
EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK



DUKE UNIVERSITY, 1997

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EVE SEDGWICK, a literary critic and theorist of gender and sexuality and a deeply original thinker, was a formative influence for Queer Theory and the study of gender and sexuality in general. Emphasizing the range of affects, attractions, and libidinal investments that characterize individuals, her work disputed the simple binarisms, such as *homosexual* versus *heterosexual*, through which modern cultures have sought to understand desire and sexuality, and paved the way for a more nuanced and activist thinking of human possibilities.

Eve Kosofsky was born in Dayton, Ohio, to middle-class Jewish parents from Brooklyn, but she spent most of her childhood in Bethesda, Maryland, where her father took a job with the Army Map Service. As an undergraduate at Cornell, she met Hal Sedgwick, whom she married in the summer following her sophomore year. She concentrated on English literature, taking several courses with Neil Hertz, who introduced her to a combination of New Critical close reading and a deconstructive critique of established categories. Other important influences were the poet A. R. Ammons, who encouraged her life-long devotion to the writing of poetry, and Allan Bloom, a charismatic political philosopher and student of Leo Strauss. In 1971, she entered the Ph.D. program in English at Yale, where she completed her dissertation, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, in 4 years.

Returning to Cornell for a 2-year Mellon postdoctoral fellowship in English and creative writing, Eve worked on her poetry and revised her dissertation before taking a job at Hamilton College. After her dissertation was published in 1980, she obtained a tenure-track position at Boston University, and after a fellowship at Radcliffe's Bunting Institute, where she completed *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), she moved to a tenured position at Amherst College, which had recently become co-educational. There, she quickly became an influential figure, taught her first course on gay and lesbian studies, and was instrumental in the creation of a Department of Women's and Gender Studies. A Guggenheim Fellowship in 1987–88 enabled her to complete *Epistemologies of the Closet*, and in 1988, she moved to Duke University, where Stanley Fish was transforming a rather traditional English department into an exciting center for contemporary critical theory and cultural studies. This position gave her more time for writing and the opportunity to teach graduate students. She became both a flamboyant and a nurturing presence, teacher, and mentor for a generation of graduate students and worked with them in AIDS activism and Triangle ACT UP, as well as on a wide range of academic projects.

In 1991, Eve was diagnosed with breast cancer, which intensified her relation to AIDS and friends living with it. Undergoing treatment,

she wrote, was “an exercise in applied deconstruction” and stimulated her interest in writing about illness, mortality, and reparative and therapeutic strategies. After her cancer recurred in 1996, she decided to move to New York City to cut down on travel in her long-time commuting relationship with her husband, Hal, a professor at New York’s State College of Optometry. In 1998, she joined the CUNY Graduate Center as Distinguished Professor of English, where she taught until her death in 2009. She continued to travel widely throughout the world to lecture and participate in conferences until doing so became too tiring in 2008.

Although *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* demonstrates how the gothic novel formalizes a powerful set of techniques for imagining and recognizing a self, often paranoid and sado-masochistic, that has had an afterlife in modern culture, it was *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire* that dramatically broke new ground in the thinking of literature, sexuality, and identity. It explores the psychic complexities of what Sedgwick calls *homosocial desire*, the affectively-charged physical, psychic, and political bonding between men, which can be situated on a continuum that includes both what is stigmatized as homosexual desire and male bonding marked by intense homophobia. Addressing major texts of English literature, from Shakespeare’s sonnets to works by George Eliot, Dickens, and Whitman, Sedgwick studies male-male relations as part of a larger system involving women, who are often the objects of rivalry that may intensify affectively charged male bonding. Revising René Girard’s account of mimetic desire through a focus on this larger system, she demonstrates that in this period, the love plot of triangular desire, in which men desire women desired by other men, links male rivals in a bonding as intense as, and in many ways equivalent to, the desire for the woman. Both men and women are oppressed by a cultural system in which male-male desire becomes widely intelligible by being routed through triangular relations involving a woman.

Between Men offers both an original hermeneutics, encouraging the detection of complexities of same-sex affective relations in a range of literary texts, and a theoretical framework for thinking about power and desire, gender and identification, and paranoia and homophobia in a historical period that witnessed radical changes in same-sex and intersex dynamics. This book is frequently credited with making gay and lesbian studies into a genuine academic field.

Epistemology of the Closet provides further historical and theoretical grounding for gay and lesbian theory and politics by exploring the epochal change from what Sedgwick calls the Age of *Frankenstein* to the Age of Wilde, in which our society deems everyone not only to have

a gender (male or female) but also a sexuality (homo or hetero). Yet literary and other cultural discourses bear witness to an endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, with a conflict between the *minoritizing view*, which takes the definition of homosexuality to be relevant only to a small and fixed group, and the *universalizing view* that recognizes the distinction as important to the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities. "This book argues," Sedgwick announces, "that an understanding of virtually any aspect of Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition; and it will assume that the appropriate place for a critical analysis to begin is from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and anti-homophobic theory."

This is a place to begin because homophobia has epistemological effects, closeting certain kinds of knowledge and restricting it to those "in the know," as the obtuseness or ignorance of the majority becomes a source of power. The critical analysis of the functioning of the cultural divisions between hetero and homo dissolves the boundaries assumed to set off the field of gay and lesbian studies and opens the analysis of cultural discourses to an enterprise defined in this book by a number of axioms, the first of which is the simple truth, "People are different from each other." We have, Sedgwick claims, only crude, mostly binary axes of categorization for dealing with this fundamental fact. (Thus, from all the many different aspects of sexual attraction, the gender of the object of desire has been taken as fundamentally defining of identity.) Other axioms take a similar tack: "There can't be an *a priori* decision about how far it will make sense to conceptualize lesbian and gay male identities together. Or separately." And: "The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, anti-homophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry. But we cannot know in advance how they will be different." Essays on Melville, Wilde, Nietzsche, James, and Proust explore the intricacies of power, gender, and sexuality in remarkably insightful literary texts, but the programmatic introduction made this a foundational work for gay and lesbian studies and cultural studies generally.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Sedgwick became an influential, even notorious, figure, attracting attention beyond the academy. The advanced program for the 1990 meeting of the Modern Language Association announced a paper by Eve Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," which was seized upon by conservatives fighting the culture wars as clear evidence of the danger critical theory posed to Western civilization. Sedgwick is "more dangerous than Saddam Hussein," one pundit announced, judging on the basis of a title alone,

for the paper had not yet been written. Her *Tendencies* (1993) reflects ironically on this notoriety—"my war with Western civilization"—and evokes "the moment of Queer." *Queer* can refer to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning, when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or *can't be made*) to signify monolithically." These essays seek "new ways to think about the lesbian, gay and other sexually dissident loves and identities in a complex social ecology where the presence of different genders, different identities and identifications, will be taken as a given." They include very personal reflections on her own life and affective investments, as well as tributes to friends who had died of AIDS.

In what she later presented as a shift from the erotic to the affective, Sedgwick published, with her student Adam Frank, *Shame and its Sisters: A Sylvan Tompkins Reader* (1995), reviving the work of the 20th century psychologist who had developed a theory of eight primary affects. She saw this as an attempt to attend more closely, with greater discrimination, to the rich spectrum of affective life: the bodily rootedness and cultural variability of human emotion. She also developed an interest in the work of Melanie Klein and other non-Oedipal versions of psychoanalysis.

The return of inoperable cancer freed her to explore a range of activities: *A Dialogue on Love* (2000) blends poetry and prose in a Japanese form known as *haibun* and, in a dialogic experiment in intimacy, includes notes made during psychotherapy by her analyst, with whom she had little in common. She became deeply engaged with Buddhism and also experimented with various sorts of art making, especially weaving, which came to occupy a major place in her life and thinking. (Between 1999 and 2005, she had a half dozen solo exhibitions of her artwork).

Her last collection of essays, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), incisively takes issue with the effects of Michel Foucault's influential *History of Sexuality* and also proposes a notion of *reparative reading* contrasted with *paranoid reading*, or the hermeneutics of suspicion that had become almost synonymous with critical analysis. Our suspicious readings for concealed truths lead us to neglect what knowledge might entail for the seeker and preclude many of the consequences that might be most fulfilling or reparative. "Falling in love with an author," for example, is only the most obvious reading experience generative of positive affects.

Other significant publications include *Fat Art, Thin Art* (1994), a collection of poems from many decades that stage many of the same issues of the complexities of gender, sexualities, identities, and affect,

and a posthumous collection of essays, *The Weather in Proust* (2011), with discussions of object relations, affect theory, and her own textile art, as well as talks describing her central ideas about sexuality and concerns about the direction of U.S. queer theory.

Eve Sedgwick's life included many services to the profession: she was a Trustee of the English Institute, chair of the MLA Commission on the Status of Women, and an editor of the Q series of Queer Theory texts for Duke University Press. But above all, she saw herself as engaged with a broader community of women and men both inside and outside of the academy, a great many of them friends who were fiercely loyal to her. Her work in a life cut short stands apart for its conceptual originality, critical daring, and unabashed willingness to consider human life in all its frailties and peculiarities. "What I'm proudest of, I guess," she wrote, "is having a life where work and love are impossible to tell apart."

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