

Cambridge University Press
0521813948 - Henry James and Queer Modernity
Eric Haralson
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

So much of life is queer, if we but dare feel its queerness.
(Sherwood Anderson, *Memoirs*)

As the most politically charged term in my title, with respect to both literary criticism and the *realpolitik* of contemporary culture, “queer” deserves primary attention among my definitional tasks, before I can begin to examine the questions that underlie this study. Although it is hard to generalize about a field as diverse and proliferating as queer studies, especially one that programmatically prides itself on constant self-querying and self-renovation, the current mood in this subdiscipline seems introspective, even uneasy, after a long decade of evolution. Originally, the conceptual terminology of “queerness” (or “queer”) drew its analytical and political force from the very quality that made it so appealing, as well, to Victorian and modernist authors and readers: a fluency or an indeterminacy of signification that was felt to be at once powerful and elusive. In *Saint Foucault*, for instance, David Halperin suggests that both the intellectual value and the subversive potential of *queer* depended on its being defined as indefinite, its referentiality mobile and contingent rather than fixed: “Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence . . . describing a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance.”¹ One impetus of this challenging anti-definition (challenging in every sense) was clearly the desire to push against the damaging epistemological operations whereby the modern sex/gender system conflated identities with essences and fastened down referentiality in order to categorize, weed out, and punish those who were “at odds.” The work of Judith Butler has put perhaps the strongest stamp on contemporary theorizings of sexual discourse, discussing the attempted reclamation (or “discursive resignification”) of *queer* from its history of abuse and the strategic exploitation of its contingency

to turn a vicious stigma into a “term of affiliation” for purposes of lesbian/gay advocacy or antihomophobic critique.² Butler, like Halperin, conceives of the discursive transience of *queer* in the most radical possible fashion, suggesting that the politically necessary fictions of stable identity that the word names or inspires will have to adapt as oncoming generations of speakers and writers trope *queerness* into new shapes or possibly even out of existence.

Yet the democratic ebullience and liberating effects of such thinking – already conditional in Halperin’s formulations³ – have recently been qualified by warning sounds from some of the ablest practitioners of queer reading. Marilee Lindemann, whose work on Willa Cather informs my chapter on Cather’s formative triangular relationship with her precursors Henry James and Oscar Wilde, observes that in academic literary criticism, “the assault on heteronormativity . . . has come to seem not revolutionary but routine,” to the point where embracing the term *queer* for its subversive flexibility has become “not merely generous or pragmatic but evasive and risky.”⁴ Marjorie Garber concedes the need for a word to describe “transgressive self-invention,” but wonders (*pace* Butler’s more hopeful view) whether the lessons exemplified in Wilde’s rhetorical strategies might not be forgotten, causing *queer* to reify as “yet another essentialized identity or political faction.”⁵ Leo Bersani moves in a different direction entirely, suggesting that no matter who is performing the queer reading, or how it is performed, the practical effect on the established order may be puny at best.⁶

I want to advance as a fundamental principle in approaching the conceptual task, and then in undertaking queer readings of my five main authors – James, Cather, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and Sherwood Anderson – that the critical posture recommended by the latter author, as expressed in the epigraph above, will be not merely useful but methodologically vital. Feeling or reading the “queerness” in life, in literature, in the very diction of *queer* – where *queer* itself is not limited to but manifestly includes matters of sexuality – is substantially a factor of *daring* to feel or see or read queerness. What differentiates the work of these American authors from most of their predecessors is their alert receptivity to this queerness, to the strange combinations that modern life casts up: a receptivity – sometimes despite powerful internal resistance, and sometimes even through the screen of homophobic prejudice – to modernity itself. “Queer” is so interwoven with the modern, and the modern with the queer (though neither is simply reducible to or synonymous with the other), that one’s reading practice must be equally receptive.

This is not to say that one should succumb to what Rita Felski describes – and well resists – as “an over-arching meta-theory of modernity”

that grants interpretative superiority to present-day perspectives. Rather, the critical project must be to track “the mobile and shifting meanings of the modern as a category of cultural consciousness” by seeking to recover, as much as possible, the representations of modernity sanctioned by the historical objects being surveyed. This effort seems especially acute in addressing the span of years under consideration here – from 1875, when James published *Roderick Hudson* and began writing *The American*, to the mid-1930s, the period of Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Four in America*, with its important chapter on James. This sixty-year swath of cultural history witnessed a heightened preoccupation with “narratives of innovation and decline,” as well as the self-conscious mobilization of “the modern” as a master trope by which Anglo-American society sought to understand itself. In Felski’s helpful summation, “‘modernity’ thus refers not simply to a substantive range of sociohistorical phenomena – capitalism, bureaucracy, technological development, and so on – but above all to particular (though often contradictory) experiences of temporality and historical consciousness.”⁷

For Henry James, the struggle to articulate a modern manhood – apart from the normative script of a fixed national identity, a vulgarizing, homogenizing career in business and commerce, a middle-class philistinism and puritanical asceticism in the reception of beauty, and crucially, a mature life of heterosexual performance as suitor, spouse, physical partner, and paterfamilias – resulted in his valorizing the character of the disaffiliated aesthete. To what degree this modern aesthete’s difference from other men may be attributed to “queerness” in the emergent sense of “homosexuality” shall be discussed later. What is striking and symptomatic about the work of all the authors I will examine, starting with James, is that while they simultaneously fostered the association between “queer” and “homosexual,” they also sought to contain, constrain, and rhetorically manage the implications of that linkage: in effect, to mean only so much, or to mean it only so distinctly, in the way of sexual meanings. The “queerness” of their texts always opens on to a larger field of difference(s). Lindemann, for example, has noted that the recurrent word *queer* in Cather is a marker not only of “sexual ambiguity” but also of ethnic difference or corporeal distortion;⁸ sometimes just the vague community impression that a young man “don’t seem to fit in right,” as in the case of Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours*, is enough to brand him *queer*, though the sexual implications of his difference must be patiently extracted from context (EN 1050).

James himself dramatizes the broader spirit of Anderson’s above-quoted remark in the so-called Lambinet scene of *The Ambassadors*, which

culminates in Lambert Strether's acceptance of the novel's sexual intrigue; the unfolding, quasimystical events of his fateful day of discovery strike this well-read man as being "as queer as fiction" (*A* 308). This reflexive gesture of James's text makes for meaningful fun, suggesting that a realist fictional practice inevitably blurs the line that only seems to set the novelistic genre apart *as* fiction. Whatever is "queer" in literature seeps into the queerness of modern social reality, just as whatever is "queer" in reality may turn up in literature. In pointing to this coincidence or interpermeability of zones of queernesses, James instructs his readers that they, too, should be prepared for startling recognitions such as Strether's: for the exposure of a potent secret or "a *lie* in the charming affair" that constitutes the public surface of social life, and more particularly, for the revelation of a "deep truth of . . . intimacy" precisely where they (like Strether) have labored not to notice or acknowledge it – in other words, where they have not dared to feel it (*A* 311, 313).

Oh, *prefer*? oh yes – queer word. I never use it myself. (Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, 1853)

Despite this contiguity, in *The Ambassadors*, between the word *queer* and a form of intimacy (technically, adultery) in violation of community norms, especially the norms of American post-Puritanism, it is not immediately apparent how phenomena "as queer as fiction," or phenomena queer *in* fiction of the Victorian and modern periods, can be related to the discourse of sexuality, or homosexuality, as such. Indeed, Strether's mental phrasing seems almost to lead *away* from eroticized resonances by recalling the sheer abundance and diversity of "queer" things in Anglo-American literature from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, most of which have no evident connection to sexuality. Even a highly selective catalog suggests the term's extraordinary range of application and, partly as a result, its diffuse referentiality. For instance, Anglo-American prose as well as verse of this vintage regularly featured dwellings or places of business that were "queer" in atmosphere, furnishing, or architectural condition: queer shops, lodgings, castles, gables, looking glasses, smelling bottles, and so forth. Characters in fiction notoriously succumbed to "queer" states of affect or imagination – queer moods, fancies, ideas, or reminiscences – or fell into "queer" habits and forms of self-expression: queer grins, laughs, looks, noises; queer little dances, tunes, ditties; queer "ways of putting it." If manners or bodies or faces became "queer" *enough*, the persons exhibiting them were set down as queer fellows, chaps, or creatures, or sometimes evoked more colloquially as queer birds or queer fish. Extreme manifestations

aroused suspicion that a person might be “queer in the head” or possibly residing in “Queer Street,” that populous thoroughfare, running through the pages of especially English literature from Charles Dickens to Robert Louis Stevenson to Evelyn Waugh, where residents suffered from unspecified but unseemly “difficulties”; some of these unfortunates were probably “on the queer,” as well, or living by forgery and theft, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* clarifies.⁹

In works by other prominent authors the reader learns even more about the proliferation of “queer” possibilities. Sailors could be dangerously, even fatally “queer” toward one another (Herman Melville, *Billy Budd*, 1886–91); “single gentlemen lodgers” were “a queer lot” (Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, 1906/7); men apparently had to worry about women “turning ‘queer’” with age (Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome*, 1911); genius, too, could be a “queer thing” (James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922); horses might think it “queer” to stop without a farmhouse near (Robert Frost, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” 1923); and female poets were *also* “a queer lot” (Amy Lowell, “The Sisters,” 1925).¹⁰ As these and other literary examples suggest, “queerness,” whether in persons or in things, often referred to an *internal* heterogeneity – perhaps a character who was a “queer mixture” of contraries (as in James’s own “Daisy Miller,” 1878) or a dry goods store that contained a “queer jumble” of wares (Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, 1919) – that simultaneously perplexed, attracted, alienated, and possibly mirrored the putatively normal outside observer (*THJ* 22; *WO* 196). At a minimum, it is safe to say that queer “happenings,” objects, and types abounded in Victorian and modern fiction, so that James’s Strether, whose adventures in alterity while abroad in Europe render him “changed and queer,” was far from alone in his impressions and sensations (*A* 317).

But again, what might this rampant queerness in literature written between the mid-1870s and the mid-1930s have to do with sexuality? Is it necessary that an author *intend* for a text to be queer in order for it to be read queerly? One premise of this book is that each of these instances, and others that will be drawn from the work of my five main authors, participates to some degree in the broad, complex cultural process – a process uneven, shadowy, and multiply sited – by which “queer” came to include “homosexual” among its meanings, first in urban subcultures in New York, Paris, London, and elsewhere, and increasingly in popular parlance and mainstream media. To adapt Butler’s theoretical terms, these textual instances constitute a formative (if inchoate) chapter in the strategic resignification of *queer* that would cohere as a political force in the 1980s. Clearly, some of these early examples can be more readily related than others (such as

Frost's pensive little pony) to the troping of *queer* into the vocabulary of sexual difference – the initially underground but ultimately very public discourse tradition in which *queer* (as well as *gay*) came to be “used . . . tactically” by men (and only somewhat less by women) to “position themselves and negotiate their relations with other men, gay and straight alike.”¹¹

As in the case of *The Ambassadors*, one often discerns this process in suggestive juxtapositions and contexts of usage, especially since the sexual shading of *queer* was bound to be muted and nuanced instead of self-advertising during this period. The claim is not that diction definitively establishes a character's homosexuality, nor that the examples in question necessarily signal the circulation of same-sex desire among the professional classes of London (near Stevenson's “Queer Street” in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*),¹² the sailors of the merchant marine (in Melville's *Billy Budd*), or among the denizens of men's boardinghouses (in Conrad's *Secret Agent*), but rather that the recurrent recourse to *queer* to evoke an uncanny emotion or a densely homosocial environment indicates the term's adaptability or inclination to its evolving sexual meaning. By the same token, although it is uncertain whether the idea of lesbianism, as such, underwrites Amy Lowell's reference to women poets as a “queer lot” (“The Sisters”), her inclusion of Sappho and Emily Dickinson in this deviant sorority marks her poem as a shaping force in itself in the emergence of the homosexual signifier. Even such unlikely seeming instances as Edith Wharton's may forecast the modern meaning of *queer* in a generally progressive spirit. When her character Ethan Frome, embodying a hapless masculinity, worries that women “turn queer” after menopause, the phrase does not mean “become lesbian,” and yet as can be seen in considering Hemingway's relations with Stein, Wharton does engage a cultural logic that would increasingly understand a woman's “change of life” as a potentially ominous virilization that might well reinforce lesbian tendencies (*SL* 736). To extrapolate from these diverse examples, then, it might be said that the quality of diffuseness or indeterminacy – of widely dispersed differences – that distinguished *queer* is precisely what recommended the term to writers or narratives preoccupied with the murky dynamics of modern sexualities.

Even to make these moderate claims, as they strike me, is already to invite skepticism from certain quarters. The politically motivated resignifying of *queer* has predictably (and profitably) agitated the academy, notwithstanding Bersani's argument that Butlerian exercises in reverse discourse are not only *not* revolutionary (“spectacles of politically impotent disrespect”) but are also easily reversed themselves (such “hyperbolic miming,” being “too closely imbricated” with the very norms it mimes, falls subject to

re-appropriation by the dominant culture).¹³ Prestigious Jamesian scholars such as Alfred Habegger have hardly been reassured by this deflationary view. In fact, to Habegger's mind, the queer studies meaning of *queer* has so "overwhelm[ed]" the conventional Victorian sense of *queerness* – in his gloss, "an oddness . . . not felt to be desirable and . . . surpass[ing] harmless eccentricity" – that this older usage seems "obsolescent and . . . definitely unsmart," prompting a "defiant self-consciousness" in the speaker (particularly in the US) who wishes to employ it. As part of his own verbal recovery effort – a reading of James's *What Maisie Knew* as a *bildungsroman* of "the artist as queer moralist" – Habegger leans on the authority of the *OED* to argue that James could not have been thinking of "homosexual" when he wrote "queer": "James used the language of his time, not ours," and the earliest use of the word in its latter-day sense, according to the *OED*, occurred in 1922, or "six years after James's death."¹⁴

There are several problems with this resort to the dictionary, particularly in the case of such a loaded term, with such a complicated history, as *queer*. First, Habegger's formulation seems too complacent about "the language of [the] time," as if usage were governed by a unitary standard and no allowances needed to be made for variations owing to national setting (American versus British), the relative privacy or publicity of the text or utterance in question, or the lively, disparate, and often subcultural processes by which diction mutates and gathers new inflections. It is worth noting, for instance, that the *OED*'s 1922 source for *queer* as "homosexual" is a report on juvenile delinquency issued by the US Department of Labor, from which it can be inferred that the usage was already well established on the street. Indeed, the document seems to acknowledge this slang currency by placing *queer* in quotation marks: "a young man . . . 'queer' in sex tendency."¹⁵ A more useful approach to the challenge of dating usage is advanced by George Chauncey, who studies "the broad contours of lexical evolution," rather than "reconstructing a lineage of static meanings," and who finds that the use of *queer* as "essentially synonymous with 'homosexual'" (though not with "effeminate") was already common in New York "by the 1910s and 1920s."¹⁶ This usage had made it to the opposite coast of the United States by that time as well. In Sharon R. Ullman's *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America*, one learns from court testimony in the Long Beach, California, homosexuality scandal of 1914 about the fancy "wardrobes among the 'queer' people" (which I will have reason to inventory shortly).¹⁷

The quasi-documentary gay rights novel *Strange Brother* (1931), by Blair Niles, pushes the dating of this specialized usage back even farther,

suggesting that *queer* as a term of opprobrium had found its way into American small-town vernacular even *before* 1910.¹⁸ But most remarkably, Hugh Stevens borrows from Douglass Shand-Tucci's work to show that *queer* had acquired "a more assertive shade of pink" as early as 1895, when a Boston professional man, by the Jamesian name of Wentworth, warned his gay friends to be cautious inasmuch as "queer things are looked at askance since Oscar's exposé" (referring to the contemporaneous Wilde trials).¹⁹ Thus, although the *OED* is probably correct in noting that this pink tincture to the word originated in the US, one cannot rely on its methods or sources for careful knowledge about the early, subterranean life of *queer*.

If approached as scripture in matters of linguistic history, the *OED* can be equally misleading on the use of *queer* as a noun substantive (as opposed to its adjectival form) to mean "a homosexual." W. H. Auden is credited with the first such usage, in a piece of writing from 1932, and yet a short story collection by the American writer Robert McAlmon makes it clear that this meaning was abroad in New York and in the expatriate circles of European capitals by the early 1920s. The postwar Berlin and Paris evoked in McAlmon's *Distinguished Air* (*Grim Fairy Tales*), published in 1925 but based on the author's experiences of 1922–3, clearly belong to the vertiginous cabaret scene associated with Auden and Christopher Isherwood ("To Christopher, Berlin meant boys")²⁰ and later with Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1944/5), in which, for instance, "lubricious anecdotes of Paris and Berlin" are the stock-in-trade of the novel's gay aesthete.²¹ McAlmon's personal reminiscence of Berlin, in particular, chimes as well with the city of transexual fantasia made familiar in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936): "along the Unter den Linden it was never possible to know whether it was a woman or a man in woman's clothes who accosted one."²² Seeking to capture the argot of this modern urban netherworld, *Distinguished Air* uses *queer* extensively to mean a sexual "invert" (or an "androgyne"), as when both "war-made queer[s]" and congenital ones, like the drag queen "Miss Knight," congregate in "queer cafés" (*GL* 634, 632).

If McAlmon had discovered that "a queer" meant "a homosexual," then so had many other migratory artists of the time. To speak only of American, English, or Irish figures, those in the know would have included Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom praised McAlmon's *Distinguished Air*; the author's social friends, many of them "elaborately double-lived person[s]" themselves (*GL* 634), such as Djuna Barnes, Ronald Firbank, Mina Loy, Marsden Hartley, Man Ray, and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), the lover of McAlmon's former wife, Bryher (Winifred Ellerman); and writers whose works were published by McAlmon's

Introduction

9

Contact Editions Press, notably his intimate friend Hemingway and his later antagonist Stein. As with the adjectival *queer*, one may reasonably assume that the meaning of “a homosexual (usually male)” was going the rounds in bars, cafés, and drag balls well before 1932 (the *OED* dating) and even before McAlmon adopted it in fiction. Again, this conjecture draws support from the Long Beach trials of 1914, in which one of the accused testified to – and a Sacramento newspaper duly reported on – a flourishing “society of queers” in the greater Los Angeles area, estimated at between two thousand and five thousand men.²³ In any case, one can be certain that by the time Hemingway worried aloud, in a 1933 letter, that Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* would recycle “some fag story” (probably started by McAlmon) that allegedly proved Hemingway to be “conclusively . . . very queer indeed,” his unequivocal usage was already more than a decade old, and very likely much older (*SL* 387). Moreover, to the extent that the word *queer* traveled along with wo/men like McAlmon’s “Miss Knight” (a.k.a. Charlie) – or as s/he says, “queer bitches like you and me” – in their peregrinations, this new meaning would have turned up, too, in the subcultures of “New York . . . [or] Paris, or London, or Madrid, or Singapore,” becoming “just that international” as a consequence of the cross-cultural mobility of modernity (*GL* 635, 639).

The larger point, of course, is that one can no more pin down the first instance in which *queer* meant “(a) homosexual” in Anglo-American discourse than one can say that “modernity” commenced on or around December 1910, as in Virginia Woolf’s famous formula, or, alternatively, that it began “in 1922 or thereabouts,” as in Cather’s estimation of just when the world “broke in two” in the aftermath of the so-called Great War (*SP* 812). The incremental, communal process whereby *queer* shaded into or acquired the meaning of “homosexual” possibly even antedated James; its very shadowy quality and multireferentiality constituted a latency that lent itself to the gradual elaboration of a signifying linkage. From this circumstance, however, it cannot be argued (against Habegger) that James definitively *did* refer to homosexuality when writing *The Tragic Muse*, with its “queer comrade” Gabriel Nash (*TM* 44); or *The Turn of the Screw*, with its “queer whisker[ed]” Peter Quint (*TS* 320); or *The Ambassadors*, which follows Strether from the “queer ignorance” of America to the “still queerer knowledge” of Europe and the “queer truth” about himself (*A* 277, 216); or yet again “The Jolly Corner,” where the transatlantic exchange is reversed and a Europeanized American of Strether’s age (Spencer Brydon) confronts the plural “queernesses” of New York in its “awful modern crush” (*THJ* 313, 315). Such a line of interpretation would have to contend, at a minimum,

with the fact that nearly all the examples of *queer* as “homosexual” adduced here – from 1895 to 1933, or in other words from the height of James’s career until well after his death – occur in specialized subcultures, in private communications (their very privacy encouraging Hemingway’s unrestrained use of “queer” and “fag,” questions of homophobia aside), in suppressed or withheld prose (as in the instance from Auden cited by the *OED*), or in fiction that was “all but unpublishable” (as William Carlos Williams said of McAlmon’s work) except in very limited, privately printed editions.²⁴

In a book not only published but favourably reviewed in 1909, Gertrude Stein contributed as well to this gradual literary project of modernizing and augmenting the meaning of “queer” by collocating it with homosexual motifs or characters. Perhaps more to the point, her *Three Lives* (composed 1905–6) can serve as an example of the transition in usage, since some instances of *queer* in the text seem Dickensian in vintage and others correspond with Stein’s more calculating, forward-looking use of the term in *The Making of Americans*. The protagonist of the segment entitled “The Good Anna,” for example, is coded as a figure of lesbian desire whose sexuality gets rerouted into a “strong natural feeling to love . . . a large mistress,” especially an employer who is evoked as “a woman other women loved” (*TL* 10, 27). When Stein refers to Anna’s “queer piercing german english,” the usage seems antiquated and innocuous; yet in the “queer discord” produced when Anna tricks out her “spinster body” with colorful clothes, the traditional sense of *queer* is simultaneously in effect and under renovation (*TL* 3, 18–19). Meanwhile, Stein’s narrative aside on “all the queer ways the passions have to show themselves all one” (*TL* 12) provides an inkling of the challenge she will mount to modern gender binaries and sexual conformity in her later works, as I shall show: “There are many ways of having queerness in many men and women” (*MOA* 194).

By extension of my general logic, then, one cannot cite an historical threshold *after* which “queer” invariably possessed a sexual signification. It is tempting to say that by the end of the 1920s the meaning “homosexual” achieves a sort of critical mass. In Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) – an intermediate type of document inasmuch as it was published, then suppressed – one learns of the “queer antagonism” that a mother feels toward her daughter, the evolving transsexual Stephen Gordon, because Stephen resembles her father; the father, himself a “queer mixture,” recognizes Stephen’s deviance by reading Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, the pioneering sexologist who waged (in J. A. Symonds’s phrase) a “long warfare against . . . [homophobic] prejudice and ignorance.”²⁵ Compounding the