were uncomfortable bringing up homosexuality was their fear that doing so would cause problems for them. While Vanessa was personally uncomfortable with the topic of homosexuality in general, she also feared negative reaction from the parents. However, this was clearly not her chief reason for being uncomfortable with the idea of discussing homosexuality with students.

Although all of the English teachers profiled up to this point other than Clare were uncomfortable with the topic, it appears that the majority of the members of the English department are comfortable with the topic. In fact, at least three other teachers shared ideas that were quite similar to Clare's. Ruth, William and Sylvia all expressed feelings that talking about lesbian and gay studies were an important part of teaching literature. They also felt that they were very comfortable talking about homosexuality but weren't sure that they were as knowledgeable as they could be regarding the subject. They also shared the fact that they had no fears that parents would object, and in talking about the subject over the years had never experienced any complaints from parents or administrators.

Not Well Informed.

Perhaps the most important and obvious characteristic that Clare, Ruth, William, and Sylvia shared was the fact that while they had all included discussions of homosexuality in their classroom, they all felt that they didn't know enough to do it on a regular basis. The times they had brought up discussions of homosexuality were all in connection to the lives of the authors or characters in stories. None of them had taught a lesbian/gay adolescent work, but they all were receptive to the idea of teaching one. For the most part, they also were receptive to the idea of talking about homosexuality through the biographies of the authors' lives. Clare, who first learned about the homosexuality of some of the better known lesbian/gay authors in college, was still learning about the homosexuality of some of the authors whose homosexuality is lesser known: "Some of the authors that I have taught for

years, I didn't know were gay or lesbian. Of course some I do, but some I don't." William, who prior to our interview had dismissed the relevance of an authors' homosexuality, had not made any attempt to learn about this aspect of the life of the authors he teaches: "Well I would bring it up if I knew, but I don't know. So I guess in most cases I don't think it is relevant." As I will talk about later in more detail, William changed his stance later in the interview, and as he analyzed the importance of race to literature, he came to see homosexuality as also relevant to literary studies. Sylvia, who had asked to read the first chapter of this dissertation, when asked how knowledgeable she was of which authors in our texts were homosexual said: "I… I thought I was until I saw a list… And maybe it was in your prospectus… Was it you that mentioned Emily Dickinson? I had no idea… I would need to know a little more." While Ruth did not express any concerns about lack of knowledge in the formal interview, she did express those views to me in informal conversations.

Lesbian/Gay Issues Important, But Students React Negatively.

While these four participants showed a desire to know about the homosexuality of authors they teach, they also expressed a need to understand more fully when the author's homosexuality was important to the text. Clare, for example, felt that is was not always important to point out the homosexuality of an author, but when she felt that the author's homosexuality contributed to the work, she should talk about it: "We should if we think it impacted on their writing. Yeah… if we know about a way that it impacted on their writing, we probably should." William' feelings about revealing the homosexuality of an author were very similar to Clare's:

> I think… I think it has a place in uh… discussing events of the world that are happening to kids today. Uh… And if it is relevant as to what the author's orientation is, then I… For the most part I don't know or I don't bring it up. Or… Well I would bring it up if I knew, but I don't know, so I guess I don't feel it is relevant in most cases. I think the issue [homosexuality] is relevant to talk about with kids.

Here William suggests that talking about homosexuality is an important thing to do and something he has done on a regular basis. However, in the past he had felt most comfortable talking about homosexuality out of the context of literary discussion. When lesbian/gay issues had been in the news, William had sometimes talked about them with his classes such as in the instance of the Matthew Shepard case. Also, when the students brought up homosexuality, William had conducted class discussions of the topic. As his response here seems to indicate when it came to literary discussions, William did not "feel it is relevant in most cases," however as the interview went on, William changed his stance somewhat.

When I first asked William about the differences between the way he teaches about an author's race or ethnicity, he insisted that this was different than someone's sexuality:

> If it was relevant I would mention it. When I teach Elie Wiesel's book and he's Jewish, it's important. When I teach Maya Angelou's book, she is black, and yeah that's crucial. But I… I am trying to think if I teach anything where I know the author is gay and whether it matters or not. I don't know whether Thoreau was gay or not but it doesn't matter.

Clearly, with this response William feels that homosexuality isn't as important or vital to the works he teaches as are issues of race. However, as the interview went on, William seemed to change his stance. Towards the end of the interview, when I asked William about his concerns about parents, he returned to the issue of race,

sexuality and identity:

> I would have no problem with the parents… I have no problem with trying to hit them over the head and wake them up to some things they need to be concerned about in terms of prejudice. And it's interesting, we read the Maya Angelou book, and we talk about that racism. We read the Elie Wiesel book, and we talk about that racism. Gay rights comes up just in general.

As William was answering this question, I perceived that he was questioning himself and the way he had dealt with the authors' homosexuality in the past. I believe that when he says, "that's interesting," he does so because he is questioning why in the past he has believed that the race of an author was central to a work of literature, and at the same time he believed an author's homosexuality was not.

My belief that William was altering his stance about the importance on an author's homosexuality slightly as the interview went on was also partially based on the fact that William gave a very detailed example of how he had in the past talked about at least one author's homosexuality. Since William had said that if the homosexuality of an author were important, he would reveal it, I asked him if he could think of a specific case where the author's sexuality was important. He replied, "When we are reading the book, The Picture of Dorian Gray. The kids are kind of wondering what's… Well of course they read that outside of class. No. I don't think I bring it up the rest of the year." Later in the interview when I redirected him to the discussion of Dorian Gray and whether or not is was important that Wilde was a homosexual, he then replied: "No. I don't think it is really relevant… But I guess when the uh… A lot of it takes place on a divan with roses and lavender. Some of the scholars [students] say, 'What is going on?' And the idea that he is gay

comes up. And the trial which I know some things about." As William began thinking about his approach to his teaching of Dorian Gray throughout the years, he realized that he had changed the way he had approached the revelation of Wilde's homosexuality because of the reaction of the students:

> Well you know what… It is interesting… Is that… I am trying to think back because I haven't taught the book in ten years although it is on my reading list. One of the years I consciously and maybe then after did not mention, that Oscar Wilde was gay when we started the book because I knew that in the previous year some of the kids would [say], "Well I'm not reading this book. I am not reading a book about gay people. I am not interested." Which I thought was more that they didn't want to read the book anyway. This was before I was teaching an honors class. So they… They maybe used that rationalization for, "Well, I don't have to read that book." I don't know whether it was bigotry on their part as much as… uh something they could hold on to to not read the book. So as a result the next year I didn't mention it until… If it came up in class, then I would mention it. Then I would answer some questions.

While William does not see the students as being homophobic: "I don't know whether it was bigotry on their part," it is highly unlikely that he would feel the same about students refusing to read a book because the author is African-American, Hispanic, or Jewish. However, in this case the students' belief that not reading a work because the author is gay is acceptable. While William may not have challenged the bigotry that seems evident in this situation, throughout my informal observations of him, I saw him challenge homophobia many times. For example, when students use the word fag or the expression "that's so gay," William is relentless in correcting them and making sure that they understand that this is wrong. In fact, many times William has stopped class and asked students who use the expression "that's so gay," to explain why they use they expression and what they

mean by it. In these discussions he draws an analogy to the use of "that's so gay" to the use of "that's so Jewish," an expression students at the school sometimes use to mean that someone is cheap.

While William' actions in this situation may not at first glance seem much like Clare's, I believe the two are very close in their stance. The fact that William now waited for the kids to bring up the topic because of his experiences with the students' negative reactions make him seem in some ways like Elizabeth who also wanted the students to bring it up first. However, when the students brought it up, Elizabeth was still uncomfortable with the topic and would cut off the discussion. William, on the other hand, was fairly comfortable discussing the subject once the students raised the topic. In this sense, he was very much like Clare. He was more than willing to talk about the biographical facts concerning Wilde's life including the details of the trial because he was aware of these facts and because he saw them as just that, facts.

Another participant, Sylvia, in many ways echoed William and Clare's beliefs. When asked if she thought lesbian and gay studies had a place in the teaching of literature, she replied:

> Yes. I do believe they do. When we have a whole segment of society that's being discriminated against ummm… Teenagers in particular have a problem with sexuality… And they are trying to find their own sexual identity and therefore I think that homosexuality becomes a matter of groups who feel compelled to laugh or denigrate. And I feel they need to get the facts straight.

Obviously there is no pun intended when Sylvia says that the students "need to get the facts straight." Sylvia, William, and Clare, all expressed a feeling that prejudice against lesbians and gays should be confronted and that literature class was one place to do so. Sylvia, William, and Clare had all observed homophobia in their students'

reaction to literature discussions. Both William and Sylvia had changed their teaching practices due to this negative reaction on the part of students. Just as William' experiences with homophobia on the part of students had led him to refrain from telling the students that Wilde was a homosexual until they brought it up themselves, Sylvia had once told the students about authors' homosexuality but changed this practice because of the students' reaction:

> I used to do it, but… real recently I haven't because the response is such that the issue of the person's sexuality can loom to become a big distraction from the point of discussion ummm… I think I will try and go back and do it because I think it is important.

Even though Sylvia thought it was important, she had stopped telling the students about an author's homosexuality because she felt that the students' were so negative in their reactions that to tell them detracted from the literary discussion: "Yes. Yes. Once they find out that Walt Whitman is gay they say, 'blah, blah,' and they start looking for things. And they feel compelled to repudiate the author because of his sexuality to make a statement that I am not one of those." While I got the feeling with William that he might go back to talking about the homosexuality of authors because he began comparing it to the way he treated Angelou and Wiesel and began feeling that he should treat the subject of homosexuality the same way he treated race, Sylvia was much more proactive in her stance. She believed that she might go back to revealing an author's homosexuality and had even begun thinking of how she believed that might be best carried out:

> I do believe that presented in the right way, and I haven't done this… ummm … homosexuality and… I haven't had any preface to the teaching of a gay or lesbian author. I think that could be valuable. I think that could work. But there has to be some preliminary discussion of the rules of the game so to speak. The discussion

> would look like… I think this is a society sort of discussion… Is this a matter of choice or is this a matter of birth?… in other words… ummm… Homosexuality is not something you say, "I want to grow up and be such and such." But it is another form of nature. Get your feelings out, and let's get the facts on the table. And try to get them to express their insecurities. Although they don't know they have insecurities. Because that is where I think this comes from.

Sylvia felt that the only way to avoid the kinds of negative reactions that both she and William had encountered was to have a discussion of the general topic of homosexuality before she revealed that Whitman or any other author was homosexual.

While the fact that Sylvia and William had both stopped revealing an author's homosexuality because of negative reactions from students seems to make them very different from Clare who had always done this and continues to do so, I believed the three actually had a great deal in common. They all had at one time felt that revealing an author's homosexuality should be done and had done so. While Sylvia and William had stopped because of the negative reactions, they both continued to have other discussions regarding homosexuality and continued to challenge students' homophobia. While they had separated these discussions from the literature, the challenging of student homophobia was still an important part of their classroom instruction, and they felt no sense of discomfort when carrying out these discussions.

Another teacher who shared the views of Sylvia, Clare, and William was Ruth. Like the other three, Ruth felt that lesbian/gay studies were important, and like the other three she had told students when she was aware that an author they were studying was homosexual. When asked if lesbian/gay studies had a place in the teaching of literature, Ruth replied:

> I think they do… Because our literature… First of all a lot of our writers have been gays or lesbians, and I think understanding something about them and their background helps in understanding the literature. And then there is some literature that gets into those issues and so I think they are worthy of being explored.

Like Clare, William, and Sylvia, Ruth could name specific lessons where she had told the students of an author's homosexuality. Ruth mentioned one case in detail:

> One particular poem is "When Lilacs Last in the Courtyard Bloom." If you read that poem carefully, you are aware that this man is… Well maybe it is because I have read the poem so many times that I am aware… But the kids kind of pick up on, "Is this man interested in Lincoln in any way other than just being the president." And I tell them Walt Whitman was reportedly a homosexual, and it does come through in that particular writing.

Ruth's example here is somewhat similar to the example William gave of his discussion of The Picture of Dorian Gray. In both cases, the homosexual elements of the text were so overt that whether the teacher told the students about them or not, the students "picked up" on them. Interestingly, in both cases, the readings were not included in the curriculum guides and so were not required readings. Like Clare's discussion of Gertrude Stein, these pieces were something added on because Ruth and William both felt that they were important in the study of literature.

Like Clare, Ruth never stopped these types of discussions as William and Sylvia both had. Also like Clare and unlike William and Sylvia, Ruth did not express any feeling that the negative reactions of students was severe enough to distract from the discussions. In fact like Clare, Ruth had come up with certain strategies to avoid allowing negative reactions from students to get out of hand. Clare had expressed that she didn't give the students, "much of a chance to say anything negative." Ruth was even more assertive about cutting off students'

negative reactions: "I don't let them say anything negative. I just tell them, and that's that." While Ruth and Clare had developed similar strategies to avoid negative reaction on the part of students, all four of these participants changed their customary teaching practices because they did not want to allow students to voice homophobic comments in their classroom. Sylvia was the only one of these four who suggested that it might be beneficial to let the students "get your feelings out and let's get the facts on the table." The other three felt that it was best to suppress student speech regarding homosexuality.

No Fear of Parents.

One of the most obvious ways that Clare, William, Sylvia, and Ruth differed from Vanessa, Elizabeth, Lily and Ford is their concern about reactions from parents, administrators and members of the community. While Vanessa, Elizabeth, Lily and Ford felt sure that inclusion of homosexualty would open the teacher up to criticism, punishment, and possible loss of job security, Clare, William, Sylvia and Ruth had been almost completely unconcerned that this topic could "get them in trouble."

Clare was possibly the most oblivious of the four to the fact that parents might complain about discussions of the topic of homosexuality. She stated, "that has never occurred to me." Then later in the interview she was even more assertive, "I swear that has never occurred to me… Maybe it should." To understand why Clare was totally unaware of any potential problem with parents, it might be helpful to

compare her experiences with those of Elizabeth. Elizabeth was tremendously afraid that if she talked about homosexuality with students she might lose her job or have parents complain about her. After the interview, when Elizabeth taught My Antonia she decided to tell the students that Willa Cather was a lesbian and was surprised when no parents complained. Clare had talked about the homosexuality of authors, when she knew it, since the beginning of her career. Since she felt that she was revealing an innocuous fact like many of the other facts she revealed about the authors' lives, she had not considered it a controversial issue, and because no parents had ever complained, she simply had been given no reason to think about that as a possibility.

William, like Clare, had no fear of parents or anyone else reacting negatively to his inclusion of discussions of homosexuality. However, unlike Clare, he had thought about it, and the thought that parents might react negatively to it, made him more likely to include discussions of homosexuality. William was vehement that the parents' opinions should not be allowed to influence classroom practices:

> I would have no problem with the parents… I have no problem with trying to hit them over the head and wake them up to some things they need to be concerned about in terms of prejudice. And it's interesting we read the Maya Angelou book and we talk about that racism… We read the Elie Wiesel book and we talk about that racism… Gay rights comes up just in general… I have a cartoon in the back that talks about the way adults program their kids and put all the garbage in their heads as to the way they should think and the words they should say.

William's belief that he should challenge students if they were merely parroting their parents' views about this and other issues gave him somewhat of a unique stance that was quite different from every other participant. This might be due to the fact that

unlike all the other participants except Ford (who is gay), William is himself a member of a minority group. Because William is Jewish, perhaps his sensitivity to prejudice is heightened somewhat more than the other participants, and over the years, William has experienced the prejudice of students towards Jews that was undoubtedly influenced by the prejudiced attitudes of their parents.

Like William, Sylvia and Ruth both had considered the fact that parents might complain about the inclusion of discussions of homosexuality, but like William, they didn't let that discourage them from discussion of the topic. In speaking of a book that Ruth regularly recommends to her students, Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, she expressed her concern that parents might complain but also her belief that parents shouldn't object. When asked if she worried about the parents' reaction to her recommending this book, she replied, "Well of course I do. But these kids are mature enough to read a book like that. It is not required reading as you know." Similarly, Sylvia considered parents' reactions when contemplating whether or not she would include a work that had lesbian or gay characters:

> I don't know what the parents will accept these days… I mean you can't read a book in which a character commits suicide because the thinking is so irrational… I think it would be an issue with parents… I think they would think we are trying to indoctrinate their kids.

Despite her fears that parents might object to works that dealt overtly with lesbian/gay subject matter, Sylvia had never had a parent complain when she told the students about an author's homosexuality: "When I have mentioned a gay author before… Houseman or Whitman… I have never gotten any negative feed back on that."

Interestingly, although Ruth, William, and Sylvia had never had a parent, administrator, or community member complain about their bringing up the topic of homosexuality in the classroom, all believed that it was a very real possibility. Even Clare, who hadn't thought about the possibility of complaints, said, "I swear that has never occurred to me. Maybe it should." This threat of parent, administrator, or community member complaints was more than enough to stifle the conversation in at least some cases for Vanessa, Ford, Elizabeth and Lily. However, for Clare, Ruth, William, and Sylvia fears of complaints did not stop them from discussing the topic of homosexuality in relation to an author's identity.

Comfort Level With Lesbian/Gay Adolescent Work.

While Clare, William, Ruth, and Sylvia were all somewhat receptive to the idea of teaching a work that specifically dealt with lesbian/gay characters, they felt that parents were more likely to complain about a work that was specifically about lesbians or gay than they would be with the revelation that the author was lesbian or gay. They also expressed a concern that the work should be of high quality and perhaps not totally focused on lesbian or gay matters. Clare was the only one of these four who could name a specific work that she felt was appropriate to use which dealt with the subject matter of homosexuality overtly.

William couldn't think of a specific work that focused on lesbian/gay matters, but he expressed a willingness to use a work if he knew of one. When asked if he would feel comfortable teaching a work that overtly addressed lesbian/gay matters, William stated:

> Absolutely… Well I would like to use it [a work that deals with lesbian/gay matters] in class. Because I think that when an issue like the Shepard issue came up, I think it [homophobia] was something that we talked up and needed to talk about. And it was no problem to talk about it [homophobia] with the honors kids. And I would have no problem talking about it with the regular kids as well, but all I had at the time were honors kids, and so if there were a story I had that went along with it [a discussion of homophobia], then I would use it deliberately.

William was aware that such a story might be controversial with the parents. However rather than making him less likely to use the work, this fact made him more likely to use it: "I know it steps on some of the Christian fundamentalists toes, and I am happy to step on those toes whenever I can." Because William was receptive to using a work that focused on lesbian/gay concerns, this made him somewhat similar to Clare. Unlike Clare, William could not name a specific work, but in both cases while both teachers expressed a desire to use such a work neither had done so.

Sylvia shared a similar stance to Clare and William on this topic. Like Clare and William, she had never used a story that focused on lesbian/gay matters and like William, she didn't know of such a story that she felt would be appropriate. But like Clare and William, she believed that she would be very comfortable teaching a lesbian/gay story and even desired to do so:

> I think English is a very good place… Could potentially be a good forum to open up this discussion… To talk frankly with these students to help dispel some of the myths… English is just so broad and we talk about so many issues… human nature, variety of the human species, that I think it [literature class] is an appropriate place to bring it [discussions of homosexuality] up. And if we are going to talk about minorities, multi-cultural etc., then I think this fits right in.

Like Clare, Sylvia expressed concern about the need to be careful in the choice of a

lesbian/gay work. Clare said, "It would depend more on the quality of the story than the subject." Sylvia' response was somewhat similar to this:

> I think the right story would… Could really have very strongly… If it is written correctly, written on the right level with the right feeling… umm… Showing this person to be just another one of us suffering human beings that they can relate to… I think it would be valuable.

Even though Sylvia felt that a work that dealt with lesbian/gay concerns could be "valuable," she said, "I think it would require some preparation and really appealing to them to keep an open mind." Sylvia's comment clearly shows how this topic differs from issues regarding race. None of the teachers in this study suggested that they would prepare their students for discussions of race.

Like Clare, William, and Sylvia, Ruth expressed a feeling that she would be comfortable teaching a lesbian/gay story. However, Ruth expressed one concern that the other three had not mentioned and that was her feeling that any story she used should be included in the curriculum. Because there is no story in the curriculum that deals with lesbian/gay matters overtly and it is highly unlikely that there will be such a story anytime soon, Ruth is possibly less likely than the other three to include a lesbian/gay work in her class.

Derogatory Comments.

Another belief that Clare, William, Sylvia, and Ruth all shared was the idea that using derogatory names for lesbians and gays was wrong and would not be

tolerated in their classrooms. All four had very strong feelings about homophobia, and all had an awareness that the use of these terms by students was a very strong possibility. Clare explained how she dealt with negative comments on the part of students: "It depends on who it is and the extent of how they are doing it. But I let them know right away without lecturing at them that I think it is silly to be that way…" While Clare adjusted her response according to how vocal the student making derogatory remarks was with his/her remarks, she stated that she always made sure that her students knew that making derogatory remarks towards lesbians/gays was wrong, and she felt that the current school rules were clear enough that students should know that these remarks were unacceptable: "I think they take a cue from me and from everyone else in the school because for the most part I think we have an environment here that is accepting or at least officially accepting."

William was even more vocal than Clare in decrying the use of epithets in regards to lesbians and gays. William' statements were similar to Ford's because he compared derogatory remarks about lesbians and gays to epithets regarding race:

> One of my pet peeves in when someone uses the word gay to mean something bad which is what… Just in passing, "Well that's gay." And I say, "When you start taking a word that people choose to use to define themselves and give it a negative connotation, it's too easy." And I see what happens… If they use Jew that way or Nigger that way, and so I get on to them. And they can see I'm pretty sure… Well I take it for granted that they can see, all of my classes, that it is wrong to use Nigger… That it is wrong to be prejudice against someone because of their religion… And they may not get it. They may think it is just O.K. to be prejudice against someone because of their sexual orientation. My point is that it is just as much bigotry as to be prejudice against someone because of the color of their skin or their religion.

William' observations here are similar to Clare's in the sense that they are both

adamant about not allowing students to use derogatory language. However, William' views diverge somewhat from Clare's when it comes to what they perceive students to believe about these comments. While Clare believes that students understand that using these words goes against official school policy, William believes that students might know that it is "wrong" to make derogatory comments about someone's race or religion, but they might think it is "O.K." to be prejudice against a lesbian or gay person. Like Ford, to illustrate his point to students that derogatory comments about lesbians and gays is wrong, William compares these comments to racial epithets.

Both Sylvia and Ruth shared William and Clare's views that derogatory comments were wrong. However, while sometimes they did reprimand students for these comments, Sylvia' more customary way of dealing with these comments was to avoid them altogether. Sylvia explained that when discussions of Whitman's sexuality seemed to provoke negative reactions on the part of students, that she would change the topic of discussion in order to avoid dealing with these comments. Ruth explained her way of dealing with these homophobia, "I don't let them say anything negative. I just tell them and that's that."

In their repudiation of allowing students to use derogatory remarks towards lesbians and gays, Clare, William, Ruth and Sylvia shared the same views as the first four teachers, Vanessa, Ford, Elizabeth and Lily. In fact, every teacher in this study expressed the opinion that students should not be allowed to harass lesbian and gay students. Despite the fact that everyone seemed united in this belief, virtually every teacher in this study was aware that students did frequently use these comments.

Treatment of Students Who Come Out.

All of the teachers included up to this point had never had a student come out to them. Clare and William, like Ford, expressed their belief that they knew students who were lesbian or gay, but they had never had a student "formally" come out to them. In other words, while some students had indicated to Clare, William and Ford through indirect means about their homosexuality, no student had ever told them directly.

Clare, William, Ruth, and Sylvia all had somewhat different beliefs about how they might approach students who came out to them. However one thing they all shared in common was their lack of confidence in the counselors' ability to help lesbian and gay adolescents. They also shared a concern that they didn't know anyone to whom they might recommend a lesbian or gay student for help if needed.

Clare was more likely than the others to see a students's coming out as something that might not necessarily indicate a problem. During the formal interview, Clare did not mention the possibility of sending a lesbian or gay student to the counselors, but in informal conversations she did indicate reservations about the counselors' ability to handle lesbian and gay issues regarding coming out.

William' reaction was more typical of how most of the teachers in this study reacted to the question of how he might react to a student who came out than was Clare's. First, like most of the teachers in this study, William had never had a student come out to him in any overt way:

> I am trying to think back over decades of journals… No…

> Certainly not anything that anyone has said to me… No… Journals are kept confidential, but certainly no one went out of their way to say anything overtly… Maybe there was something hidden in there… But no.

This was somewhat similar to the way that Clare indicated that she had known about some students' homosexuality. Just as Clare had determined this through subtle references in the students' writings and reactions during class discussions, William felt that he did know of some students who had hinted that they were lesbian or gay through their journals, but none had directly told him of their homosexuality. William suggested that he had never thought about how he might handle it if a student came out in a direct way:

> Awkwardly I suppose… Uh … I don't know… how… I would listen to what he had to say. Maybe try to direct him to somebody who could help him more than I could… Someone who was gay or who was better versed in how to deal with it… I know if the kid felt there was problem with it or was being harassed, I would do what I could for him.

Like Clare, William suggests here that there may not be one set way to deal with student who comes out. He indicates that whether or not he might recommend help would depend on what the student has to say. However, he hesitates somewhat on what he would do if the student needs help, offering that he might recommend the student meet with someone else who is also lesbian or gay. The problem that William struggles with here is who he might recommend. When I asked him if this person would be another teacher, he stated:

> I might… Knowing that, that might… I don't think I would immediately recommend another teacher because I don't know if it is my business to say… First of all I don't think it is my business if I know what someone's orientation is to say, "Well maybe you should go see that person." I also don't think that is… If there was a group, and I know you had a group a one point… I would point them in that

direction.

As William struggles here to determine what action he might take, he begins to see the difficulties involved. He worries about recommending another teacher because while for the most part most members of the faculty at this school know which faculty members are lesbian or gay, William would not want to reveal that information to a student because he wouldn't want to "out" the teacher to students without permission. Also, William feels that telling a student that comes out to him, "Well maybe you should go see that person," would send the message that he is uncaring about or uncomfortable with the subject. However, William clearly feels that a student that came out to him as lesbian or gay would benefit from interaction with other lesbians and gays, and ultimately comes up with the response that if there were a group, he might recommend that for the student.

William was not comfortable referring the student to a counselor. Although he indicated that if he could be sure which counselor met with the student, there were some counselors he felt might be appropriate. When asked if he might recommend a counselor, he replied:

> Not to [Sam], but I might write a letter. I might send a letter to [Betty] who I feel is competent and would know what to do more. When I have had kids that are suicidal in any way, I have gotten in touch with the social worker. Yeah if the kid felt that is what he wanted to do, then I… And it would probably be a good idea, because I think it would be tough for a kid to be openly gay in high school. I think you would be asking for trouble from uh…I don't know. I know so little about what goes on around here. Some of the horror stories I hear about other things…

As William starts to consider this more, he begins to feel more strongly that a student who comes out to him might be in distress, and in that case he would want to make

sure the student got some help. However, he would want this to be the student's choice because he feels that the student might know better than he does whether or not that help is needed.

Like William and Clare, Sylvia had never had a student come out to her, and like William and Clare, the response she might give to a student depends on the circumstances:

> Gosh Randy. I have never thought about it. It depends upon how he/she presented himself/herself. Whether it was with distress… or I just wanted to tell you. I would try to be as reassuring as possible. That this is not an easy life, but it is as worthy a life as any… And you have as much to be proud of as anyone else and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Something along those lines.

Sylvia, like William and most of the other participants in this study, has never considered what she might do if a student came out to her. Also, I find some similarity between Sylvia' response and Ford's. Ford's first response to a student who came out would be a warning: "You know in this age of AIDS, you have to be careful… You've got to be careful." Sylvia also issues as one of her first responses: "This is not an easy life." Like William, Sylvia also states that if the student were in distress, she would recommend the student talk to someone other than her. However, again like William, this would not be a counselor: "Well, I don't think I could approach another gay teacher… Well, I could go to perhaps a gay teacher and ask permission, "Could so and so talk to you." You know… I would not want to disclose the identity. But I think that would be more helpful than a counselor." Sylvia shared William's feeling that she would not want to disclose the identity of a lesbian or gay teacher without that person's permission. However, Sylvia felt that a lesbian or gay teacher would be a far better support person than any of the

counselors.

Ruth was the only one in this group that suggested a counselor might be the person to help a lesbian or gay youth. She had never had a student come out to her, but she indicated that if a student did come out to her: "I believe I would have to suggest that maybe he would talk to a counselor. I don't know what she would say to me exactly, and I don't know if I would know how to address it or not." Because other than Vanessa, Ruth was the only person that suggested a counselor would be in order, I asked her if she felt comfortable that the counselors would be able to handle it: "No. Not completely, but that's the people around here that I would think could." Unlike, William and Sylvia, Ruth did not suggest the possibility of a lesbian or gay teacher, but like both of the others she struggled to think who might be an appropriate person to recommend.

What was most striking about the hypothetical responses of the teachers regarding what they might do if a child came out to them was the fact that most teachers in the study had never even considered what they might do. Also worth consideration is the lack of confidence these teachers had with regards to the counselors' ability to help lesbian and gay youth.

## Comfortable and Informed

June's perceptions regarding including discussions of homosexuality in the classroom were remarkably different from all of the other participants except one, Sally. Like June, Sally expressed a much stronger belief that the biography of the

author is always important. Also like June, she felt that she was fairly aware of which authors in the text were lesbian or gay. Sally differed from June when she spoke about her experiences when discussing lesbian/gay authors. While June was well aware of negative remarks on the part of students, Sally felt that she had never really experienced any students making negative remarks. Like June, Sally believed that the ability to include lesbian/gay studies in the classroom depended on the teacher's ability to handle controversial subject matter.

While June expressed a certain level of comfort with the idea of using a lesbian/gay adolescent work, Sally believed that including a work focused on lesbian/gay characters was sure to draw complaints. Although Sally differed from June in her feelings about including a lesbian/gay adolescent work in the class, surprisingly Sally was the one teacher in the study who stated that she had actually used such a work. [June had actually used some works that focused on lesbian concerns in her class, the poems of Adrienne Rich, but June did not perceive these as lesbian works perhaps because they were poems.]

Perhaps the way that June and Sally were most similar was in the number of students who came out to them. Sally, like June, had a remarkable number of students come out to her over the years. Also like June, she felt comfortable with this and felt that she gave the students who came out as much support as possible.

Biography Important.

June believed that it was always important to reveal the homosexuality of an author because she wanted the students to realize that the literature they read came

from a wide range of perspectives: "One of my philosophies is that every kid should hear different voices." June did this because of a desire to teach tolerance, and while Sally also did this partially to teach tolerance, she also had another goal in mind:

> I feel very strongly that the kids should be made aware of all kinds of life styles and all kinds of differences in people. Any little fact I know about an author I feel like brings dimension to the work and to the ummm… and to… just to the students' appreciation in general. I try to make it a point to know details about the author including whether they are gay or lesbian.

While Sally wants to teach tolerance, it is clear here that Sally's main reason is that she has a strong feeling that the biography of the author is an integral part of the study of literature. While Sally's views about biography may seem self-evident or seem to be common sense, her views were not shared by all the literature teachers in this study.

Lily, Vanessa, and Elizabeth all expressed a belief that a work of art stands on its own, and therefore biography was not relevant. In the words of Elizabeth: "I say this about everything. I say, 'it's very interesting to know about an author's background and to understand the context and the fabric of society of when that person was living, but I think that is icing on the cake.'" Clearly June and Sally' views that the biography is important contrasts sharply with the views of Lily, Vanessa, and Elizabeth.

Connecting to Literature And Illuminating Themes.

Like June, Sally felt that revealing an author's homosexuality could help students connect to the literature and could help them explore the themes of the literature in more detail. An example of the way June did this is her example of how she teaches "Wagner Matinee." June thought it was important that the students know about Cather's lesbianism because: "I want kids to read that story first, before they know that Cather is a lesbian. Because I want them to see that all of us shut down parts of our life in certain situations, and we all have things we feel like we can't share with other people." Not only did June believe that revealing an author's homosexuality could illustrate themes, she also believed it was important because of the impact it might have on lesbian or gay students. Sally's comments were very similar to those of June:

> I used to teach British Literature and several of the authors in modern British Literature are… And one author I can think of that I tell students about… That I have told students about is E. M. Forrester and so that would be a time when I said to them that he often… He did not come out of the closet until basically… Well I don't think he actually… during his lifetime, he did everything he could to keep in the closet, but I am sure that there were people who knew he was gay. But he did not want to come out of the closet because his mother was still alive. And I tell them that story and am actually hoping to relate to a lot of different things. If there is a gay student in there, to let them know that hey even E. M. Forrester was worried about that sort of thing.

Not only did Sally share June's belief that the revelation of author's homosexuality might help lesbian and gay students, she also shared June's view that the homosexuality of the author might be important to the study of the work: "With the

modern day British authors so much of their work was influenced by their issues, and I guess you really can't understand the work unless you understand that."

Negative Remarks.

One way that Sally differed from June was in the fact that she had never had a negative reaction to the revelation that an author was lesbian or gay. In some ways, her comments about the reactions she did receive were very similar to the reactions William had received when he revealed that Oscar Wilde was gay before the reading of The Picture of Dorian Gray. Like William, Sally did not perceive the comments she received as cases of homophobia, but rather as excuses on the part of students to avoid reading the work: "I can't say that I have ever gotten any negative reaction. I have gotten more negative reaction over the selection than I have over the fact that the author is gay or not gay. Sometimes they will say, 'We hate this. We hate this,' but it is not necessarily because of the sexual persuasion of the author." Sally believes that the reason she hasn't encountered negative reactions on the part of students is due to the way she handles the discussion of homosexuality.

Teachers' Ability To Handle Lesbian/Gay Issues.

Just as June suggested that some teachers might be better able to handle controversy than others with her comments about The Chocolate War, Sally also felt that the way the teacher handled the situation determined how much controversy it would raise. In some ways, Sally handles these discussions using a strategy that is

similar to the one employed by Clare. In speaking about the revelation that E. M. Forrester was a gay man, Sally stated:

> I think it is all the way you handle it as a teacher… I just say he was obviously very torn about it in his lifetime, and it was reflected in some of his literature… ummm… You know and… I feel like… I guess I am just one of these people… I am sensitive to the kids who may be gay in the classroom, and I just handle those kinds of things in a matter of fact way, but… you know… in a way that I hope will make the kids reflect on it, not in a sensational way… just in a… this is life and this what it is. And in many cases it is part of the creative process… You know because certainly there is a very large number of authors and artists and actors who are gay, and certainly, I think, it impacts the creative process.

This is very much like Clare's way of dealing with the topic because like Sally, Clare presented the information as a fact like any other and expressed that by doing this she avoided the sensationalism she thought this topic, handled incorrectly, might generate.

Concern About Reactions From Parents.

Like June, Sally was ambivalent about the possibility of negative reactions from parents. Also like June and others in the study, she had never received any negative feedback from parents, administrators, etc. when she had told students about an author's homosexuality. However, Sally thought that if she taught a work that was specifically focused on lesbian/gay characters, she might expect some

negative feedback from parents:

> I would say that knowing… the fact that parents in this area have been very vocal… not as vocal as people in other places about censorship of things in textbooks… About all kinds of things in the textbooks that uhhh, that we would probably hear something. I could say I would teach it. I would try to do my best so that we would not hear anything about it, but I think we probably would.

Because Sally felt that parents have an enormous amount of influencing on what is taught, she speculated that if she taught a work that focused on lesbian/gay characters and parents complained, then she would have to stop teaching it:

> I would do my best, but if the uproar was so loud from the community to the administration, then I think that would be a whole different issue. But to me personally, if it was a story that was in good taste, if it was well done, and it was that sort of thing, then I would try to teach it as a slice of life… Like I always do, and just say these are some issues that face some people and see what happened. I personally don't think there is a problem with it that way, and I don't think most of the parents would. But we have some rabid parents around here that would absolutely hate it. They have complained about some things in textbooks that we as educated people just can't even believe, and I mean it happens.

Sally distinguishes here between her personal views that such a story might be a valuable educational tool, and her more practical considerations that she is not willing to lose her job over teaching a work that parents don't approve of. Also, again she suggests that the way the teacher handles the work might be the most important factor in gaining acceptance of its inclusion.

Use Of A Lesbian/Gay Adolescent Work.

Sally's certainty that using a work that focused primarily on lesbian/gay characters would draw fire was surprising because she had used such a work and had not received any criticism for it. She made the decision to use this work because in

coming across it on her own, she felt that it provided a great opportunity to reinforce some of the things she had already been teaching:

> I remember about… Ahhh it's been a long time ago, maybe about seven years ago… I read a story in a magazine. It was a teenage magazine about two girls who went to the prom as dates. It was a nonfiction story, and so, and I brought it to class. And I let the kids read it, and we read it together because the story was so well written from both of the points of view, both from the girls and the administration. I mean all the things we teach in literature are there. There was a conflict, there was point of view, the high school was just like this high school. I brought that into class, and I never heard a word. And we all read it out loud… Well, I read it out loud, and they all read along. And we discussed it, and I think some of the kids said, "uh uh uh," or whatever. And I said, "Look ya'll, this happened in this high school. It is probably going to happen here someday." And I said, you know, "Let's talk about this," and it was an open chance for some discussion.

While this situation had the potential for causing controversy, Sally diverted criticism from her selection of a lesbian/gay work in three ways. First, she asserted that this story had real literary value: "I mean all the things we teach in literature are there." Second, she believed the factual nature of the story inoculated her from criticism: "Look ya'll, this happened in this high school." Third, she pointed out the potential that the students might encounter a similar situation in their own lives: "It is probably going to happen here someday." For all of these reasons, Sally felt that nonfiction works provided the best opportunity to bring up the topic of homosexuality:

> I guess I feel more comfortable with nonfiction… I've never read, and really and I guess this is a downfall in my own reading… but maybe I haven't read a real sensitive story of two people of the same sex who are in love or whatever. Maybe I just haven't read that. But I do feel comfortable if it's true, and your discussing it in context. It's kind of like teaching the Bible as literature. You can talk about the Bible as just plain ole literature, not about any kind of religious

> context. And it's the same thing with that. At least that's how I feel about it

Sally's choice of analogies in comparing the teaching of a lesbian/gay adolescent work to the teaching of the Bible as literature is somewhat ironic. However, her analogy here would be clear to those that know her because her point is that she would not be "promoting" homosexuality any more than she would be promoting Christianity by teaching the Bible as literature. She felt "safe" with her choice of the lesbian/gay short story because it was factual and because no one could accuse her of promoting homosexuality. In these two ways, she is somewhat echoing the sentiments of Clare.

Treatment of Students Who Come Out.

Sally was also like June in the fact that she had many students come out to her over the years. Her way of handling this was very much like June's. She offered the students support and made sure that they knew that they could talk openly with her:

> I have had students who have had conversations with me that assumed that I knew that they were gay and I hadn't made that assumption. But they were comfortable enough to say, "You know I'm gay" or as one student said last year, "You know I have been touched by the pink wand," or something like that… And I didn't know what that was… Some euphemisms for it and that sort of thing. And certainly I have had kids discuss it with me in that context. And I have had students that I knew were having issues as a young gay teenager that I have not addressed directly with the students, but that I have addressed in a round about way with the counselor and other people. Just to try to support the child when the child needs support. I guess has anyone come to me and said to me, "You're the first person I have ever told I am gay,"… no… But over the years I have.

> Ummm I think probably…. Like I said I think the students feel pretty comfortable to say to me…. Like I have had students give me compositions, and they were about issues having to do with gay and lesbian issues, and they said, "Please don't read this in front of the class." And I said, "No. I wouldn't do that." This is private… ummm… and so you know they felt like they could trust me.

Just as with June, the students feel free to talk to Sally or give Sally compositions that talk about their homosexuality. However, as shown here, they do so only with the understanding that this will be kept secret. Sally recognizes this fear the students have about being exposed:

> Oh I have seen lots of them in distress. What's his face? What's his name? You had him. I had him. He was in distress. Remember two years ago… didn't come to school. He had a lot of issues, and he didn't know what to do our how to do it. I felt like between you and Ford and me, we supported him in some ways. And I have seen students in distress over… Some of the gay students, even if they do have a gay social life and they are very entrenched in that and they are very comfortable with it, they still don't want the other kids to know it. And so I think they still live with a great deal of nervousness about that. And the fact is that after they get out of high school this won't be that much of an issue… to a certain extent it still will be an issue, but it won't be as much of an issue as it is in high school. So that sort of thing. So I guess I have seen kids in distress, and I always try to help when I do see them. And I certainly have answered questions, "If you knew someone who did this, what would you do?" We have all answered a thousand of those, "well I know I am not answering this about your friend I am answering about you."

Like others in the study, Sally recognizes that most lesbian/gay teens realize that the school culture is very hostile towards them, and while they may have formed social groups among themselves, they must ensure that these groups remain secretive.

Like virtually every other teacher in the study except Vanessa, Sally had reservations about the counselors' ability to handle lesbian/gay issues. Just as with the other participants, Sally felt that she would only trust certain counselors to deal

with lesbian/gay students and their problems: "I would recommend certain counselors. But I would want to pick out the ones, and it wouldn't have to be a gay counselor. Certain counselors would be more appropriate than others I think." While the reasons varied for each participant in the study, almost all were certain that if they referred a lesbian/gay student to a counselor, they would do so only if they could chose the counselor that would handle the case.

Summary of Results

Only two teachers in the study seemed both willing and able to include discussions of lesbian/gay studies on a regular basis. While other teachers did include these discussions at times, these times were not that often, and it is clear that lesbian/gay studies are not fully integrated into the curriculum. The responses from the participants were in many ways very varied and in other ways remarkably similar.

There seemed to be great variation on the role of author's biography in the teaching of literature with two basic camps forming. One camp asserted that "literature in universal" and that a work of art "stands on its own." Another camp insisted that while there should be a universal quality to literature, it is of great importance to have a diversity of "voices." For the teachers in this study, much of the impetus to talk about the sexuality of the author depends on which of these two philosophies the literature teacher embraces. Those who believed that "literature stands on its own" saw no reason to identify the homosexuality of an author because they believed that not only was the homosexuality of the author irrelevant, but in

many ways the author her/himself was inconsequential.

While the participant's philosophy of how the biography of the author should be used or not used created perhaps the greatest variation in the study, there were at least two points that were incredibly consistent throughout. All participants agreed that the use of derogatory words is wrong and should be stopped. Also, virtually ever participant believed that the counselors, or at least some of the counselors, were incapable of handling lesbian/gay issues.

These variations of opinions, as well as the consistencies, suggest that the place of lesbian/gay studies in the teaching of literature is an area in need of further exploration. In the next section, I will use the results of this study to demonstrate how this English department might use these results to form a more thought out and consistent response to how they as a group handle this topic.

## Summary of Analysis

In this section, I will discuss what these results show, where I believe the teachers in this study position themselves with regard to lesbian and gay issues, and more importantly where I believe there might be room for integrating lesbian and gay issues into this department's literature instruction. I will examine the reasons some of the teachers involved in this study give for at times being reluctant to talk about the biography of lesbian/gay authors, how they might begin to view biography in new ways, and what actions would be needed to prepare these teachers for the presentation of biographical facts about lesbian/gay authors.

I will also address the concerns the teachers in this study voiced regarding the

ways lesbian/gay issues might be included in the curriculum at some future time, the need for administrative support as these teachers begin to broach lesbian/gay topics in their classrooms, and the fears that this group of teachers had regarding the age level when this topic might be introduced. Although not directly related to literature discussions, I will also discuss this group of teachers' uncertainty about how they might handle students who choose to come out to them, and the feelings that these teachers expressed about their concerns that the counselors are not prepared to help students who might be dealing with coming out issues.

While the results of a study of this nature are only applicable to this department, in addition to suggesting some further areas where I might be able to help the teachers in this department overcome their reluctance to address lesbian/gay concerns, they may suggest areas that are of importance to other literature teachers as well. All of the teachers who participated in this study are or were influential members of the department. With the exception of Vanessa, they all have been teaching for twenty years or more and have considerable knowledge to share. It is my hope that the results of this study will be one of the tools the members of this department might use in helping them reflect further on their teaching practices with regards to lesbian/gay issues. These results may also be helpful to other literature teachers, whose teaching situation may be quite different, but who may be stimulated by these results to reflect further on their own teaching practices with regards to the inclusion of lesbian and gay issues in the literature classroom.

When I began this study, I started it with the overriding question of why the teachers in this department who for the most part express generally liberal ideas were

reluctant to talk about lesbian/gay issues. My hope was that through my exploration into their reasons for not discussing these issues, they might begin to struggle more with this subject that I believe many of them had given very little thought to in the past. During the formal interview process, I believe that many of the teachers began to question their perceptions regarding the introduction of lesbian/gay issues.

Changes Resulting From the Interviews.

During the interview process, many of the teachers suggested that they might change their teaching practices, but so far not all have carried through with the changes they thought they might implement. Elizabeth provides an excellent example of a teacher who did change her classroom practices. Even though Elizabeth never indicated to me that she might change the way she approached the biography of lesbian/gay authors, she did in fact change the way she handled the teaching of My Antonia. While Elizabeth's biggest concern was that parents might complain, she was pleasantly surprised. After revealing Cather's lesbianism, no parents complained, and Elizabeth felt that the students seemed to enjoy the novel more and understand it more fully. June also changed something about her teaching practices. Although she was already quite inclusive of lesbian/gay issues, prior to the interview, she had not included a work that dealt specifically with lesbian/gay issues on her reading list. She now includes such a work, Breakfast with Scot.

Other participants showed a willingness to change, but have not done so at this time. One prominent example is Ford, who suggested that he might teach Becoming

a Man in his Pacesetter's course. While he seemed adamant about creating an argument for the inclusion of this work, he has not made any attempts so far at ordering or attempting to teach this work. He has explained this by saying that the reason he has not proceeded with his attempt to teach this work is due to his uncertainty about his impending retirement. He is reluctant to order an entire set of books that might only be used for one or two years.

Other teachers in the study suggested they might change their practices with regards to integrating lesbian/gay issues into their class if they knew enough about it. Over and over, I heard from participants that when they know an author is lesbian or gay, they discuss it with the class. However, most of the teachers who stated this said they weren't always aware of which authors were lesbian or gay. In addition to this, many of the teachers said that at times they were unsure how the knowledge that an author was lesbian/gay would aid the students in their analysis of the work being studied.

Lack of Knowledge.

This lack of knowledge about lesbian/gay issues was the major factor in why many of the participants who seemed willing to change their teaching practices were unable to do so. These participants who said that they lacked the knowledge to include lesbian/gay issues made up the majority of the study's participants. They named two different areas in which they were deficient and limited in their ability to include lesbian/gay issues in their class. The overwhelming majority of the

participants said they were willing to talk about the sexuality of an author when they knew. However these teachers said they often didn't know which authors were lesbian or gay. Most participants gave a similar reason for not including a lesbian/gay work, saying that they did not know of any lesbian/gay works that were suitable for their classrooms.

These findings suggest many areas for further work. While it is unlikely that many of these teachers are ready to incorporate into their classes works that focus specifically on lesbian/gay issues, I believe there are areas where lesbian/gay issues might be incorporated almost immediately. The results of this study indicate that the teachers were much more comfortable with the idea of presenting biographical facts about an author who is lesbian or gay and is already a part of the curriculum, than they were in presenting a work that specifically dealt with lesbian/gay subject matter. Sally's comments provide a good example of a teacher who is comfortable talking about the biography of an author, "Any little fact I know about an author I feel like brings dimension to the work." Also, William, Clare, Ruth and Sylvia all expressed an interest in bringing up the topic of lesbians and gays through the biography of the author being studied.

This method of discussing an author's homosexuality might not be the most effective way to approach the introduction of lesbian/gay issues in the literature classroom. As June stated, "It would be easier [to talk about the homosexuality of an author], but it would be more effective if it came from the literature. Because in a way telling about the author's life, because I am telling them, I am the one that knows about it, that's an intellectual kind of thing." June went on to explain that

having a piece that directly dealt with lesbian/gay issues would open up the discussion in a much broader way. Revealing a fact, after all, sometimes does not allow for a great deal of debate.

While I am certain that teaching works that deal specifically with lesbian/gay issues would be much more effective, it is futile to recommend this as the way that the majority of teachers in this study should introduce this issue. Clearly, even the teachers who were most comfortable in discussing lesbian/gay issues were reluctant to include pieces that dealt specifically with the issue. June included a lesbian/gay novel on her reading list, but that novel is one option among many, not a required part of the course. Sally, who had taught one work that focused on lesbian issues, stated that she didn't know of any stories that she would use on a regular basis. Ford, who was very desirous of including Becoming a Man as one of his readings, never actually asked that the book be ordered and consequently never taught it.

Because even the teachers who are most comfortable in talking about lesbian/gay issues are reluctant to include a piece that deals specifically with these issues, I believe the best way to get these issues included on a regular basis is through the biography of the authors that are currently being studied. There is some anecdotal evidence that revealing the homosexuality of an author, while perhaps not as effective as teaching a lesbian/gay work, might have more of an impact than any of the teachers in this study are currently aware of. Lee Lynch (2000) tells of how important the knowledge of lesbian/gay authors was to her in an essay entitled, "Cruising the Libraries":

> Why was this so important? Simply, I suspected that all of these authors might be queer like me. Yet they belonged, truly had a place

> in the world, were valued. Even the fact that those who were gay were closeted thrilled me because I was a part of their secret society. Someday I, might be valued even though I was gay. (p. 9)

Lillian Faderman (2000) also suggests the importance biography can have in the lives of lesbians and gays:

> As lesbians and gays, it is in our interest to know the lesbian or gay facts in the lives of the great and to acquaint others with those facts. That certain historical figures had something in common with contemporary homosexuals would be of little importance in a world where gay was considered as good as straight, where homosexuals had never been put in jails or insane asylums or fired from their jobs or disowned by their families merely because they were lesbian or gay. We would not especially need to lay claim to great figures of the past if our homosexuality were never a factor by which we've been meanly judged. (109)

Although I am in agreement with June's point that teaching stories that specifically deal with lesbian/gay issues are more effective for students, Faderman's point here adds credence to the idea that it is important, maybe even crucial, for lesbian/gay students to know that important authors are/were lesbian or gay. Faderman makes this even more clear when she questions how history has been used by the dominant culture:

> What are the uses of history? The various furors over the last years regarding changes in the guidelines for teaching history in the public schools should serve as evidence that "history" is never simply a collocation of objective facts. The public school battle was about crucial conflicts such as whether American history should be related by stories that emphasize an Anglo heritage or stories that emphasize slave rebellions and immigrant experiences. Both sides in the battle realized what is at stake in the relating of history; among the uses of history are its possibilities for providing role models to the young, for giving people reasons for pride in who they are, for teaching lessons about the past that we can incorporate in the present and use to plan the future. The recording or relating of history is always a matter of angle of vision and is seldom without some degree of chauvinism. History can provide something vital to any people who bond in a meaningful group; it can provide what Van Wyck Brooks has called

in a different context *a usable past*. (p. 109-110)

It is precisely this "angle of vision" that I think might be shifted a little bit more if the teachers such as William, Ruth, Clare, Sylvia and Ford begin revealing the homosexuality of authors to a greater degree than they are presently doing. The occasional discussions that are already taking place in their classrooms are certainly preferable to no discussion of homosexuality at all. However, I believe if these discussions were more prevalent, lesbian/gay students might get more of a sense of having the "usable past" that Faderman speaks of.

The curriculum already includes so many authors that are lesbian or gay that discussions of the biographical facts when appropriate, in other words when the author's homosexuality has a bearing on the work being study, would make discussions of homosexuality quite commonplace. From this start with biographical facts, I believe students and teachers would become more comfortable with talking about lesbian/gay issues, and then pieces that deal specifically with lesbian/gay characters and issues could be included.

However there are some major hurdles to overcome before this can be carried out. First, most of the teachers in this study are unaware of which authors are lesbian/gay and do not understand the ways these authors' homosexuality shaped their works. Second, many of the teachers in this study, at least in theory, believe that biographical facts are not important in the study of literature. Third, the results of this study suggest that there would need to be discussions among the teachers about what point in the study of work is most appropriate for the revelation of an author's homosexuality.

Education of the Teachers.

During informal and formal observations of the teachers, I heard many times and from many members of the department, "When I know about the homosexuality of an author, I always talk about it." I knew from my observations over the years, both in classrooms and just in general, that the topic did not come up nearly as frequently as these teachers indicated. Because I felt sure that the teachers were not bringing up the homosexuality of the authors they studied to any great degree, I did a very informal exercise with the teachers in the department.

I made a list of all the authors in both the British literature and American literature textbooks and asked all the teachers in the department to circle the names of the ones they believed were lesbian or gay. When I asked the teachers if they would carry out this activity, the universal response was apologetic. Typically, the participants would say something along the lines of "Randy, I am not going to know any of these." When I encouraged them by stating, "That is sort of the point," most participants reluctantly went ahead with the activity. A couple of members of the department in addition to circling the authors wrote notes on the handouts. Both of the teachers who wrote notes were not part of the primary participants in the study. One wrote, “I have no idea about any of these people. My assumption has always

been ‘straight’ unless I knew otherwise, but I have never followed the issue to know more.” The other participant wrote:

> Randy,
>
> I’m the worst person in the world to answer this survey, and you may want to throw it out. The reason is my philosophy of teaching literature has always been to center on the works rather than the person who wrote them. I never ask questions of students concerning the personal lives of the authors, nor have I ever been really interested in them – I am more interested in what they had to say. In short, I couldn’t care less about their sexual orientation, political affiliation, religious beliefs, etc.

The comments of both of these teachers confirm the findings of Mario DiGangi (2000):

> Teaching openly about same-sex desire may strike students as flagrantly political not only because homosexuality is a controversial subject but also because teaching controversial subjects powerfully debunks the myth of pedagogical objectivity. It seems perfectly natural when English teachers discuss relationships between men and women, because heterosexuality is generally understood to be a "natural" condition, not an ideological construct. Creating the illusion of the natural, which in this case serves to render heterosexuality cognitively un(re)markable, is of course a primary operation of ideology. (p.161)

During my informal observations I came to realize that both of these teachers did, without realizing it, make it a point to learn other biographical facts about the authors they studied. For example, the second teacher who said that he was concerned “in what they had to say. In short, I couldn’t care less about their sexual orientation, political affiliation, religious beliefs, etc,” has in the past taught The Chocolate War. During the teaching of this novel, he regularly discusses Cormier’s Catholic upbringing and how his Catholic beliefs shape the novel. In addition to this, he regularly brings up his own experiences in the Viet Nam War when reading stories

about war.

Sixteen of the twenty English teachers did fill out the study and few could name more than four authors on each list. Of the authors listed in American literature seventeen of 120 had same-sex attractions. Of the authors listed in British literature sixteen of 101 authors had same-sex attractions.

| | American Literature | British Literature |
|---|---|---|
| Vanessa | (No longer part of the department) | |
| Elizabeth | 4/17 | 4/16 |
| Lily | 2/17 | 0/16 |
| Ford | 9/17 | 10/16 |
| Clare | 6/17 | 2/16 |
| William | 2/17 | 2/16 |
| Sylvia | 2/17 | 2/16 |
| Ruth | 2/17 | 2/16 |
| June | 7/17 | 5/16 |
| Sally | 6/17 | 5/16 |

I believe there are many good reasons why most participants were only able to identify a very few lesbian/gay authors from the list. One reason, indicated to me by the participants as they were conducting the activity, is that their teachers had never identified which authors were homosexual, and therefore, since they had never studied this, they were unaware now. Clare indicated in her formal interviews that her professors in college had talked about the homosexuality of authors. However, under further analysis, we both came to the conclusion that these professors were not

revealing all of the lesbian/gay authors of works they were studying. They were only mentioning the most famous ones, such as Oscar Wilde and Gertrude Stein.

While I do believe that this group of teachers is generally very liberal and accepting of lesbians and gays, I did start to question this apologetic attitude towards this activity. Most of the members of this department are in my opinion highly intellectual. Typically, when they find themselves deficient in knowledge about a subject, they go to great lengths to find as much information about that topic as they possibly can. Their failure to seek more knowledge about which authors were lesbian or gay might at least on some level be traced to residual amounts of internalized homophobia. As I analyzed the response to this activity, I thought of the words of Jim Reese (2000):

> Many well-meaning colleagues say they would be more inclusive if only they had more knowledge; some say they would rather not talk about homosexuality at all because the issue makes them uncomfortable; still others cannot understand why such discussions are relevant in the classroom setting; and I even have heard a few say that so long as they have no students who identify as lesbian or gay, there is no need to raise the topic. There are times, of course, when I wonder if this ignorance is not in fact veiled hostility. (p. 133)

Certainly, I heard most if not all of these responses during the course of this study. I, like Reese, wondered how much of this ignorance is simply ignorance and how much is "veiled hostility." While I would never characterize the participants of this study as homophobes, certainly the resistance on the part of the vast majority of them to learning more about lesbian/gay issues is at the very least troubling.

However, as troubling as these teachers reluctance to learn about lesbian/gay issues is, it is not at all uncommon according to William Spurlin (2000). Spurlin

acknowledges that even at the college level where presumably teachers have greater academic freedom, the topic of homosexuality remains taboo:

> At the college level, despite common yet highly questionable perceptions of a more liberal or progressive stance toward variant sexual identities, many English faculty, despite a wealth of new scholarship in queer studies, often downplay the homosexuality of canonical authors, remain unfamiliar with contemporary gay and lesbian authors, do not create adequate spaces in classroom discussion for lesbian or gay readings of texts to emerge, and do not adequately sustain classroom discussion on the politics of sexuality as it comes up in student writing. (p.xviii)

If college professors remain fearful and ignorant of the homosexuality of the authors that they include in their coursework, this cycle of ignorance mentioned by the participants of this study will continue indefinitely. However, even if the participants of this study did not learn in undergraduate school about the sexuality of the authors from their professors, they can help end the cycle of ignorance by learning this information now and sharing that information with their students. If this is done, these students will possibly feel free to bring up their knowledge of the homosexuality of an author in their college classrooms whether it is introduced by the professor or not.

### The Intentional Fallacy.

Despite the fact that participants saw the revelation of an author's homosexuality as less threatening than including a piece that dealt directly with lesbian/gay issues, I realized early on that the idea of talking about an author's homosexuality would be met with great resistance by many members of the

department. These teachers did not believe they were being homophobic, they believed they were applying an important literary principle that they summed up by saying, "a work of art stands on its own."

I first realized that this would be a problem for many of the literature teachers when discussing my study with some of them over lunch. While most of the teachers present were English teachers, the most vocal member of the lunch group was the drama teacher, a former English teacher in the school. He voiced a philosophy about literature that I was to hear over and over again from many of the other English teachers in this study. When he discovered that I advocated the revelation of an author's homosexuality in cases where this revelation would aid in the understanding of the literary work, he became incensed:

> Randy, that is the dumbest thing I ever heard. What difference does it make if Walt Whitman was gay? It doesn't change the literature. A work of art stands on its own. How could knowing that an author was gay help anyone? I don't care if Whitman was gay or straight. It doesn't change what he was able to accomplish. It doesn't change what he wrote. It doesn't make any difference whether he was gay or straight.

As I tried to clarify what my position was and give him specific examples of how I thought students might benefit from the knowledge of an author's homosexuality, he became more and more irate. He looked to the other English teachers present for support. The other English teachers seemed to embrace both sides of this debate. They argued that they could see my points about how the revelation of author's homosexuality might illuminate certain themes, but they also agreed with the drama teacher that works of literature are universal and that a work of art stands on its own.

From classroom and informal observations, I knew that all of these teachers

including the drama teacher did in fact reveal other facts about the lives of the authors. So at times I questioned how much of this belief that a work of art stands on its own was literary and how much of it was a way to mask internalized homophobia. However, I quickly learned that the teachers in this study felt justified in their assertion of this stance because of their educational background.

Most of the teachers in this study had received their undergraduate degrees during a time when New Criticism had an almost exclusive domination in the field of literary theory, and consequently most of them believe that they base their literary instruction on the principles of New Criticism. One of these principles and the one that is at work in the assertion that "a work of art stands on its own," is the principle of the intentional fallacy. Defined in the Harper Handbook to Literature (1985) as "The idea that the meaning of a work can be explained by considering the author's intention, a fallacy according to New Criticism," the intentional fallacy is what the literature teachers in this study who protest against giving biographical facts use to justify their position. In Annabel Patterson's (1990) essay "Intention" she traces the development of intention as a term used in literary criticism. She cites as one of the most important essays on intention the one that appeared in 1965 under the title "Intention" in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics by R. W. Stallman. In Patterson's citation of this as an important source of understanding intention as it applies to literary criticism, she gives a quote from Stallman's essay that begins, "Once the work is produced it possesses objective status—it exists independently of the author and of his declared intention." When we realize that these words were first published at virtually the same moment that most of the teachers in this study

were working on their undergraduate degrees, we can see why they hold on to the belief that "a work of art should stand on its own."

However, while most of the teachers in this study asserted in one way or the other this belief that literature should be separated from any biographical facts that might have shaped its creation, their teaching practices did not correspond with this belief. In every class I observed and from informal conversations about lessons taking place, I came to the realization that these teachers were constantly revealing facts about the author's life when they knew them. In fact, the only times that teachers did not give at least some biographical facts about the author were times, like those mentioned by Sally, when they were teaching the works of authors that they were unfamiliar with and consequently did not know any biographical facts that they might use.

Elizabeth provides a perfect example of this disconnect between belief and practice. In the interview, Elizabeth insisted that there was no need to reveal the homosexuality of the authors. Along with her assertion that literature stands on its own, she stated, "it's very interesting to know about an author's background and to understand the context and the fabric of society of when that person was living, but I think that is icing on the cake." When I asked her to compare the way she avoided revealing Willa Cather's lesbianism with the way she taught the works of Langston Hughes, she first insisted that Hughes' race was inconsequential. Later in the interview she said she might tell the students that Langston Hughes was African-American after they had read the poem and discussed it first. Again she stated that it shouldn't matter what race Hughes was because "great literature should be

universal."

This philosophy stood in sharp contrast to what I witnessed during observations of Elizabeth's class. For example, when Elizabeth's honor's ninth grade literature classes were studying "The Cask of Amontillado," Elizabeth supplemented the lesson with an audio-taped biography of Edgar Allen Poe. This audio-tape was a lecture conducted by Professor Engels. In this lecture, Engels focuses solely on the biography of Poe. Elizabeth had supplemented the tape with a worksheet that she created. Questions on this worksheet directed students' attention to some of the most minute details of Poe's life. For example, one question was, "Poe's father became famous by doing a dance called _____." The appropriate response was clogging.

Despite the fact that Elizabeth insisted that she avoided controversial issues in the classroom, this tape and the worksheet focused on some areas of Poe's life that might be considered quite controversial. For example, Poe's fascination with death, unresolved romantic issues associated with his mother, alcoholism, and marriage to his thirteen year old cousin, are all topics that the tape addresses. Elizabeth did not see any of these issues as particularly controversial. In fact, these issues were, in her mind, what made the tape so enjoyable to the students. As she said, "the students love this tape because Poe is so weird."

Despite the fact that Elizabeth does not see her reluctance to identify the sexuality of authors she knows to be lesbian or gay as homophobia (and as mentioned earlier she later did identify Cather as a lesbian), it is notable that homosexuality is the one topic that she has consistently shied away from over the

years. Edward Ingebretsen (2000) brings up this point is his essay "When the Cave is a Closet: Pedagogies of the (Re)Pressed." In analyzing the responses to a course he teaches, English 118, Unspeakable Lives: Gay and Lesbian Narrative, he comes to the conclusion:

> In its emphasis on language and text, English 118 is not all that different from more traditionally formulated courses in literature and linguistic studies. It differs from others, however in that its scope is potentially wider-- concerned as it is with the complications of all speech acts -- as it assesses the grave consequences that follow from deflections and erasures in the discursive domain. To take a case in point: Freedom of speech is acclaimed everywhere. Congressional and presidential addresses extol it, while newspaper and tabloid alike hail it as the essential American freedom. Yet, to the contrary, in contemporary American society it is not what is said in public that is problematic-- rather, it is what is not and *will not* be said. (p. 19)

I believe that the members of this department would benefit greatly from looking at how we use biography in our classes ("what is said" and "what is not and will not be said"). Instead of haphazardly revealing biographical facts simply because we know these facts, I believe we should strategically reveal facts that would help students better understand the works we are studying. We should ask ourselves when do we reveal biographical facts and why. Through asking these questions and discussing them as a department, I believe we could come to terms with why we believe that there is no problem in talking about Poe's marriage to his thirteen year old cousin, F. Scott Fitzgerald's problems with alcohol, and other somewhat controversial biographical facts, but we are reluctant to reveal the homosexuality of an author.

These discussions might lead the teachers in this department to consider other theoretical frameworks besides New Criticism. However, even if the teachers

remain entrenched in their belief in New Criticism, through these discussions they may begin to challenge their notion that a work of art stands on its own. We might look to the Harper Handbook to Literature for leadership in this area. This handbook gives some caveats to the notion that a work stands on its own. The handbook's definition of intentional fallacy states:

> (1) …Writers may accomplish more than they intend, or even something quite different. (2) Despite the warnings of the New Criticism, a consideration of the author's intention can sometimes lead to an understanding perfectly compatible with close analysis, but overlooked without the external clue. (p. 244)

Since my observations of the teachers in this department show that they are already incorporating biographical facts about the authors whose works they study, this group of teachers, by examining the different perspectives on the use of biography, might come to a more well crafted method of incorporating these biographical facts. If this occurs, the teachers might use biographical facts about the authors whose works they study to lead the students to a close analysis of the literary work rather than just to supplement the lesson.

When to Reveal an Author's Homosexuality.

Assuming that the teachers in this department become comfortable in revealing the homosexuality of the authors they study, another conversation that might be needed is a dialogue about when, in the discussion of a literary work by a homosexual author, it is appropriate or necessary to reveal the author's homosexuality. Both William and Sylvia stated that in the past when they revealed

an author's homosexuality, many students objected to reading the work. While teachers should not allow students to use an author's sexuality as a reason not to read an assigned work, William's and Sylvia's experiences show that at times this is precisely what occurs.

Even June who regularly reveals the homosexuality of the authors studied in her class, suggests that this requires a strategic approach. As June suggests, withholding the fact that an author being studied is lesbian or gay until after reading the work, might allow students who are homophobic to make a connection with the work first. Then, these students might, through their own self-analysis, be able to confront their feelings of homophobia when they see the commonality that heterosexual and homosexual people share. As June says:

> So I usually start off with something like "Storm Warnings" which is a regular poem about emotion turmoil and kids love that. And get them hooked on her and then lead them into the radical poems and see the sort of the scope of her poetry. Because I think sometimes if they get hooked on it, then the lesbianism doesn't seem (trails off).

Withholding knowledge of an author's homosexuality until the students have read and already had some discussion of the work, might be a strategy that this department chooses to use. However, clearly there may be times when it would be more beneficial to reveal the author's homosexuality before the reading takes place.

If this department decides to be more forthcoming with the knowledge of authors' homosexuality, it would be beneficial for us to conduct discussions about which works would be best suited for this revelation. Also, it might be important to decide which works lend themselves to having this discussion after the reading and

which ones are best suited to having these discussions before or during the reading of the work. For example, with The Importance of Being Earnest and My Antonia, the teacher might want to have this discussion prior to the reading. In this way, students would be alerted to look for certain themes and situations that might aid in a close reading and analysis of the work. If students understand from the beginning that bunburying might be metaphorical for Wilde's own secret life and endeavors, they might better understand the play. In the same way, if students have knowledge of Cather's lesbianism, then they might better recognize and understand some of the interesting ways that Cather plays with gender throughout the novel.

Biography of Teacher.

Another interesting way that teachers utilize biography in their classrooms is through their own autobiographical examples and vignettes. For the overwhelming majority of the participants of this study and other members of the department, I witnessed in every classroom observation the teachers using their own biographical stories to illustrate points and connect the lesson to real life. One example of this mentioned earlier in this work is the way Vanessa used her relationship with her husband as a metaphor for the relationship between a subject and a verb. But there were many other such examples. June for example often used her relationship with her husband to illustrate literary points. However, at the beginning of the year she did not name him and she rarely referred to him as her husband, instead using the word partner. This led many of the students in her class to believe that she was a

lesbian until later in the year as gradually more biographical information came to light.

There were a couple of notable exceptions to this use of autobiographical information. Clare rarely ever uses any biographical information in her classroom discussions. I believe this stems from what I characterized earlier as her stoicism. Clare believes that what is important in a literature classroom is facts, and therefore, she does not see a need to highlight literary discussions with personal examples. This is not to say that Clare is resistant to the idea of personal connections to literature. She often allows time in her classroom for students to make and share their own personal connections to a work. While she is more than willing to listen to and see value in the students' personal connections to these works, she is reluctant and sometimes unwilling to share her own connections. This often leads the students to speculate on Clare's personal life. I have had many students tell me that Clare, who is Caucasian, is married to an African-American man. When I tell these students that I know Clare's husband and that he is a white man, they are incredulous. It is clear to me that the students believe that since Clare does not readily reveal personal information as the other teachers do that she must have something to hide. I believe that the students perceive interracial relationships as something that is taboo. I think that Clare's reluctance to talk about her personal life, combined with her inclusion of African-American literature and generally liberal ideas, leads students to make up stories that fill in the blanks that Clare refuses to reveal in class.

Other than Clare, Ford is the only other teacher in the department who doesn't make references to his personal relationships during class discussions. However, this

is not to say that Ford does not give biographical details. Ford often uses life stories to illustrate lessons. He frequently talks in class about his life in New York, and the experiences he had in the theater. Paradoxically, Ford probably engages in autobiographical revelations during classroom discussions more than any other teacher in this study. However, the biographical facts he reveals are always devoid of any mention of romantic or intimate relationships. Just as with Clare, the students make up their own "facts" to fill in for the absence of the autobiographical facts that Ford leaves out. One of the predominant rumors about Ford is that he is engaged to a model (a woman), and that he is reluctant to get married. Students often claim that they have seen Ford and this fictitious model at school events.

I believe that Ford's withholding of facts about his personal relationships is a significant finding of this study. Of the twenty teachers in this department, I could find only three, Clare, Ford, and myself, who withheld facts about their personal relationships. While clearly Clare consciously made the choice to withhold these facts, Ford and I were not given the choice. As Edward Ingebretsen (2000) states: "For a queer teacher to achieve a degree of safety in the classroom entails a complex choreography. He or she must negotiate multiple and generally disguised fault lines of power: civil, legal, popular, academic" (p. 14). Clearly, Ford's revelation of so many personal facts while withholding facts about his personal relationships constitutes the "complex choreography" that Ingebretsen speaks of.

Perhaps even more significant are the rumors the students make up about Ford. Ingebretsen addresses this phenomena as well:

> Because of the fixities built into the educational model, and because of the fixations enforced by the closet, the queer teacher is

> forever under erasure. His or her face must always be locked toward the light of the opening door -- not to anticipate release but, sadly enough, to be alert to the threat. After all the monster must be silenced, lest fearsome spectacle be diluted by the compassion provoked by speech. (p. 32)

I believe the students find comfort in the rumors that Ford is a heterosexual because through the erasure of Ford's gay identity, students can "normalize" Ford and no longer be threatened by his class. I find it significant that when Clare withholds details of her personal life, the rumors the students create have the potential to make her a more radical or controversial figure, while the rumors spread about Ford have the effect of normalizing him. Claudia Mitchell (2000) touches on this fact when she quotes Kirk Fuoss, "The implication seems to be that while it's one thing to permit talk about homosexuality, it is quite another matter to permit a homosexual to talk" (p. 123). Clearly, in this department, not by any decree but simply through the force of societal norms, a double standard exists where heterosexuals are free to talk about their personal relationships, but homosexuals are not. The biographical facts that the gay teachers in this study (myself included) must withhold may make it more difficult for them to discuss the biography of lesbian/gay authors. It might be that the heterosexual teachers may feel more comfortable talking about the homosexuality of authors because they know their motives and their personal lives will not be called into question for doing so. As Mitchell says, "In a sense, then, there is often a censoring of the gay voice to speak on its own behalf. While it is clearly 'safer' to have someone speak on behalf of gay voices, this is not without political implications" (p. 123). This finding might mean that lesbian/gay teachers or at least the ones in this study might have greater difficulty in incorporating

discussions of the homosexuality of authors than will the heterosexual teachers in the study.

Grouping of Lesbian/Gay Authors.

Both prior to and during the research for this study, I witnessed a resistance on the part of the literature teachers to present works that dealt with a wide range of diverse viewpoints. I noticed that often the teachers in this department seemed to devalue the works of minority authors. More than any of the other participants, Clare's formal interview most clearly illustrates this reluctance, but I saw this resistance in other teachers as well. While Clare stated openly her feelings about "capital B black authors with capital I issues about being capital B black," other teachers in the study stated similar things but only in informal conversations.

Some of these discussions took place in lunchroom conversations when English teachers complained about the new curriculum. While there was considerable angst about many aspects of the new curriculum, most of the anger was focused on the inclusion of works by minority authors. The teachers often complained that these works were only included because of the author's ethnicity, and they believed that the works were often lacking in literary value.

While I disagree with the assessment of these works, I believe that the perceptions of the teachers in this department offer caveats for those like myself who propose a greater integration of works by and about lesbians and gay men. First, I believe works by lesbians and gay men must be integrated in a natural way. Second,

I believe that at this time it would be unwise to include an entire unit that focuses on lesbian and gay works.

The works must be integrated naturally because this is one of the biggest complaints I hear from this group about the works of minority authors. For example, in an effort to be more sensitive to the needs and interest of a variety of different cultural groups, the new curriculum presents works anachronistically. Teachers, who for years have been accustomed to starting American literature with a unit on the Puritans, often become disconcerted when they are asked to begin their study of American literature with works that are about Native Americans, African-Americans, and other minority groups. This argument becomes exacerbated when the teachers are asked to present works like the one currently used, "My Sojourn in the Lands of My Ancestors" by Maya Angelou, that are not presented in chronological order. I have heard a great deal of resentment from the members of the department who teach American literature about works such as this one.

While it might be that these teachers are simply resistant to all works that are multicultural, the argument that students, who are studying a course that purports to be chronological, shouldn't be reading a twentieth century work before they read earlier works has a certain amount (at least on the surface) of credence. I believe that what proponents of a curriculum that is more inclusive of lesbian and gay works might learn from this is that lesbian/gay works might meet with even more resistance than they otherwise would from the teachers unless they are integrated naturally into the curriculum. This might be even easier to do with lesbian/gay works than it is with other multicultural literature because unlike African-Americans who were

purposely kept from learning to read and write or Native Americans who had no written language prior to contact with the Europeans, there are many works in every period of history authored by lesbians or gay men. In addition to this fact, many of these works are already a part of the curriculum.

Rather than create a grouping of works (i.e. the Stonewall Unit), I believe that it would be best to fully integrate these works as they naturally occur. I see a great deal of resistance now to having all or the majority of African-American writers grouped as a part of the Harlem Renaissance. Again, Clare was the most forthcoming about expressing this view: It is sort of like “The Black Authors.” It’s the Harlem Renaissance and everything that goes along with it… And all those authors even though they aren’t Harlem Renaissance authors are all in the same unit." Clare went on to say, "Everything we read in our curriculum is specifically… Not just the idea of being different or being and outsider… Or seeing things from a different view… but being black. As if 100% of their identity and the only thing they were interested in is the fact that they were black." Clare's comments about African-American authors echo Lee Lynch's words about lesbian/gay authors:

> Now when I read from the vast selection of lesbian and gay literature, I am looking for that same uplifting experience. I don't want the tortured complaints of our past abuse, unless they're turned around into hope and acceptance. I don't want melodramatic stories of desolation. I want our protagonists and heroes to be rounded people living in the world. I want our literature to project our own newfound or newly acknowledged health and I don't care if it's in mysteries or romances, or heady intellectual novels and perfect short stories. I want us thriving through our words. (p. 11)

Like the Harlem Renaissance Unit that presently exists, a Stonewall Unit could fall prey to this tendency to focus “on the tortured complaints of our past abuse.” In

addition, if we identify the homosexuality of authors that are already in the curriculum and add new authors when appropriate, there will be no need for a "special" unit to address lesbian/gay concerns.

A fully integrated curriculum would inspire lesbian/gay students and enlighten heterosexual students. For example, with early American Literature we might focus on how Whitman's homosexuality helped shape his transcendentalist views. From there we might talk about Cather, Stein, and others but always in the context of the time period or the movement, and never simply because of their homosexuality.

Appropriate Age For Students to Discuss Lesbian/Gay Issues.

Many members of this department expressed concerns that lesbian/gay subject matter might not be appropriate with all age levels. Most participants who expressed this concern were reluctant to give a specific level that would be appropriate, but the general consensus was that eleventh and twelfth graders were more mature and more capable of discussing lesbian/gay subject matter than were ninth and tenth graders. This perception on the part of the teachers actually runs counter to the research. For example, Kathryn Herr (1997) in her study entitled "Learning Lessons from School: Homophobia, Heterosexism, and the Construction of Failure" demonstrates:

> Gay and lesbian teenagers report that between ages 12 and 14 they became more aware that they were attracted to persons of the same sex. Many gay and lesbian teenagers report that they somehow considered themselves outsiders or felt different for many years; for a large number this dated back to early childhood. (p. 54)

Herr indicates that for lesbian/gay youth, an early age might be the best time for these young people to begin learning about their history and heritage:

> At a time in their lives when they should be freely exploring "Who am I?", young gays and lesbians instead are encouraged to either hide their sexual orientation or attempt to change themselves into acceptable heterosexuals; the third option, that of openly accepting themselves as gay or lesbian, is the most optimal and the one least encouraged by society. (p. 55)

While learning about other homosexuals might benefit young lesbians and gays, the teachers in this study feel that it is inappropriate because sexual topics should be introduced only with older students. However, when Elizabeth and other ninth grade teachers tell students that Poe married his thirteen year old cousin, Virginia Clem, they do not believe that they are revealing anything sexual. When ninth grade teachers choose to teach The Chocolate War, which many ninth grade teachers at this school do, they may worry some about the discussion of masturbation, but it is not frightening enough to keep them from teaching the work. Why should telling students that Cather is a lesbian invoke thoughts of what Cather did sexually any more than telling students that Elizabeth Barret Browning and Robert Browning were married? This might be a question that we want to address as the department moves forward in this area.

However, while I believe it would be beneficial for students to talk about lesbian/gay subject matter at all levels of education, I must recognize that this group of teachers, who are not completely comfortable with this topic, should not make themselves even more uncomfortable by introducing with a group that they feel is

not at the appropriate age level for these discussions. I feel that the concerns of these teachers might best be overcome by convincing them to begin the process of integrating lesbian/gay subject matter with their older students. Once they do this and become more comfortable with talking about lesbian/gay concerns in front of students, I believe they will overcome their fears and realize that the subject is appropriate at all levels of high school instruction.

Treatment of Students Who Come Out.

The most troubling thing I discovered in the process of this study was the fact that, except for the teachers who had already had students come out to them, the teachers in this department had never given any thought whatsoever to what they might do if a student chose to come out to them. In my teaching career, the number of students who have come out has increased each year. I believe that as the topic becomes more and more commonplace in the media, we will see ever increasing numbers of students come out at earlier and earlier ages. Eric Rofes (1997) has also suggested that students will increasingly come out at younger and younger ages:

> Increasingly personnel in schools throughout the United States find themselves forced to deal with queer youth. Not only have school administrators been found liable for failing to protect students from school-based anti-gay harassment and violence, but anecdotal evidence is mounting that queer youth are coming out in their classrooms at increasingly early ages, some as early as fifth or sixth grade. (p. xvi)

It seems to me that before teachers begin their careers, it might be beneficial for them to contemplate the actions that they might take to help lesbian/gay students who come to them looking for support.

It might be even more important that teachers, at least at this school, begin to imagine how they might help youth who come out to them given the fact that the majority of the participants in this study had very little confidence in the counselor's ability to provide lesbian/gay students with support. Every participant in this study, with the exception of Vanessa, believed that the only way they would direct a lesbian/gay student to a counselor for support would be if they could pick the specific counselor that would be involved.

While we contemplate as a department how we might move forward with lesbian/gay subject matter, we might take into account what lesbians and gays say about their school experience. Some of these comments are included in Kathleen Malinsky's (1997) "Learning to Be Invisible: Female Sexual Minority Students in America's Public High Schools":

> The only positive mention in my classes (the negative ones were from peers, not teachers) came from my senior Psychology teacher, who stated, as I recall, that homosexuality was normal and healthy and that anyone who had questions or concerns about being gay or friends being gay could come talk to him. (L., 22, San Mateo County, California)

> I would say that the most important thing to do is discuss the subject in class if at all possible; one thing that drove me nuts and still does is the complete lack of representation gays and lesbians have in the curriculum or even in general discussions. I think the sheer fact of omission of the subject is so evil you can't even talk about it. Not quite a very encouraging environment… (S., 19, Tulsa, Oklahoma)

> …there was not material on gay issues in my town. And I looked for it, because although I wasn't really fully aware of my sexuality I was forever doing projects on AIDS, and les-bi-gay issues (to my teachers' dismay and disappointment). (R., 19, Fairfield County, Connecticut)

> I don't know if books pertaining to the issue of homosexuality were available in my school. I knew not to look for such things,

> because if you read about homosexuality, you were assumed to be a homosexual. (K., 19, Batesville, Indiana) (pp. 40-41)

I have watched over the last eight years as the participants in this study have gone to enormous lengths to accommodate the special needs of students. I believe that when these participants come to fully understand the needs lesbian gay students have and when they are able to confront their own internalized homophobia, most of them will make changes in the way they teach. I believe they will come to understand that we simply cannot continue to force lesbian/gay students to educate themselves about lesbian/gay subject matter. First, many simply won't because as K says above to do so would reveal their homosexuality at a time when they are reluctant to come out. Second, it is inherently unfair and unjust to continue to fully educate heterosexual students about their past while forcing lesbian/gay students to discover theirs on their own.

Clearly, this department has a great deal of work to do regarding full incorporation of lesbian/gay issues. I believe that this study allowed me to better understand why some of the teachers were reluctant to introduce the topic of homosexuality. More importantly, I believe that this study gave the participants a chance to reflect more fully on their views regarding lesbian/gay issues. I believe that this study is only a first step in the change process, but through this step I can see many opportunities for further growth.

# CHAPTER 7

# CONCLUSION

In this chapter I will address the path that I believe literature teachers should travel in their integration of lesbian/gay studies in the literature classroom. While certainly this is not a panacea. Since there are, I am sure, many high school literature teachers who are already incorporating lesbian/gay studies and many who never will, I believe that the following might give a general direction in which we might head. Throughout this section, I will discuss concerns that emerged during my data collection and analysis, and I will address how all literature teachers might further explore these concerns and by doing so enhance their ability to reach all students.

First, I will address three separate concerns many of the participants voiced. These concerns are the reluctance to talk about homosexuality because the teacher is uncomfortable with the topic of sex, the fear that talking about homosexuality will get the teacher in "trouble", and the belief that only older students are capable of discussing homosexuality. While each of these concerns is distinct, I believe they can all be addressed in one section here because of the common element of fear they all share.

Next I will address the concern that many participants had that they lacked the knowledge necessary to fully integrate lesbian/gay studies in the literature classroom.

I will address two areas of concern that fall under this category of lack of knowledge. The first is the belief many of these teachers had that they didn't know which authors were lesbian or gay. The second is that the participants didn't know of any lesbian/gay adolescent novels or short stories that they believed were of high enough quality to be used in the literature classroom.

Finally, I will address the fear shared by most of these participants that they wouldn't know what to do if a student came out to them. While I believe all teachers, not just literature teachers, should reflect on what they might do if a student came out to them, I think that this reflection is of special importance to literature teachers. Because literature teachers often have discussions that focus on the intricacies of the human spirit, it might be that they are more likely to have students come out than say a math or science teacher.

A Note Regarding Terms.

Throughout this work I have avoided the term sexual orientation in favor of the term sexual identity. I recognize the ineptness of the term, sexual identity, but I choose it in order to avoid contstucting lesbian/gay identity as a fixed entity. I do not mean to suggest that identifying as lesbian or gay hinges on who one has sex with. However, I address the issue of sexuality here because so many of my informants did see sex as the primary focus of lesbian/gay identity.

Fears About Discussing Sexuality.

Many of the teachers who participated in my study expressed their fears about talking about sex in the classroom. In reality literature discussion requires honest talk about sex and sexuality, and I believe that these discussions are commonplace. I believe that the reason many of the participants in my study and perhaps many literature teachers nationwide believe that they don't talk about sex is that these discussions usually take place regarding heterosexuality and as such are normalized. Therefore when literature teachers have discussions about heterosexuality, they do not "count" these discussions as sexual, but because talk about homosexuality is taboo in our society, any mere mention of homosexuality, even in its most subtle forms, is considered to be talk about sex.

Places in Literature Where Discussion of Sex is Unavoidable.

In this section, I will point out some of the works of literature that require talking about sexuality. For the purposes of this study and to illustrate my point more clearly, I will only use the works that are currently used in the high school where I teach. In doing this, I will be drawing on works that are used by the participants of my study, the same participants who believed the topic of sex was off limits or only appropriate for older students.

Clearly, the eleventh grade, American literature curriculum is rife with literature about sexuality. Numerous works included in this system wide mandated curriculum have conflicts that hinge on the disastrous results of heterosexual affairs. Some of

these works are The Scarlet Letter, The Crucible, and The Great Gatsby.

The sexuality included in these works is not in the least subtle. As a reader, it is absolutely necessary when reading The Scarlet Letter that we understand that Dimsdale has an affair with Hester Prynne that produces and illegitimate child. In a similar way, we must know that Gatsby has an affair with Daisy in The Great Gatsby. This affair between Gatsby and Daisy is not obscured in any way. Surely even unsophisticated readers can understand Fitzgerald's (1953/ 1925) line: "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife" (p. 137). Perhaps even more sexually provocative are Miller's (1976/ 1953) words that make clear the affair between Abigail and John Proctor in The Crucible:

> Abigail: I know how you clutched my back behind your house and sweated like a stallion whenever I come near! Or did I dream that? It's she put me out, you cannot pretend it were you. I saw your face when she put me out, and you loved me then and you do now! (p. 22)

I have never read this work with a class without this line being met with surprise and laughter, so undoubtedly the students understand the sexual nature of Abigail's metaphor here.

Not only is heterosexual sex overt in the American literature curriculum, it is often linked with violence. One example of this is the rape of Blanche in Williams' (1951) A Streetcar Named Desire. The words of Blanche's rapist, her brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski and the playwright's notes make the sexual nature of this scene apparent:

> Oh! So you want some rough-house! All right, let's have some rough house!

> [He springs toward her, overturning the table. She cries out and strikes at him with the bottle top but he catches her wrist.]
>
> Tiger--tiger! Drop the bottle top! Drop it! We've had this date with each other from the beginning!
>
> [She moans. The bottle top falls. She sinks to her knees. He picks up her inert figure and carries her to the bed. The hot trumpet and drums from the Four Deuces sound loudly.] (p. 130)

The rape scene is a pivotal point in the play, and certainly any discussion of the play without any mention of this scene would be remiss. However, many teachers in my study would point out that A Streetcar Named Desire is normally taught only in junior or senior classes. Since all but two of these participants in my study argued that discussions of sex are appropriate for older students, all of the examples I have mentioned thus far would be considered acceptable.

However, one of the most sexually explicit scenes in all of the novels that are included in this school system's curriculum is a part of the tenth grade course work. This scene is included in William Golding's (1954) Lord of the Flies. While the novel is particularly violent, the scene that involves the killing of the pig is particularly horrific:

> Here, struck down by the heat, the sow fell and the hunters hurled themselves at her. This dreadful eruption from an unknown world made her frantic; she squealed and bucked and the air was full of sweat and noise and blood and terror. Roger ran round the heap, prodding with his spear whenever pig flesh appeared. Jack was on top of the sow, stabbing downward with his knife. Roger found a lodgment for his point and began to push till he was leaning with his whole weight. The spear moved forward inch by inch and the terrified squealing became a high-pitched scream. Then Jack found the throat and the hot blood spouted over his hands. The sow collapsed under them and they were heavy and fulfilled upon her. The butterflies still danced, preoccupied in the center of the clearing.
>
> At last the immediacy of the kill subsided. The boys drew back,

> and Jack stood up, holding out his hands.
>
> "Look."
>
> He giggled and flicked them while the boys laughed at his reeking palms. Then Jack grabbed Maurice and rubbed the stuff over his cheeks. Roger began to withdraw his spear and boys noticed it for the first time. Robert stabilized the thing in a phrase which was received uproariously.
>
> "Right up her ass!" (135)

Not only does this passage symbolically link sex and violence, it includes many societal taboos. First is the clear metaphor of the spear compared to the phallus and the reference to anal sex that this passages invokes. Also, in symbolically resorting to bestiality, the boys break one of the strongest of society's moral imperatives. While clearly here the sexual imagery of this passage is meant to be symbolic and not literal, it demonstrates the belief, at least on Golding's part, that sex especially as it is presented here is an expression of power not of love.

It would be hard to imagine a class deliberation of Lord of the Flies that does not include a discussion of the killing of the pig. The scene is pivotal because it shows the boys complete descent from British prep school, choir boys to depraved savages. Despite the obvious sexual allusion and the graphic violence, this novel is standard for all tenth grade students in our system.

Even more telling is the graphic sexuality of one of the standard works for all ninth graders, William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. I focus on this work here and my treatment of it is somewhat extensive because it is a work that the teachers in my school system, and many literature teachers throughout the nation, use with the youngest of all high school students. Long presented as a beautiful love story between two youths, Romeo and Juliet is as much about sex as it is about love.

From the earliest entrance of Romeo, we see the importance of sexuality to the

play's conflict. Romeo's love of Rosaline is not returned. Romeo makes it clear that the reason he is rejected by Rosaline is her promise to remain a virgin:

> She'll not be hit
> With Cupid's arrow. She hath Dian's wit,
> And, in strong proof of chastity well armed,
> From Love's weak and childish bow she lives unharmed.
> She will not stay the siege of loving terms,
> Nor ope her lap to saint-seducing gold.
> O', she is rich in beauty; only poor
> That, when she dies, with beauty dies her store. (p. 25)

In order for the students to understand Shakespeare's allusion here, they must realize that Shakespeare compares Rosaline to Diana, the goddess of the moon, because they both have sworn a vow to remain virgins. While it is not essential to the plot that the students understand the exact reason that Rosaline rejects Romeo, this early reference to sexuality sets the tone for many more explicit sexual references throughout the remainder of the play.

Many of the crudest sexual references come from the lines of the Nurse. The nures's crude an often inappropriate sexual remarks are an important part of her characterization. When the nurse informs Juliet that she is helping Romeo in his efforts to consummate the marriage, she says:

> Then hie you hence to Friar Laurence' cell;
> There stays a husband to make you a wife.
> Now comes the wanton blood in your cheeks;
> They'll be scarlet straight at any news.
> Hie you to church; I must another way,
> To fetch a ladder, by the which your love
> Must climb a bird's nest soon when it is dark.
> I am the drudge, and toil in your delight;
> But you shall bear the burden soon at night. (pp. 109-111)

An examination of these lines could be an important part of teaching this play.

Through analysis of these lines, students could reflect on sexual mores of the Elizabethans, but more importantly, students could examine the inherent sexism of the time period as they give thought to why the nurse believes that sex will be a "burden" for Juliet.

A more obvious example of sexism occurs when the nurse tells Romeo of Paris' interest in Juliet: "O, there is a nobleman in town, one Paris, that would fain lay knife aboard" (p. 103). Here not only is the male the one whose sexual desire takes precedent, but by using a weapon as a metaphor for the phallus, Shakespeare links sexual penetration with power and violence.

For my point here, more important than the comments of the nurse are the words of Juliet. Many of my informants expressed concern that talk about sexuality shouldn't take place with the younger students, but here we must remember Juliet's age ["She hath not seen the change of fourteen years" (p. 29)], and we will be reminded that often those in their early teens are much more aware of sexuality than we often give them credit for. Some may argue that Juliet is a fictional character and an Elizabethan one at that, so teens today might not share her sexual awareness. However, one of the main reasons teachers at my school, and I suspect other English teachers as well, cite for including Romeo and Juliet in the ninth grade curriculum is the students can "relate" to it. Surely, with the prevalence of sex in popular culture in modern times, teens are not more ignorant of sexuality now than were the Elizabethans, and although Juliet is a fictional character, surely Shakespeare must have felt that Elizabethan audiences would find her knowledge of sexuality believable.

Perhaps the most clear cut example of Juliet's knowledge of sexuality occurs as she waits and longs for nighttime to come so she and Romeo can consummate their marriage:

> Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
> Towards Phoebus' lodging! Such a wagoner
> As Phaeton would whip you to the West,
> And bring in cloudy night immediately.
> Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,
> That runaways' eyes may wink, and Romeo
> Leap to these arms, untalked of and unseen.
> Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
> By their own beauties; or, if love be blind,
> It best agrees with night. Come, civil night,
> Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,
> And learn me how to lose a winning match,
> Played for a pair of stainless maidenhoods.
> Hood my unmanned blood bating in my cheeks.
> With thy black mantle; till strange love, grown bold,
> Think true love acted simple modesty.
> Come, night; come, Romeo, come; thou day in night;
> For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night
> Whiter than new snow on a raven's back.
> Come, gentle night; come, loving, black browed night;
> Give me my Romeo; and when he shall die,
> Take him and cut him out in little stars,
> And he will make the face of heaven so fine
> That all the world will be in love with night
> And pay no worship to the garish sun.
> O', I have bought the mansion of a love,
> But not possessed it; and though I am sold,
> Not yet enjoyed. (p. 131)

It does not take much prompting on the part of the teacher for students to see how Juliet's passion builds here. Her impatience for nighttime, her talk of lovers' "amorous rites," and her references to both her own and Romeo's virginity ["a pair of stainless maidenhoods"] clearly show that while the nurse may see the consummation of this marriage as a "burden" Juliet must bear, Juliet does not.

While Juliet may have a more positive attitude about sex than that of the nurse, Juliet does share the nurse's sexist attitudes. With Juliet's last words here, she compares her marriage to sexual slavery: "Though I am sold, not yet enjoyed." The sexuality of this passage is in no way subtle, and yet, I have never heard an English teacher complain that Romeo and Juliet is inappropriate for ninth graders, the youngest level of students that we teach.

Many English teachers might argue that because the Elizabethan language is often difficult for students to understand, most of the students do not "get" the sexual references in this play. I believe this is a specious argument. As literature teachers it is our jobs to aid the students in as full of an understanding of the literary works as we can possibly achieve. These passages are not minor and unimportant. In fact much of the conflict of the play rests on the understanding of the difficulties the young couple face in not only getting married, but later consummating that marriage. In addition to understanding the conflict, students can have a much richer discussion of this play by analyzing the sexist elements of the play which are for the most part most obviously revealed through the characters' attitude towards sexuality.

My argument here is a simple one. In order to fully teach literature not only do we need to talk about sex and sexuality, we must do so. As I have shown here, discussion of sex is a part of every level of high school, literature instruction even with the youngest of the students we teach, the ninth grade students.

## What Knowledge of Lesbian/Gay Studies Might Bring to the Literature Classroom.

Given the fact that, as I have shown here, discussions of sexuality are inevitable in the literature classroom, we should stop using a double standard when it comes to discussions of homosexuality. When we encounter homosexuality in a work, as literature teachers instead of asking whether we should discuss the homosexual aspects of the work, we should instead ask, "How will my students benefit both intellectually and personally from a discussion of the homosexual aspects of this work?"

In this section I will use two examples to show how students might benefit from frank talk about homosexuality. In the first example I will show what knowledge of an author's homosexuality might bring to the study of a literary work. In the second example, I will show how even when the author is not lesbian/gay or we are unsure of the sexuality of the author issues regarding homosexuality often arise. Teachers might enrich their discussions of literary works that touch on homosexuality by allowing the students to have more complete examinations of these issues.

## A More Complete Examination of the Works of a Gay Author.

To illustrate how having knowledge of an author's homosexuality might help

the student have a more complete understanding of that author's work, I will focus on Walt Whitman. While Whitman was mentioned by many of the participants in this study, the approach each participant took to the teaching of Whitman's works was radically different. For example Vanessa did not know that Whitman was gay, but said that even after finding out that he was homosexual, she wouldn't tell the students. Lily did know that Whitman was gay, but still didn't think it was necessarily important. In the past, Sylvia had told students that Whitman was homosexual, but because they reacted negatively to this fact, she stopped revealing it to her classes. Clare and Ruth both asserted that talking about Whitman's homosexuality was essential in talking about his works.

Here I will demonstrate how the book we currently use, The Language of Literature 1997), approaches Whitman's works. By withholding the knowledge of Whitman's homosexuality, the book prevents students from having a complete understanding of the excerpts the book presents. Also, by withholding this knowledge of Whitman's sexuality the book prevents students from linking Whitman's works to other works included in the textbook.

Ironically the book encourages a biographical connection to the works of Whitman at the same time it withholds knowledge of Whitman's homosexuality. While all authors presented in the book have a biographical sketch that follows their work, Whitman has a special introduction that encourages students to use biographical facts to aid their understanding of Whitman:

> Biographical Connection:
> Walt Whitman's first book of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, was so revolutionary in content and form that publishers would not publish it. After Whitman printed the book himself in 1855, many established

> poets and critics disparaged it. In 1856, the *Saturday Review* suggested that "if the *Leaves of Grass* should come into anybody's possession, our advice is to throw them instantly into the fire." Doubtless Whitman was shocked and hurt and shocked by such a reception, for he saw himself as capturing the spirit of his country and his times. In the preface to *Leaves of Grass,* he wrote, "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." Whitman's images encompass all of American life, including the common and "vulgar." His lines are long and rambling, like the vastly expanding country. His language reflects the vigor and energy of American speech, resounding with the new, distinctly American, rhythms. Most of his poems are marked by optimism, vitality, and a love of nature, free expression, and democracy-- values often associated with the America of his day. (p. 312)

Surely, Whitman's homosexuality and the homoerotic elements of his poetry were at least partially responsible for the extreme negative reaction from critics, but the Biographical Connection presented here sidesteps that aspect of Whitman's life. In the biographical sketch that follows Whitman's work, the textbook comes closer to revealing Whitman's homosexuality, but still withholds this information:

> "I am large. I contain multitudes," says Walt Whitman in "Song of Myself." It is a fitting description of a man whose writing touches on all aspects of life--the unique and the commonplace, the beautiful and the ugly. Whitman knew country life as well as city life, having grown up in rural Long Island and then in crowded Brooklyn. His varied work life included jobs as an office boy, a typesetter and printer, a school teacher, a carpenter, a newspaper editor and journalist, a nurse during the Civil War, and a government clerk in the Bureau of Indian Affairs.
>
> His true life's work, however, was a book of poems called *Leaves of Grass*, which he began to work on in 1848. Whitman quit his job, moved in with his parents, and worked part-time as a carpenter while writing his poems. In 1855, unable to find a firm that would publish his 12-poem book, he had it printed at his own expense. Throughout his lifetime, Whitman rewrote, revised, and expanded *Leaves of Grass*; the ninth and final edition in 1891 contained nearly 400 poems.
>
> Many critics thought the poems in *Leaves of Grass* "barbaric" and "noxious." They were shocked by the poems' radical style and suspicious of the poems' subject matter, particularly the vivid sexual imagery. Other readers, most notably Ralph Waldo Emerson, praised

> Whitman. Gradually, the literary world recognized the brilliance of the book. By the time the fifth edition was published in 1871, many well-known writers in England and America were traveling to Whitman's home in Camden, New Jersey, to visit him. Today *Leaves of Grass* is often regarded as the greatest, most influential book of poetry in American literature. (p. 321)

Here the editors of the textbook suggest that there is indeed "vivid sexual imagery," in Whitman's works, but they fail to describe what made this presentation of sexuality so offensive to the critics. While it is important to know the various jobs that Whitman held in order for students to recognize his poetry's strong connection to working class people, it is equally important for the understanding of Whitman's work to know of his homosexuality.

Another irony of this presentation of Whitman is that while the biographical information in the book is devoid of references to his homosexuality, one of the excerpts included in the book is from "Song of Myself," and contains overt references to Whitman's (1891/1997) homoerotic attractions:

> Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
> It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
> It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
> It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken
> Soon out of their mother's laps,
> And here you are the mothers' laps. (p. 318)

This reference to Whitman's love for men is crucial to understanding this poem. When Whitman contemplates the fact that the grass he walks on might ultimately stem from the decomposed bodies of young men and therefore he should love it as he might have loved them, he is not speaking of some general love for all of humanity. Students must know of Whitman's homosexuality in order to understand that

Whitman wants readers to see that his passion for nature is as strong as his love for his most passionate and erotic relationships, those with men.

This characterization of Whitman's love of nature as an erotic one is an important difference between Whitman's transcendentalism and Emerson's. Robert Martin (1995) explores this difference between Whitman and other transcendentalists:

> If Whitman took his nationalism and his optimism from Emerson, he was not satisfied with the Transcendentalist version of neo-Platonism. Such a philosophy saw the body merely as a means toward a higher, purely spiritual existence. Whitman's task in *Leaves of Grass* is to reclaim the body, to counter Western idealism with a new idea of a balance between body and soul. This tactic was essential for the creation of a view of homosexuality that did not privilege the "ideal" or nonphysical relationship over an embodied experience. (p. 737)

While high school students might not need to understand the finer points of Whitman's rejection of platonic love over erotic love, it is essential that they understand how passionate Whitman's love of nature is. In my own teaching experience, I have never had a group where at least some of the students, tipped off be the antiquated application of the word breast in reference to male anatomy, did not question what these lines from "Song of Myself" mean. We short-change these students when we withhold this information.

By failing to tell the students about Whitman's homosexuality, we also prevent them from making connection that could occur later in the textbook. Once such connection occurs with the presentation of the works on Langston Hughes in <u>The Language of Literature</u> (1997). The textbook includes Huges' (1926/1997) work

"I, Too":

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother,
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed--
I, too, am America. (p. 767)

The textbook asks students to make a connection between Whitman's work and this work by Hughes: "Compare "I, Too" with Walt Whitman's poem "I Hear America Singing" (page 312), concentrating on subject, mood and tone. Which vision of America-- Whitman's or Hughe's-- is closer to your own vision?" (p.771). The textbook instruct teachers that the proper response to this question is: "Whitman's subject is broader because by definition he encompasses all of the American culture rather than one group; Whitman is more exuberant, Hughes more gently melancholy and wryly humorous. Students' opinions of the poets' visions will vary" (p. 771).

Again, the textbook encourages while at the same time it discourages students from making the full connections they might make to this work. I assert here that one of the strongest connections students might make between these two works is Langston Hughes' attempt to link himself to a rich gay, literary tradition.

McDougall Litell makes this link for works that connect to other literary traditions. For example, in the ninth grade level of The Language of Literature (1997), the text tells us: "The title *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an allusion to the poem "Sympathy" by the African-American writer Paul Laurence Dunbar" (p. 60). In a similar fashion, the eleventh grade edition of The Language of Literature (1997) points out the link between Robert Frost's "Out, Out –" and Shakespeare's Macbeth: "The title of this poem is an allusion to some lines in William Shakespeare's Macbeth" (p. 825). In making these connections for readers, the textbook allows the students to see Frost's connection to works from the Western Canon and the connection of Angelou to an earlier African-American tradition. By not pointing out the connection of one great gay writer, Hughes, to another, Whitman, the textbook denies the students the opportunity to learn that there is a great lesbian/gay literary heritage, just as other groups have their own rich literary tradition.

There is every reason to believe that Hughes' line, "I, too, sing America" is a subtle attempt to connect his work with that of one of the best known and most respected gay writers. The admiration of Whitman by other gay writers is well documented. Robert Martin (1995) speaks of this connection:

> Whitman's work quickly established a sense of gay community among his readers. Writers such as Bayard Taylor, Bram Stoker, and Charles Warren Stoddard wrote to express their gratitude and received encouragement from Whitman. An 1868 edition of poems in England brought him many new readers. Among them were socialists such as Edward Carpenter, who in repeated essays, and Whitman-like poems sought to continue Whitman's heritage in its radical implications for the reorganization of society and sexuality. It was this radical Whitman, mediated through Carpenter, who reached E. M. Forster, leading him to create his memorable bathing scene in *A Room with a View* (1908) and to respond to Whitman's "Passage to India" (1871), a late poem seeking a completion of the spiritual mission in the

> embrace of the "Comrade perfect," with his novel *Passage to India* (1924). Later gay poets have also responded to Whitman, notably Hart Crane, who tried in *The Bridge* (1930) to create a modernist myth of America, and Beats such as Allen Ginsberg who were dubious about Whitman's vision, even as they adopted his free verse and his apparent authorization of a freedom of subject matter and an openness about homosexuality. (742)

While this passage does not mention Hughes, the reader can clearly see that like Carpenter, Hughes wrote "Whitman-like" poems, and like Forster, Hughes directly alludes to Whitman in his works.

While The Language of Literature text does not point out the place that Hughes and Whitman have in lesbian/gay literary tradition, the biography very subtly hints at Hughes homosexuality:

> By the age of 19, Hughes had found his distinctive poetic voice and had begun publishing in magazines. Although his work was well received by African-American readers, national recognition still eluded him.
>
> Then by winning a literary contest with "The Weary Blues" in 1925, Hughes won the support of a prominent critic who helped arrange for publication of his early books. He also gained public notice through an encounter with Vachel Lindsay. When the popular poet came to the restaurant where Hughes worked as a bus-boy, Hughes slipped three poems -- including "The Weary Blues" -- beside Lindsay's plate. The next morning the newspapers reported that Lindsay had "discovered" an African-American bus-boy poet. The rest is literary history. (p. 771).

While most high school students will not recognize Vachel Lindsay as a prominent gay writer, readers "in the know" can see that Hughes, like many Harlem Renaissance writers were "discovered" by white audiences through their friendships with prominent gay literary figures like Lindsay (Grief 1982) and Carl Van Vechten (Reimonenq (1995). By telling students of Hughes' homosexuality, teachers could show students that there is a rich lesbian/gay literary tradition.

In obscuring Whitman's homosexuality the textbook prevents the students from connecting Hughes with Whitman, but it also keeps them from making other connections. The excerpt in the eleventh grade level of The Language of Literature that deals with background information regarding the sixties makes it clear that the editors are deliberately avoiding the topic of homosexuality:

> Like previous national protest movements, the protests of the sixties found support in many writers of the time. In 1967, the poet Robert Bly turned down the prestigious National Book Award to protest U.S. policy in Vietnam. The poet Denise Levertov, who is represented in this part of the unit, wrote about her antiwar activities. Lanford Wilson's play *Wandering* captures the sense of confusion than many young people felt. Pressured by parents to conform and drafted by the government to fight in a foreign war, Wilson's young protagonist just wants to be left alone to live his life. Other writers that exploded on the scene during the decade -- such as Allen Ginsberg (the Walt Whitman of the sixties), William Burroughs, Ken Kesey, Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, Edward Albee, and Amira Baraka-- used too much profanity and too many references to sexuality and drug use for their works to be included in a high school textbook. (pp. 968 - 969)

In insisting that the works of many of the authors of the sixties are inappropriate because they contain "too much profanity and too many references to sexuality and drug use for their works to be included in a high school textbook," the editors reveal their hypocrisy. As I have shown here, Romeo and Juliet and other works commonly used in high school classrooms contain many references to sexuality. These works are published by McDougal Littell just as the textbook is. Moreover, referring to Allen Ginsberg as "the Walt Whitman of the sixties," is duplicitous since the biography of Whitman included in this textbook makes understanding this reference virtually impossible for students to grasp.

All students need to see that lesbians and gays have made important

contributions to the world, and literature teachers have a responsibility for showing students the rich literary heritage of lesbians and gays just as literature teachers show the literary heritage of Americans of Asian, Hispanic and African descent. However, if teachers are to do this, they must do so, for the present at least, without help from the textbook. Given the time constraints high school teachers are currently working under, it is unlikely that many teachers are going to do the research required to make these connections for students. Therefore, lesbian/gay literature remains obscured from the students' knowledge.

A More Complete Examination of Lesbian/Gay Elements When They Occur In Novels.

While it is highly unlikely that most literature teachers will do the research necessary to know which authors are lesbian or gay and what that might bring to literary discussions, all literature teachers can conduct discussions of homosexuality when the occur in novels being studied. One example of this occurrence of homosexuality is in the novel, A Separate Peace. Here again, this was an example mentioned by at least some of the informants of my study. Vanessa mentioned that students bring up the question of Gene's possible homosexuality each year, but explained that she discourages the question. Ford uses the novel to talk about Finny as the embodiment of the self-actualized person. Although Ford does discuss the scenes that invite students to see Finny and Gene as possible homosexuals, like Vanessa, he defers these questions in favor of seeing Finny as someone who because

he is self-actualized is not bothered by the accusation of homosexuality.

While I don't disagree with Ford's reading of these scenes as the self-actualization of Finny or with Vanessa's reading of the scenes as a chance to talk about wrongly stereotyping someone as gay, I believe these scenes do invite a gay reading at least as one possibility. In the first scene in question Knowles (1959/1998) has the narrator, Gene, bring up the topic of homosexuality directly:

> Phineas was the essence of this careless peace. Not that he was unconcerned about the war. After Mr. Prud'homme left he began to dress, that is he began reaching for whatever clothes were nearest, some of them mine. Then he stopped to consider, and went over to the dresser. Out of one of the drawers he lifted a finely woven broadcloth shirt, carefully cut, and very pink.
>
> "What's *that* thing?"
>
> "This is a tablecloth," he said out of the side of his mouth.
>
> "No, cut it out. What is it?"
>
> "This," he then answered with some pride, "is going to be my emblem. Ma sent it up last week. Did you ever see stuff like this, and a color like this? It doesn't even button all the way down. You have to pull it over your head, like this."
>
> "Over your head? Pink! It makes you look like a *fairy*!"
>
> "Does it?" He used this preoccupied tone when he was thinking of something more interesting than what you had said. But his mind always recorded what was said and played it back to him when there was time, so as he was buttoning the high collar in front of the mirror he said mildly, "I wonder what would happen if I looked like a fairy to everyone."
>
> "You're nuts."
>
> "Well, in case suitors begin clamoring at the door, you can tell them I'm wearing this as an emblem." He turned around to let me admire it. "I was reading in the paper that we bombed Central Europe for the first time the other day." Only someone who knew Phineas as well as I did could realize that he was not changing the subject. I waited quietly for him to make whatever fantastic connection there might be between this and his shirt. "Well, we've go to do something to celebrate. We haven't got a flag, we can't float Old Glory proudly out the window. So I'm going to wear this, as an emblem."
>
> He did wear it. No one else in the school could have done so without some risk of having it torn from his back. When the sternest of the Summer Sessions Masters, old Mr. Patch-Withers, came up to him after history class and asked about it, I watched his drawn but

> pink face become pinker with amusement as Finny politely explained the meaning of the shirt.
>
> It was hypnotism. I was beginning to see that Phineas could get away with anything. I couldn't help envying him that a little, which was perfectly normal. There was no harm in envying even your best friend a little. (pp. 18-19)

Clearly, this passage offers the opportunity to discuss stereotyping as Vanessa indicates with the assumption that the other boys will assume that Finny is a "fairy" if he insists on wearing the pink shirt. Also, the scene offers the chance to talk about the self-actualization of Finny that is apparent in his ability to withstand criticism and do as he pleases. However, there is also the possibility of reading the pink shirt not as a mistaken example of stereotyping, but as a clue to the reader that Finny is in fact gay, and to see the "anything" that Finny can "get away with" as homosexuality.

There is some scholarly evidence for this reading. Joseph Cady (1995) in his essay, "American Literature: Gay Male, 1900-1969" says: "There is no overt sexuality in the best-selling *A Separate Peace* (1960) by John Knowles (b. 1926), but, commenting on the relationship of the main characters in a 1972 interview, the author admitted, 'Finny and Gene were in love'" (p. 37). More important than any "proof" that Gene and Finny are gay characters is the possibility that they might be.

Once the teacher accepts the possible reading of Gene and Finny as gay characters, the discussion of this scene involving the shirt can go in a host of different directions including talks of stereotyping and of self-actualization. For example, students might be asked to contemplate the different ways that Finny and Gene react to the possibility of being identified as gay. Because Finny is popular

and athletic, he is insulated from the “charge” of being labeled “a fairy.” However, Gene and indeed any other boy at school that didn’t have Finny’s level of popularity would risk violence if identified as gay: “No one else in the school could have done so without some risk of having it torn from his back. “ An examination that went in this direction might open the discussion up to the ways our society victimizes lesbians and gays, how gays that can “pass” as straight often are somewhat more accepted than those that can’t, and how even someone as secure as Finny might not have the courage to allow this possible identification without having an alternative possibility [the fact that the shirt is an emblem, not a homosexual symbol].

The possibility of a gay reading might also shed new light on one of the most poignant scenes in the novel. This scene occurs when Finny convinces Gene to skip school and go to the beach:

> Enough broken rules were enough that night. Neither of us suggested going into any of the honky-tonks or beer gardens. We did have one glass of beer each at a fairly respectable-looking bar, convincing, or seeming to convince the bartender that we were old enough by a show of forged draft cards. Then we found a good spot among some sand dunes at the lonely end of the beach, and there we settled down to sleep for the night. The last words of Finny's usual nighttime monologue were, "I hope you're having a pretty good time here. I know I kind of dragged you away at the point of a gun, but after all you can't come to the shore with just anybody and you can't come by yourself, and at this teen-age period the proper person is your best pal." He hesitated and then added, "which is what you are," and there was silence on his dune.
>
> It was courageous thing to say. Exposing a sincere emotion nakedly like that at the Devon School was the next thing to suicide. I should have told him then that he was my best friend also and rounded off what he had said. I started to; I nearly did. But something held me back. Perhaps I was stopped by that level of feeling, deeper than thought, which contains the truth. (pp. 40-41)

The “truth” that Gene speaks of here might be the two boys’ homosexual desire.

Telling Gene that he is his "best pal," very well may have been one of the only ways a boy in the late fifties and early sixties had of expressing this desire. Without the possible gay reading, we are left with jealousy as one of the only possible reasons for Gene's responsibility for the death of Finny that occurs later in the novel. With the gay reading, we now have other possibilities. Rather than jealousy, it could be Gene's own self loathing and inability to accept Finny's proffer of love that causes him to knock Finny from the tree. Gene might not fear Finny's popularity and success; instead, because of his intense, internalized homophobia, he might fear the possibility that society will never accept the love the two boys have for each other.

I am not suggesting here that a gay reading is the only possibility for A Separate Peace, or that a gay reading is somehow more accurate than other readings. However, opening the book for a possible gay reading would certainly, as I have shown here, add some interesting possibilities for discussion. When students have the widest range of possible readings, their discussions are more interesting and their chances of making personal connections to works of literature are greatly increased.

## How We Might Use Lesbian/Gay Adolescent Works to Enhance the Literature Classroom.

If teachers accept the idea that lesbian and gay studies should be included in the literature classroom, the question must then turn to which methods of incorporation will bring the greatest success. Revealing the truth about the lives of lesbian and gay authors or talking about the homosexual aspects of works already included in the

curriculum are two ways of achieving this goal. However, the best method would be the inclusion of lesbian and gay literature that is open and honest about the sexual orientation of its characters.

Clearly some of the teachers that participated in this study would be reluctant to embrace a gay adolescent novel. Both Vanessa and Clare expressed concern that a gay adolescent novel might not be of high quality. Clare was the most vocal in her disdain for all adolescent fiction including gay adolescent fiction asserting, “I don't much care for teenage angst stories when they are maudlin 'adolescent fiction' stuff, as you know.” I believe this reluctance on the part of teachers to embrace adolescent fiction could be overcome with more exposure to adolescent works that are of high quality.

In the past, it would have been difficult to find works that were open about issues concerning sexual identity, but this is no longer true. Adolescent literature is witnessing an explosion of openly lesbian and gay characters and stories. Although at one time I would have agreed with some of the participants of my study who saw adolescent fiction as being of poor quality, I believe that several of the new adolescent novels are equally as good as the works in the existing curriculum. Teachers can use these new works to provide the much needed inclusion of lesbian and gay studies, and in my opinion one of the best adolescent novels about the gay experience, Baby Bebop by Francesca Lia Block (1995) provides many rich opportunities for the teaching of literature.

Baby Bebop is part of the Weetzie Bat series. The novels in this series of young, adult fiction have received numerous awards including the American Library

Association's Best Books for Young Adult Readers, Publishers Weekly Fifty Best Books of 92, and The New York Times Book Review's Notable Books of the Year. Out of all the books in the series, Baby Bebop shines as the best of Block's writing.

Block's mixture of prose and poetry in her early novels can often be disconcerting. However in Baby Bebop, she blends the two styles to make a work that is highly readable for adults and adolescents. Baby Bebop demonstrates Block's growing maturity as a writer.

In this novel Block achieves what many, gay writers have failed to accomplish. She authentically tells the coming of age story of a young, gay man. In her development of her character, Dirk McDonald, she shows great insight into the lives of gay men.

Dirk McDonald, prior to this novel a minor character in the series, struggles with the knowledge of his homosexuality. Like many young, gay men, he at first believes his homosexuality is just a phase, and he tries to conceal it. Many gay and straight students will be able to relate to Dirk's insecurities about being picked first when the boys choose up teams;

> That was important - being picked first. The weak, skinny scared boys got picked last. They got chased through the yard and had their jeans pulled up hard. Sometimes other kids threw food at them. Sometimes they went home with black eyes, bloody noses or swollen lips. Dirk knew that almost all the boys who were treated this way really did like girls. It was just that girls didn't like them yet. Dirk also knew that some of the boys that hurt them were doing it so they wouldn't have to think about liking boys themselves (p. 4-5).

This passage allows enormous opportunities for students to relate in a personal way to a work of literature, but it also allows them to explore stereotyping, issues of

gender differences and the theme of alienation.

Another passage that might provide an opportunity for students to both connect with the work and explore larger issues is the passage about secrets:

> After he met Pup, Dirk's room became full of secrets. The cigarettes in the bedposts. The stolen Three Musketeers bars in a dresser drawer. The *Playboy* magazines under the bed. And the real secret that had always been there grew larger and larger each day until Dirk thought it would burst out licking its lips and rolling its eyeballs and telling everyone that Dirk McDonald wasn't normal. (p. 18)

It is likely that many adolescents will be able to relate to Dirk's keeping of secrets and his feelings that he is abnormal. After making this connection with Dirk, students might explore further the many secrets we all keep for fear of being ostracized. Again, this is a good opportunity to explore themes of alienation that students are likely to encounter in many works of literature.

Some of the saddest, and yet most beautiful passages of the book, come when Dirk falls in love at with his best friend, Pup. The two friends are constantly together until Pup discovers girls, and Dirk reveals his love for Pup. The reader can feel Dirk’s heart breaking when he confronts Pup with his true feelings:

> "I just wanted to tell you. I've been pretending my whole life. I'm so sick of it. You're my best friend." Dirk looked down feeling the heat in his face.
>
> "Don't even say it, Dirk," said Pup.
>
> Dirk started to reach out his hand but drew it back. He started to open his mouth to explain but Pup whispered, "Please don't. I can't handle it man."
>
> He got up and pushed his hair out of his eyes. “I love you Dirk," Pup said. "But I can’t handle it.”
>
> And then before Dirk knew it, Pup was gone. (p. 31)

Even heterosexual students will be able to relate to the separation between friends that often occurs during adolescence, and while this passage is universal, it also gives

students a chance to explore varying forms of homophobia including the internalized homophobia that is the real reason that Pup can't love Dirk. Teachers might open up the discussion in order to talk with students about why Pup rejects Dirk here, but teachers might also ask students to hypothesize what they might do when someone shows interest in them and that interest is not mutual. This might draw heterosexual students into a discussion of the possibility that someone of the same-sex might someday show an interest in them. If students have a chance to talk about this, they might be less likely to react to such a situation with the homophobia that has become so evident in several high profile trials during recent years with the gay panic defense (Eskridge 1999).

Much of the remainder of the novel deals with Dirk's gradually coming to terms with the rejection he feels. Like many gay teens, Dirk tries to deals with enormous peer pressure, engages in reckless behavior, and even attempts suicide in his journey towards understanding and his search for love. These themes, while specifically being applied to a gay teen here, are universal in the adolescent experience.

If teachers have had discussions of possible gay bashing with the earlier scene where Pup rejects Dirk, they will be better able to discuss the real gay bashing that occurs in the novel:

> The skinheads were on him all at once. Dirk saw their eyes glittering like mica chips with the reflection of his own self-loathing. He wondered if he deserved this because he wanted to touch and kiss a boy. The sound of everything was so loud and he kept seeing the skinhead skulls with the stubble, the bunches of flesh at the back of the neck like a bulldog's. His own head felt like a shell. (p. 45)

Students might examine the complexities that often occur when victims blame

themselves.

After Dirk is gay bashed, the novel takes a surrealistic turn. Woven into the novel during hallucinations as Dirk recovers is the story of Dirk's great-grandmother, grandmother, father and mother. All of these heterosexual family members have secrets that they kept during their lives. As Dirk discovers more about the lives of these heterosexual members of his family, he discovers just how much commonality there is in the lives of straight and gay people. He realizes that his father and mother and his grandfather and grandmother all suffered in ways that are not unlike his own sufferings. Here again is a perfect chance for students to explore the differences we have as humans, but despite these differences how we all share a basic commonality

In tying the stories of these family members with the story of Dirk, Block establishes her major theme, one that is as crucial to heterosexuals as it is to lesbians and gays. At the beginning of the novel, Block begins the development of this theme: "How could he tell his story, he (Dirk) wondered? He had no story. And if he did no one would want to hear it. He would be laughed at, maybe attacked. So it was better to have no story at all. It was better to be dead inside"(p. 36). Through hearing the stories of his parents and grandmother, Dirk learns that his story is important and just as importantly should be shared. Block's development of this theme is not only an affirmation of Dirk, it is an affirmation of the importance of literature itself. Block shows us the importance of telling and hearing each other's stories.

The true beauty of Block's novel is that through it students can gain incredible

insights into the life of a gay man, but they can also gain insights into themselves. While Dirk faces many struggles and sometimes is placed in the role of victim, he survives these struggles and we leave the novel with a sense of triumph. Block is able to achieve in this adolescent novel what many gay writers have not. She gives us a character that is accessible to all. Dirk, unlike many gay fictional characters, is not rich; he will probably never attend Harvard or Yale, join the local theater club, or become a part of the bohemian lifestyle. He is an average, adolescent male searching for the love of another and more importantly a love for himself.

Baby Bebop explores themes that are universal in literary tradition: love, loss, and the desire for human connection. More importantly it explores these themes in a way that is accessible to students at all levels and because it is current, students might find more immediate connections with it than they would with a classical work. In exploring this novel that deals directly with the gay, adolescent experience, students can explore what is most central to the study of literature: the universal experiences that are a part of the human condition.

It is my belief that the approaches to teaching literature that I have advocated above would open up students' study of literature to a wide range of possible readings. While I am sure that some will characterize this work as essentialist in stance, I believe that showing students the possiblility for a wider range of readings will actually will be doing the work advocated by Fuss. As Fuss (1989) says, "One of the main contentions of this book is that essentialism, when held most under suspicion by constructionists, is often effectively doing its work elsewhere, under other guises, and sometimes laying groundwork for its own critique"(p. 1). My

experience in the classroom has lead me to believe that when gay readings are offered as one possibility, a wide range of possible readings emerge. I believe that by showing students the possibility of a gay reading, rather than being forced into a choice between the binary opposites, gay or straight, students come to see sexuality as far more diverse than they ever have. I base this belief partially on my experiences teaching, but even more significantly on my own experience. When my high school teacher spoke to us about the sexuality of ancient Rome and Greece during the discussion of Julius Caesar, rather than forcing me to believe in a choice between gay or straight, I became conscious of the multitude of ways people interact sexually.

Teachers' Reactions to Students Coming Out.

The most troubling revelation of this study for me was the fact that only the teachers that had students come out to them in the past could say what they would do if a student came out to them. Participants in this study who had not had any students come out to them universally said that they had never thought about what they might do if a student did want to talk about her or his sexuality. It seems to me that given the current proliferation of lesbians and gays in the media, the possibility of a teacher having a student come out is greatly increased. Rather than waiting to have this experience, it might be beneficial for teachers to think about how they would handle this in advance.

When deciding what we might do as teachers when a student comes out to us,

we might modify some of the advice that Gloria Guss Back (1985) gives to parents. Back, who received her degree in social work partially in order to understand her son's coming out, compiled this advice after years of working with other parents of lesbians and gays. While some of her allusions here are dated and in she sometimes tends to stereotype groups of people, her common sense advice still bears consideration, and so I present it here at length:

> Be accepting
> Accept what you cannot change. If you loved your Gay child yesterday, remember that this is the same child only with new and different dimensions today.
>
> Flex your own psychic muscles:
> Rejoice that you are about to widen your world and get to know another side of your child as well.
>
> Question
> We in the United States are privileged to be able to challenge old precepts. So, how valid are those past Biblical, philosophical and cultural dogmatic teachings if they effect the exclusion of your Gay child? Should they not be modified in accordance with present-day knowledge and thinking? Homosexuality is only one of the many no-nos dictated in past teachings. Many homophobics have chosen to concentrate on homosexuality while disregarding many other proscribed acts such as abortion, divorce, dietary laws, adultery and free love. Are there any of us who can that he or she has followed the dogma to the letter?
>
> Continue to have high expectations for your child
> Know that your Gay son or daughter may achieve success and happiness despite many still-existing barriers. Although it is acknowledged that one of the greatest military leaders of all time—Alexander the Great—was a homosexual, a career in the military is not available to an openly Gay person. What is the military afraid of?
> Need I point out the many successful Gay people who have reached the top? If your child is in a profession, say dentistry, he or she can create smiles as chicolety as the non-Gay dentist. If in medicine, perhaps your child will come up with a cure for cancer. If in the right place at the right time, your child might save the life of the President of the United States by grabbing the arm of a crazed would-be assassin as an unofficially Gay war veteran did some years ago in San

> Francisco.
>
> Don't dwell too much on the sexual aspects of homosexuality
> Don't peer too closely into the bedroom of a Gay son or daughter—you wouldn't with a straight child, would you? Sexual privacy is their right—just as yours is your right. If, however, the Gay child insists on drawing you unwillingly into personal sexual discussion, you have every right to protest: "Spare me the details—and did you remember to send your grandfather a birthday card?"
>
> Learn to enjoy Gay culture
> When given free rein, many Gay people have a special sense of fun and the ridiculous. Even if their humor is a defense (as some say), it is a valuable defense. Relax with the two-sided humor of your Gay child. You might enjoy a lot of laughs together.
>
> Redefine the word *family*
> Today we have new definitions of the word *family*. Among them: the one-parent family, the communal family and same-sex couples. The chimerical *Saturday Evening Post* representation of Dad, Mom and the two kids smiling into the sunrise just does not hold true anymore. The families of Gay people who want to relate comfortably to their Gay children have what most of us hope for: a shared life with a loving partner. How long a relationship will last—or how fulfilling it might be—is anyone's guess. Gay relationships are just as chancy as non-Gay relationships (and we all know how chancy they are).
>
> Respect your Gay son or daughter
> Remember the respect you had for this child before the disclosure. You have been entrusted with as in-depth a revelation as you will ever get from anyone. This mutuality of respect must not be diminished. It is too precious. Of course, if their was no prior respect, it will not suddenly materialize after disclosure. (pp. 229-231)

Clearly some of this advice is dated. For example, Back's assertion that, "You have been entrusted with as in-depth a revelation as you will ever get from anyone," may not be as true today as it was when she originally wrote these words. Certainly, there are many lesbians and gays who typically tell virtually everyone about their sexual identity. However, although at times dated, the larger points here ring true, and they may be beneficial as teachers consider what actions they might take in the

event a student comes out to them.

Although at times outdated Back's advice is not radically different from the more updated advice Betty Fairchild (1992), another mother of a gay child, offers:

> Once we recognize and then overcome our fear of homosexuality and realize that it has existed throughout history as a variant of human sexuality, we can go on to understand its place in the lives of our children. And although it *has* a place, it is only one facet of that person's makeup. Unfortunately, when we learn that someone—particularly our own child—is lesbian or gay, we tend to forget everything else we know about that person or think that there is nothing more to know. But listen to what young people so often say, in hope and despair, "I am the same person I was before you knew. You loved me then; I hope you still love me now."
>
> Indeed, *reassurance of your love is the initial and primary thing your daughter or son needs*. For most lesbians and gays, the decision to tell their parents was a long and agonizing one to make. (p. 81)

Teachers might learn a great deal from the words of Banks and Fairchild. However, teachers should always be mindful of the fact that there is one major difference between a child coming out to a parent and a child coming out to a teacher. This difference is quite simply that many children may likely feel compelled to come out at some point in their lives to their parents, but coming out to a teacher is not necessary because the student/teacher relationship is temporary, unlike the relationship between parent a child. Therefore, when a student chooses to come out to the teacher, there may be even more reason for the teacher to consider Fairchild's words, "*reassurance of your love is the initial and primary thing your daughter or son needs*." A student who comes out to her/his teacher may be doing so because she/he feels unable to come out to family members and friends. This means that acceptance from the teacher might be even more crucial to the child's well being than this acceptance otherwise would.

In my own experiences with having students come out to me the one thing that I have been able to do beyond offering them acceptance and assurance as Fairchild and Banks suggest here, is to offer them reading material. I generally match this reading material to the student's interest. For example, a young, gay man whom the counselors referred to me expressed an interest in politics and told me he eventually wants to become a diplomat. I brought him the book, The Mayor of Castro Street, a nonfiction account of the life of Harvey Milk the first openly gay elected official. It is unlikely that most heterosexual teachers would have enough knowledge of lesbian/gay literature to conduct this matching of student's interest to a novel or nonfiction work, but there are some general works that might be considered. I would recommend the following books, some of which I have referenced throughout this work, as suitable for high school students:

Am I Blue? by Marion Dane Bauer (Ed.) (1994)

Annie on My Mind by Nancy Garden (1982)

Baby Bebop by Francesca Lia Block (1995)

Bad Boy by Diana Wieler (1989)

Breakfast with Scot by Michael Downing (1999)

Deliver Us From Evie by M. E. Kerr (1994)

The Drowning of Stephan Jones by Bette Greene (1991)

Gay: What Teenagers Should Know About Homosexuality and the Aids Crisis by Morton Hunt (1987)

Making History by Eric Marcus (1992)

On Being Gay by Brian McNaught (1983)

One Teenager in Ten by Ann Heron (Ed.) (1983)

The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde (1891/1983

Reflections of a Rock Lobster by Aaron Fricke (1981)

A Rock and A Hard Place by Anthony Goodby Johnson (1993)

Stonewall by Martin Duberman (1993)

Trying Hard to Hear You by Sandra Scoppettone (1974)

Two Teenagers in Twenty by Ann Heron (Ed.) (1994)

I have given all of these books to lesbian/gay students with good results. Books such as the ones above can give lesbian/gay adolescents relief from their sense of alienation. Also, through reading these books, lesbian/gay students can begin to explore issues and situations that they are very likely to confront in their lives.

Conclusion.

My beliefs expressed here are not merely theoretical. They are based on fifteen years of working with students. I have come to believe that not only do students benefit from talk of difference, they are appreciative of the opportunity to explore this and other social issues that are sometimes absent from traditional literary instruction. Years of receiving letters from students long after they have left my class has led me to this belief. I will include excerpts from these letters here.

One letter came from the girlfriend of "Veronica," the student mentioned in the first chapter. After giving me a summary of her current progress in college, she

turns to her years in high school:

> Best of luck working to make the [state] school system a more gay friendly place. I'll let [Veronica] tell you how much you meant to her, but I'll always remember hanging around after school talking about putting rainbow stickers on your car. You were the one teacher who knew [Veronica] and I were dating. Thank you for creating that safe space (tiny though it was).

Although a short excerpt, I believe there is a great deal of importance in these few words. One of the significant things about this excerpt is the young woman's belief that I knew that, she and "Veronica" were girlfriends. I did not. I believe this is important because it demonstrates that teachers need not become involved in students' personal lives in order to help lesbian/gay students. More important is the line, "tiny though it was." I believe this demonstrates that while many English teachers in my study asserted that they include lesbian/gay subject matter in their classes, we still are perhaps not presenting this material as regularly as we should or with a full enough discussion when the subject does arise. I believe if we did, we would not have lesbian/gay students who feel unsafe.

I believe that lesbian/gay students will always feel unsafe as long as discussions of homosexuality continue to occur only infrequently in the classroom. Homophobic students have had many years to develop prejudice against homosexuals, and if only a few teachers openly discuss homosexuality the infrequency of these discussions is unlikely to change the climate of the school. A letter I got from a lesbian student after I gave her a book of lesbian poetry demonstrates this:

> Thank you for the book. I really like it. I will enjoy reading it with others. It is very interesting.
>
> I also want to thank you for the advice you gave me earlier in the

> quarter. It really helped my mom and me trough a hard time. I've used it to help others.
>
> Thanks also for the words of encouragement on my papers. Someday I hope to have something of mine published. It helped me to think maybe it could happen. If it ever happens, I'll be sure to put your name in the dedication and give you a copy.
>
> I think you are a really great teacher no matter what all those other kids say. It's good that you don't give in to them.
>
> I have really learned a lot even though my last two test grades don't show that. Good luck next year. I hope you get a better group of kids.

I believe that the young woman's references here to the other students as being bad and perhaps not liking me as a teacher, came from discussions we had about homosexual subject matter. While I believe the subtext of this student's words show that she believed the other students maintained their homophobia despite our discussions of homosexuality, I feel that her perception is somewhat skewed. I believe that at least some of these students did confront their homophobia during the course. Towards the end of the semester, the student who wrote this letter, tied for first place in a class vote for the best composition in the writing competition. Her poem was a semi-erotic lesbian, love poem, and I don't believe that the students would have been receptive to her poem had they not confronted some of their fears of homophobia. However, the fact that this young woman in conversations with me after class still expressed her belief that the other students in the class were homophobic demonstrates that a few minor successes (such as the win in the writing contest) do not overshadow the overwhelming homophobia that permeates the climate of the school.

While the letters above demonstrate the difference that inclusion of discussions of difference can have for lesbian/gay students, other letters I have received

demonstrate that this can be equally important for straight students. One young woman writes:

> I also wanted to let you know how much I appreciated your class. Even though it was four years ago, it's one class that still sticks out in my mind. I remember you as one of my most open-minded teachers who allowed for open discussions and different opinions. I also remember your emphasis on current events and social consciousness (Do you still have articles of the day?). I hope all your classes are going well this year.

As high school teachers we must remember that it may take many years for the work we do to become meaningful to students. Students may resist these discussions while they are occurring because often discussions of difference can expose adolescents to ideas that have not previously given much thought to and these ideas may run contrary to most of the messages adolescents receive from mainstream culture. They may also conflict with the ideas the students are being taught by their parents.

Because these ideas may be so new and different for the students, it may take years to process them. One example of a student taking years to reflect on classroom discussions before fully working out his own beliefs comes from a student who identifies as heterosexual. This student's parents insisted that he attend a military college that was university that every male member of his family had attended for three generations. He wrote me many years after having my class:

> Stumbling across the "In My Opinion" article you submitted to the *Atlanta Journal*, I was reminded that I owe you a letter of gratitude. Considering the number of students who pass through your classroom each year, you may not remember that I was once fortunate enough to have you as my teacher. However, I certainly remember you. It's strangely fitting that your letter regarding the "Harry Potter" books dealt with traditional standards and fear of nonconformity, for

> this is precisely the area in which you managed to shape my own views.
>
> It was only after spending two years at [the military institute], unquestionably an institution that places tremendous importance on tradition and conformity, that I came to realize you were correct in your attempt to discourage me from pursuing higher education in such an environment. In this setting I was faced with the inescapable fact that, despite their self-allowed merit and virtue, those who cling to tradition and the comfort of conformity are often unwilling or unable to meet their own standards. Frighteningly, these people see nothing wrong with imposing their values and concept of morality on others. Experience has taught me that the most desirable and admirable qualities seem to be more common in those who possess the courage and mental flexibility to reject these conservative modes of thought. The past two years have exposed me to many things, most significantly to the concept by which traditional ideas retain their hold on society- the concept of naturalization. I now think it clear that current "traditional" beliefs regarding such things as gender identity, gender roles, and class relationships are not natural as conservatives would have us believe, but rather the product of their efforts to maintain the status quo and avoid that which they fear through lack of understanding. Having realized this, I abandoned [the military institute] (as well as my old ways of thinking), and am currently completing my degree at [another university]. To my history major I have added a minor in English, a choice in no small way influenced by the time I spent in your class.
>
> Having told you a little of my story, I would like to close with some thoughts about you. While much is made of the role of teachers and their importance, students (like myself) often fail to recognize such vital contributions until after they have been made. The impact of those who like you, challenge the students' preconceived ideas cannot be overemphasized. I hope that you will continue to open minds and break down barriers, forever unyielding to the to the oppressive and senseless resistance to change and equality; you are an invaluable asset to our youth and our future. You make a difference!

I include this letter in its entirety because what I believed happened with this student is what I hope may happen with this study. While taking my course, this student and many of his fellow classmates were virulently opposed to my ideas. I tried to maintain the delicate balance between exposing these students to new ways of thinking while demonstrating to them that I did not condemn them because they

didn't agree with me. I believe (and this students letter demonstrates) that condemnation of those with whom we don't agree only serves to further entrench them in their opposition to our ideas.

It is my hope that teachers will read this study and reflect on their current teaching practices with regards to lesbian/gay studies. Many teachers who read this may be like some of the participants in this study. Some might, like Vanessa, be unlikely to change their current practices. Other may be like Clare and Ford and might only need encouragement and support to go further in their inclusion of lesbian/gay studies. Still others may already be implementing the ideas expressed here. If this study makes those who aren't fully implementing lesbian/gay studies in their classroom reflect more on their pedagogy (whether they reject of accept my ideas) or if this study gives succor to those who are already including lesbian/gay studies, I feel that this study will be a worthwhile one.

Reflections on Methodology.

When I began this research, I did not realize that the way I was conducting the research might cause the participants to change their stance. Because so many of these informants did change their previous perceptions, I have come to realize that this change was partially due to the way I had structured my interview questions. I realized that there was no point in trying to present myself as a neutral party with no interest in the outcome of this research. However, I believe this turned out to be an advantage. Because the participants in the research were as aware of my stance as I

was of their points of view, I was able to question in a way that otherwise might have been inappropriate. At times, I challenged the contradictions I saw in their answers to the interview questions. For example, I asked many of them why their approach to race was different than their approach regarding sexual identity. Often the participants recognized the contradictions without my prompting. William, Clare, and Vanessa picked up quickly on their contradictory points of view and addressed them before I even had a opportunity to question them about these views.

I believe that having this opportunity to use the interview process to challenge preconceived ideas was one of the strengths of this research. The changes that occurred in many of the participants were a result of being involved in the research process. I believe that even the participants who did not change their perceptions regarding the integration of lesbian/gay issues benefited from this research. I return to Freire's (1970/1999) words, "Those who through reflection perceive the infeasibility or inappropriateness of one or another form of action (which should accordingly be postponed or substituted) cannot thereby be accused of inaction. Critical reflection is also action" (p. 109). As teachers, I don't believe that it is our place to try to influence what students think, but it is definitely our responsibility to show students how to think. I believe that a classroom that provides opportunities for students to discuss issues of difference, including differences highlighted through lesbian/gay studies, will be a classroom where students truly learn critical thinking.

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