**But Were They Gay? The Mystery of Same-Sex Love in the 19th Century**

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*It was a time of "Boston marriages" between women and intimate letters between men. But what happened behind closed doors is anybody's guess.*



Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman, and Sarah Orne Jewett all had passionate same-sex friendships. (Adapted from Wikimedia Commons images)

In August 1890, Walt Whitman opened an awkward piece of fan mail. "In your conception of Comradeship," wrote British literary critic John Addington Symonds, "do you contemplate the possible intrusion of those semi-sexual emotions and actions which no doubt do occur between men?"

It's a question modern critics have asked as well -- and some have pretty definitively answered it. "Walt Whitman and Gay Liberation are nearly synonymous for me," wrote cultural historian Rictor Norton in a [1999 essay](http://rictornorton.co.uk/whitman.htm). Norton points to Whitman's 1860 ["Calamus"](http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=WhiCala.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all) poems as a sort of coming-out letter, filled with lines like these:

The one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,
In the stillness, in the autumn moonbeams, his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast -- And that night I was happy.

After reading such passages, Symonds (who later wrote about his own sexual experiences with men) must have been disappointed by Whitman's reply. "That the Calamus part has even allow'd the possibility of such construction as mention'd is terrible," Whitman responded, insisting that Symonds was making "morbid inferences -- wh' are disavow'd by me & seem damnable."

It's hard to imagine any modern poet writing about lying in another man's arms and then calling homosexuality "damnable." But the kind of same-sex intimacy Whitman described -- and enjoyed in real life -- was accepted at the time as a natural part of heterosexuality. When editors *did* censor Whitman's work, they left the "Calamus" poems intact and instead cut his descriptions of male-female passion. [*Those who have read stanza 5 of Whitman’s “I Sing the Body Electric”, which very explicitly describes a bride and groom on their wedding night, understand why leaving the “Calamus” poems intact, but not this one, was interesting*.]

"Certainly, in his poetry, Whitman tries to be omnisexual," says David S. Reynolds, a CUNY graduate professor who specializes in 19th century American culture and has written several books on Whitman. "He even wants to exude a kind of sexuality toward the physical earth and the ocean." But it was more than that, as Reynolds explains. "Showing passion and affection was a more common part of the daily experience than it is today. America was a young nation, a new nation, and there was a sense of brotherhood."

That brotherly love certainly existed between Abraham Lincoln and his friend Joshua Speed. The two men [slept together in the same bed](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/25/the-bedfellows-reunion/) for four years, and Speed wrote to Lincoln in 1842, "You know my desire to befriend you is everlasting -- I will never cease, while I know how to do anything."

Another American president, James A. Garfield,[wrote passionate notes](http://www.amazon.com/1861-The-Civil-War-Awakening/dp/1400040159) to his college friend Harry Rhodes. "Harry Dear, do you know how much I miss you? In the school -- the church, at home, in labor or leisure -- sleeping or waking, the want of your presence is felt. I knew I loved you, but you have left a larger void than I ever knew you filled." A few months later, Garfield wrote to Rhodes, "I would that we might lie awake in each other's arms for one long wakeful night."

"The thing we don't know about any of these people," says Peggy Wishart, "is the question most modern people have: Were they gay?" Wishart manages Historic New England's [Sarah Orne Jewett House](http://www.historicnewengland.org/historic-properties/homes/sarah-orne-jewett-house/sarah-orne-jewett-house) in South Berwick, Maine, which is hosting [a lecture](http://shop.historicnewengland.org/p-6745-celebrating-sarah-orne-jewett.aspx)this weekend on the "Boston marriage." Jewett spent her later years in one of these ambiguous female partnerships, enjoying the almost constant companionship of Annie Fields, the widow of ***Atlantic*** editor James T. Fields. The two women lived together, traveled to Europe together, and called each other pet names. (Jewett was "Pinney" and Fields was "Fuff.")

This sort of arrangement wasn't uncommon at the time. The Massachusetts capital was filled with educated women from good families who could support themselves without the help of any man. It made sense for them to seek out each other's company, says Wishart. "And it didn't necessarily occur to friends to wonder what their sex life was like. Women in the Victorian era were perceived by many as being non-sexual to begin with, and most people assumed that if they didn't have husbands, they wouldn't have any interest in sex."

So what changed between the days of the Boston marriage and the [dawning of the 20th century]? For one thing, there was Oscar Wilde's trial. In 1895, Wilde was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison for his open homosexuality. Wilde did his best to defend same-sex love in the courtroom: "It is that deep spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art, like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo." But the newspapers focused instead on the salacious details, including Wilde's rumored visits to male prostitutes. After that, poetry about men sleeping together in the moonlight was never quite the same.

The other game changer was the appearance of the psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud. "You have to remember, ever since Freud, we've viewed everything through this very sexualized lens," Wishart says. "For a Victorian person, that was not the case. I think it's almost impossible for us to fully understand the way they saw these things back then." By 1911, there was enough awareness of homosexuality that when Fields pulled together a posthumous volume of Jewett's letters, editor Mark Howe [urged her](http://www.public.coe.edu/~theller/soj/ess/donovan1.html) to censor out the pet names. "All sorts of people [will read] them wrong," he warned Fields.

Today, it's hard to know just *how* to read those letters. But as Reynolds says, "It's absolutely wrong to impose today's understanding of “gay” or “straight” on Whitman or Jewett. That's done much too often." Instead, he suggests we appreciate the rich humanity of the 19th century. "Lincoln was a very, very human guy," Reynolds says. "He saw himself as a comrade, as someone who loved men and women. A lot of other people also saw themselves that way. It was a much less institutional world than we live in today -- a much more personal world."

**Questions:**

1. **What is a “Boston marriage” and why is it referred to as “ambiguous” in the article?**
2. **What can be inferred by the fact that Walt Whitman’s “Calamus” poems were left intact, but parts of his poem “I Sing the Body Electric” were edited out?**
3. **What factors began to make the public aware of homosexuality as a specific sexual orientation rather than a “normal part of heterosexuality”?**
4. **Based on the reading of this article, what conclusions can you draw about the differences between how sexuality was perceived in the 19th century compared to today?**