

**THE INTERMEDIATE DECADE: MALE HOMOSEXUALITY IN  
AMERICAN POPULAR FICTION OF THE 1930s**

**by**

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**I declare that “The Intermediate Decade: Male Homosexuality in American Popular Fiction of the 1930s” is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.**

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## *Summary*

In the short period between 1931 and 1934 a flurry of gay-themed novels was published which were blatantly marketed as novels exploring the “twilight world” of homosexual men. In the subsequent seventy-odd years these titles have received very little attention, being entirely forgotten or sometimes erroneously grouped with postwar gay pulp fiction. Furthermore, almost without exception, the 1930s novels portray a concept of homosexuality which does not quite fit into the postwar view of sexual orientation or gay isolation.

Section I explores how titles like *A Scarlet Pansy*, *Strange Brother*, and *Twilight Men* all show a view of homosexuality that was immersed in gender norms and class differences much more than psychology or the modern concept of sexual orientation. In many cases, masculine or feminine behavior denotes status more than does the actual gender of one’s sexual partner. Words like “homosexual” and “heterosexual” had a “highly clinical” sound to most 1930s ears (to quote a character in *Better Angel*). That is not to say, however, the readership of these novels were unfamiliar with “the love that dare not speak its name”. In fact, it seems many novels took for granted their readers’ knowledge of urban, working-class “fairy culture” and were seeking either to shock or, conversely, elicit sympathy by depicting non-flamboyant protagonists as well as stock pansies.

In contrast to postwar treatments, the novels of the 1930s never depict gay men as existing in confused isolation. Section II explores how the novels often treat the gay

shadow world as an elite, artistic club—albeit one filled with sinful excesses and potential dangers. Finally, after 1935 the tone of gay-themed novels changed abruptly, as the public’s “pansy craze” abated. Older notions of “gender inversion” and “Nature’s intermediates” faded and homosexuality became more associated with psychological affliction with societal implications.

## *Introduction*

Today the category of “gay fiction” is one large enough to house an entire section in most major American bookstores. While some may argue the category may be moving into obsolescence via integration into mainstream culture, few would argue against the notion that in the past novels were one of the main vehicles through which ordinary Americans viewed homosexual men. Beginning in 1931 American audiences were the recipients of a small eruption of openly gay novels within a few years, a mixed lot which occupy a unique, and usually ignored, place in American popular cultural history.

Not that this was the very first time homosexuals had been awarded characterizations in fiction –and obviously not the first time gay writers had penned or published works– but it becomes obvious that the 1931-1934 period in particular was an unprecedented time in gay interest, producing a certain type of novel which was significantly different from what succeeded it. About three decades later, beginning in the early 1960s, a subcategory of pulp, outrageous, frequently pornographic gay male paperbacks were published by Avon, Greenleaf, Corinth and others for a specifically targeted audience of gay men. Some titles from the 1930s wave were repackaged and reprinted to resemble and sell alongside to these titles. While the post-1960 pulp novels certainly deserve study in their own right,<sup>1</sup> the pansy novels (as they were often referred to) of the 1930-1935 period should not be confused with this later set, nor erroneously viewed as mere earlier, tamer precursors to the gay pulp phenomenon. The literary merit of the early 1930s novels

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Stryker has taken the first step with *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback* (New York, Chronicle, 2001).

certainly varies greatly, as does the degree to which they were read by the public at large. Many were not by gay authors, and what scant reputation they have today is often tainted by this fact.<sup>2</sup> With one or two exceptions, the novels have not been viewed as having a positive view toward male homosexuality. However, it is very difficult to define what makes a “positive” viewpoint from the modern postwar/post-Stonewall/post-feminist/post-queer activist perspective.

Positive or not, the remarkable fact remains that during a brief period, over seventy years ago, mainstream publishers took a chance on publishing, and blatantly marketing, books to heterosexual readers as tales of homosexual men. While marketing took pains to point out that it was “a delicate subject” (as stated a print advertisement for *Twilight Men*), there was no mistake that homosexuality was the topic of the book. Some, often bolder, titles (*A Scarlet Pansy*, *The Young & Evil*) had lower-profile releases, but in all likelihood were only published at all, however obscurely, because of the desire to piggy-back on the “pansy craze” of the early 1930s. During 1931-1934 timeframe seven novels were published in order to satisfy heterosexual audience’s curiosity.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the novels—or at least some of them—also seemed to reflect the burgeoning concept of what exactly

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, of the 1930s novels I discuss only one is unequivocally known to be written by a heterosexual: *Strange Brother* by Blair Niles. *The Young and Evil* and *Better Angel* are (now) known to have been penned by gay men while the others are still a mystery and likely pseudonyms. Using the scorecard approach (straight: 1, gay: 2) by no means confirms the 1930s novels’ realism, but it bears mentioning since later criticisms of the novels have often fixated on a lack of gay immediacy or believability.

<sup>3</sup> There were at least seven 1930s gay-themed novels, but I mainly discuss six. The seventh, *Goldie* by Kennilworth Bruce, remains elusive. I was unable to obtain a copy of this rare 1933 novel and even mentions of it are exceedingly scant. James Levin in *The Gay Novel in America*, Roger Austen in *Playing the Game: The Homosexual Novel in America* and John Loughery in *The Other Side of Silence* all include brief synopses and analyses, and remain the only substantial *Goldie* references I have found. In the latest (2002) edition to *The Gay & Lesbian Literary Heritage: A Reader’s Companion to the Writers and Their Works, From Antiquity to the Present* it is mentioned as being “unavailable” to the editor, suggesting it is hard to find indeed. Also, it is entirely possible that other novels were published for the “pansy craze” of the early 1930s but have slipped beneath social historians’ radar.

a homosexual *was* to American readers. Books like *Strange Brother*, *Butterfly Man*, and *Better Angel* not only reveal both a transition away from 19<sup>th</sup>-century textbook theories of sexuality, but also a drastic contrast to what was to become the status quo opinion of homosexuality in the postwar period. So different are postwar perceptions of homosexuality that this remarkable wave of novels is frequently dismissed as unrealistic sensationalism (often being lumped anachronistically in with the later pulp novels) or simply forgotten altogether. No one seems to know quite what to make of them.

Editions of Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* published in the 1970s, for example, tout it as the "first gay novel". Even if that statement were altered to "first gay novel of importance" it would still ring false, for while Gore Vidal certainly came into literary importance later, at the time of *The City and the Pillar*'s original 1948 publication he was probably less known than *Strange Brother*'s author Blair Niles had been in 1931. *The Young and Evil*'s gay authors (who enjoyed later acclaim, publishing and otherwise) probably have the best current-day literary reputation and respect among gay critics, yet *The Young & Evil*'s circa 1930 viewpoint on gay male sexuality essentially confirms that of the other mass market novels—the very novels those same critics dismiss as "confused" or "outrageous".

As noted historians such as Jonathan Ned Katz (*The Invention of Heterosexuality*) and George Chauncey (*Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*) convincingly argue, the concept of an us/them, homo/hetero dichotomy is a relatively modern one. As Katz points out it was only in the 1930s where



the very terms *homosexual* and *heterosexual* moved outside the psychology and sociology textbooks and into mainstream American usage:

“Only in 1934 does “heterosexuality” first appear in Webster’s hefty *Second Edition Unabridged* defined in what is still the dominant modern mode. There, heterosexuality is finally a “manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex: normal sexuality.” Heterosexuality had finally attained the status of norm.”<sup>4</sup>

Tellingly, no less than *seven* novels had already been published in the US in the three years prior exploring the apparent “non-norm” subject of homosexuality. The sudden rise in gay novels not only satisfied a public’s growing curiosity for reading about this subculture, but validated their own status as the dominant –and by implication normal–sexuality. Tales of exotic subcultures or bawdy lower-class sexual exploits have long proven popular with middle and upper-class readerships, and as Chauncey and others have shown, dissident sexualities were very much entwined with urban working classes, prostitution, racial minorities, foreigners, and taboo nightlife. Chauncey mentions this 1931-1934 “flurry of gay-themed novels” as an example of how Prohibition audiences developed a pansy craze right alongside, and entwined with, the Negro craze for Harlem music and speakeasy culture. Middle-class audiences had a new subculture to feed their interests in the avant-garde, and all of the 1930s novels use the language of secret societies, shadow worlds, and other terminology denoting a distinct subculture one was either a member of or an outsider to. Indeed, Chauncey refers to the first half of the 1930s as “the height of popular fascination with gay culture”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Katz, Jonathan Ned, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York, Plume, 1996), 92.

<sup>5</sup> Chauncey, George, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York, Harper Collins, 1994), 4-5.

Also, I seek to argue that in most cases these novels did not presume to be the first exposure readers would have to homosexuality, but rather in some cases tried to *redefine* how readers viewed inverts, fairies and intermediates, terms more vernacular than the clinical-sounding “homosexual”. Several novels –*Twilight Men* and *Strange Brother* for example– assume that the sophisticated reader is already quite familiar with the elaborate drag balls of New York City and the dyed-hair, fairy prostitutes of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. Instead, they sought to familiarize readers with the *other* side of the “shadow world”, meaning the non-flamboyants, and otherwise ordinary men who have sexual relations with each other. The idea of an ordinary, “closeted” gay man was new terrain to many 1930s urban readers, who felt fairies’ tweezed eyebrows and mock-female behavior were every bit as universal of cultural indicators as were African-American skin tones or Italian-American accents and mannerisms. In this sense, I believe, the novels not only reflected but contributed to the budding binary mindset that assumed dominance following the Second World War, and solidified with Stonewall and the arrival of gay liberation. The 1930s burst of novels is reflective of a unique and brief period in American social history: one where homosexual men had an unprecedented mainstream visibility but were still perceived, by and large, in 19<sup>th</sup>-century terms.

## I

*Discovering the Homosexual: Gender, Class & Sexuality*

George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, probably more than any other work, disproves the myth of pre-Stonewall gay invisibility and isolation. His research demonstrates that not only was there an urban gay social network and community, but an elaborate and complex one that culminated in a late 1920s/early 1930s "pansy craze" which swept the New York theater and was widely discussed in the popular media. This craze extended to publishing in the form of seven novels produced within a four-year period. While the figure of the pansy would have been familiar to most Americans –and definitely to New Yorkers– the broader audience reached via popular novels necessitated more restraint. Those that had the smaller publishers and less mainstream methods of distribution (*A Scarlet Pansy* and *The Young and Evil*) could be more blatantly, even shamelessly, entrenched in big city pansy subculture. The novels that had a broader middle-class intended audience could still appeal to adventurous readers' appetite for pansies, but often mixed it with a good dose of "serious, sensitive treatment" (according to the dust jacket of one novel) and often a large dash of the salacious. The results of such concoctions for a middle-class readership vary greatly: from *Strange Brother*'s often schoolmarmish instructions for tolerance and broad human understanding, to *Better Angel*'s forthright coming-of-age tale, to the fantastic portrayals of drag and drugs in *Twilight Men*.

***“Might just as well wear skirts”***

Robert Scully’s *A Scarlet Pansy*, a farcical romp through the pre-World War I gay life, is by far the most outrageous and comedic of the early 1930s gay novels and probably the most akin to the stage and nightclub material that exploded with the pansy craze at the time. It is also a novel which possesses an uncertain and shrouded publishing history. The first edition seems to have appeared in 1933. Published by Faro it is, presumably, quite rare. Another undated hardcover edition, published by Royal, appears to have remained in print throughout most of the 1930s and 1940s and while still fairly obscure it is the most commonly available with book antiquarians. In his 1977 study, *Playing the Game: The Homosexual Novel in America*, Roger Austen claims the Royal edition (from which I will also quote) was a revised edition in terms of updating the vocabulary and certain language.<sup>6</sup> This was common, especially for middlebrow literature at the time, as clunky spellings or the rapidly dated terminology was modified (“motor-car” becomes simply car; outdoor gas-lamps become streetlights, etc.). He also theorizes that *A Scarlet Pansy* may have been written significantly earlier and nearer to the time frame in which it takes place (roughly 1905 through about 1918) and was only published in 1933 once censorship practices regarding fictional treatment of homosexuality loosened up following the success of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). Perhaps, but clearly *A Scarlet Pansy* didn’t get the mainstream promotion and marketing, and thus attention or controversy, as did Hall’s novel and Blair Niles’ *Strange Brother*. I could not locate any contemporary reviews of *A Scarlet Pansy*, indicating it was either unnoticed by reviewers or was purposefully ignored. Austen also proposes that the style,

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<sup>6</sup> Austen, Roger, *Playing the Game: The Homosexual Novel in America* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1977), 64.

in contrast to the other 1930s gay novels, denotes it as predating 1933: “there is a Van Vechtenish breezy delight in the bizarre and outrageous that makes *A Scarlet Pansy* seem to belong far more to the twenties than to the thirties.”<sup>7</sup> It certainly does not pay lip service to middle-class values or sensibilities, which seemed to be more common as the Depression deepened and an eventual backlash to the pansy craze emerged, but that could also be explained because it was never intended to have as wide a readership as a *Strange Brother* or *Twilight Men*, for instance.

Bizarre and outrageous are also applicable terms in describing the later publishing history of the book. *The Bay Area Reporter* makes reference to a paperback edition usually sold “under the counter”, although there is no record of Royal, Nesor or Faro publishing a paperback edition, suggesting another publisher may have picked it up.<sup>8</sup> To my complete surprise, there was also a 1992 (and reprinted in 1994) mass market paperback edition, and here not even the authorship or title seems to be consistent. Masquerade Books’ *The Scarlet Pansy* by “Anonymous” calls it a “white-hot gay camp classic” but gives no earlier publication date than its own, no background or historical information, nor any reason why Robert Scully suddenly has become anonymous (although in all likelihood “Robert Scully” was a pseudonym from the very start). While it is outside my time frame, the strange 1992 edition does bear later discussion for reflecting the presumed readerships’, and by implication society’s, altered views on the nature of homosexuality and heterosexuality.

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<sup>7</sup> Austen, *Playing the Game*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> 9/5/1974 edition.

Whether or not written in the 1920s or early 1930s, whether or not written by Scully or Anonymous, *A Scarlet Pansy* stands out from the 1930s pack because it is the one most clearly written for consumption and enjoyment by gay men themselves. In order to ramp up the level of outrageousness, and perhaps avoid obscenity laws, Scully employs a curious device: the protagonist Fay Etrange is referred to in the feminine pronoun. *She* stays at the YMCA when arriving in New York, *she* gets a job shoveling coal, *she* eventually enrolls in medical school and *she* ends up dying in the arms of her lover in the trenches of the Great War. In spite of the pronoun switch, it quickly becomes clear that Fay Etrange is male. In fact, the second chapter, ‘Might Just As Well Wear Skirts’, makes it obvious, as the still-naive hero is subjected to the cat-calls and advances (“Look at the pretty one!, “Little fairy, will that complexion rub off?”) of the older bachelors at the YMCA:

“Fay’s mind struggled with the meaning of these remarks, but she could not fully understand. She knew that while they were intended to ridicule and even to demean her, they yet contained elements of a passionate earnestness that threatened to wreck her whole life. It began to look as if she might just as well wear skirts!”<sup>9</sup>

“To wreck her whole life” gives a false impression of the overall breezy and satirical nature of the novel, which is fairly soaked in sexual innuendo and insider gay language, and seems to be parodying late 19<sup>th</sup>-century “and let us follow our heroine, dear reader, as she leaves for the big city” conventions most readers of its generation would have grown up with. The decision to change Fay’s pronoun seems to have been done as much for farcical comedy as to seriously fool anyone as chapter titles like ‘Shenanigans At the

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<sup>9</sup> Scully, Robert, *A Scarlet Pansy* (New York, Royal, 1933), 20.

“Y”, ‘A Marriage in Fairyland’, ‘Like Other Exercises, Love Improves with Practice’, and ‘A Policeman Can Be a Great Comfort’ show the wink-wink effervescence that saturates the novel. Fay is never really a very fleshed-out or believable character, nor does he seem intended to be. *A Scarlet Pansy*’s only intention seems to be amusement, and showing the gay life of the New York pansy subculture. *A Scarlet Pansy*, unlike many other gay novels which sought to appeal to middle-class sensibilities or sociological theories, seems to actually take for granted the readers’ knowledge of a pansy subculture of parties, street cruising, gay repartee and lower-class trade. It does not seek to humanize the homosexual but, rather, celebrates the pansy.

What is the difference? Chauncey, Katz, Gail Bederman and other historians have provided significant evidence that American gay men in urban areas found themselves often being grouped together not in one homogeneous category of “men who like men” (which would be the norm now) but instead in subcategories and labels depending on class, demeanor, and even ethnicity. While Austen seems to think the mere style and high camp quotient of *A Scarlet Pansy* indicates an earlier authorship than 1933, I would argue the fact that it never properly explores or even fully acknowledges the non-pansy homosexual is a more accurate indicator that pegs it far closer to the first quarter of the century. There is no masculine, “normal” gay protagonist like *Strange Brother*’s Mark Thornton –or even a sensitive, artistic gay protagonist like *Better Angel*’s Kurt– just the adventuresome Fay Etrange. A pansy or fairy was marked not so much for their desire, or even practice, of having sex with men but rather for their effeminacy and high-strung demeanor. Chauncey makes a compelling case that ordinary New Yorkers of the time

were not at all blind to this fairy culture that was a large part of their city, nor were they particularly threatened by it. Fairies, pansies, a third sex or gender intermediate –all terms from the time– practically enforce the fact that gender roles were the main building blocks to an identity. Today’s paramount identity of “sexual orientation” is completely absent in *A Scarlet Pansy*. Pansies just *are*, and other men may or may not respond to their advances depending on their own sexual tastes, morals and social class.

This older notion of an intermediate sex does imply, however, that intermediates are destined only to desire “straight” men just as women do. *A Scarlet Pansy* certainly enforces this assumption. Fay and her elder pansy friends (aunties) compare tastes and conquests, referring to rough trade (meaning masculine, non-pansy males):

“Chauffeurs and army officers for me” piped up Sissy Beach. “Puttees are my fetish.” Then Old Aunty Beach-Butsch, the fat, the gray, the sophisticated, added her preference-- “Don’t forget the men in blue overalls and blue shirts, the plumbers and steamfitters and such. I like ‘em rough and strong and sturdy.”

“Oh Aunty Beach-Butsch, don’t! Rough trade, after you’re through with it, is such a bore!”<sup>10</sup>

Bore or not, Fay and the Beach-Butsch clan seem to have no trouble obtaining blue collar sexual partners. In fact, most of Fay’s conquests seem to involve longshoremen, policemen, West Point cadets, and other manly types. It could be argued that this is mere wish-fulfillment on the part of the protagonists, but for all its facetiousness *A Scarlet Pansy* also supports Chauncey and other social historians’ arguments that “rough trade” cruising encounters also fulfilled a chauvinist standard that kept pansies in their place

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<sup>10</sup> Scully, *Scarlet Pansy*, 118.



among loose women and prostitutes. Chauncey devotes an entire chapter (Chapter II—‘The Fairy as an Intermediate Sex’) to the evidence that men, especially blue-collar and working-class ethnic minorities such as Italians and African-Americans, would have sexual encounters with the third sex, as well as the opposite sex, and not think of themselves as having a gay or even alternative sexuality. He writes:

“Much evidence suggests that the fairy, so long as he abided by the conventions of this cultural script (effeminacy), was tolerated in much of working-class society—regarded as an anomaly, certainly, but as more amusing than abhorrent, and only rarely as a threat to the gender order. He was so obviously a “third-sexer”, a different species of human being, that his very effeminacy served to confirm rather than threaten the masculinity of other men, particularly since it often exaggerated the conventions of deference and gender difference between men and women. The fairies reaffirmed the conventions of gender even as they violated them: they behaved as no man should, but as any man might wish a woman would. Their representation of themselves as “intermediate types” made it easier for men to interact with them (and even have sex with them) by making it clear who would play the “man’s part” in the interaction.”<sup>11</sup>

*A Scarlet Pansy* is so immersed in the prevailing notion of pansies confirming rather than threatening male sexuality that if it was not for its light-hearted, farcical style certain sections would be almost alarming. Fay has sex with an Irish policeman at a party, but when he encounters him later “on the beat” in Central Park is sharply rebuked:

“Don’t hang around. I got a regular girl now. Goin’ to get spliced nex’ week. Fix you up with a couple of friends of mine. What say? There comes the boss! Beat it!”<sup>12</sup>

Fay, a surprising good sport about his rejection, responds: “Do you suppose one cop is just as good as another?”<sup>13</sup> In the chapter ‘Cruising for It’, Fay meets up with a marine

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<sup>11</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Scully, *Scarlet Pansy*, 92-93

named Whitey who brags how he rescued another pansy from a gang rape by his shipmates yelling “Hey, youse, this is my kid. Beat it!”<sup>14</sup> Later, Fay himself is rescued by Whitey from a potential robbery by another marine brought home after a night of cruising. What differentiates Whitey from other rough trade is not his willingness to have sex with pansies, but rather his willingness to treat them with some degree of friendship and respect. A postwar reading would probably surmise that Whitey himself must be gay, bisexual, or at the very least “closeted gay” if he sleeps with Fay and other pansies. However, in the pre-1940 context of the novel those labels don’t quite fit. It is suggested that the reason Whitey is loitering at the well-known gay cruising haunt is because lack of funds inhibits his ability to take out a girl or pay for a woman prostitute:

Whitey had been standing at the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and Market gloating at the “skirts” as they passed by. Pay day was still in the offing. Therefore free amusement for the evening appealed to him.

A little further on they spotted a Marine. “That looks good to me, said Fay. “Do you know him?”

“Not very well” answered Whitey. “But I guess he’s O.K. If he ain’t, well, it’s just too bad, for I’m here, little one, ain’t I?”<sup>15</sup>

Even within the realm of gay cruising traditional gender roles are reaffirmed. The fact that Fay is a gay male does not alter *Whitey’s* masculinity, for he is still acting within the boundaries of normal manly conventions. He offers gallant protection to his feminine companion should any trouble arise. The flip side to that, of course, is that the would-be rapists Whitey averts are also acting within the bounds of normal manhood, not out of

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<sup>13</sup> Scully, *Scarlet Pansy*, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Scully, *Scarlet Pansy*, 127.

<sup>15</sup> Scully, *Scarlet Pansy*, 126.

homosexual depravity. While the *morality* of raping a pansy –just like the morality of raping a prostitute– may have been questioned at the time of *A Scarlet Pansy*, the *manhood* of the rapists would not have been.

I cannot help but use this opportunity to compare an incident in the Masquerade 1992 edition with the earlier one. As a whole, this later edition follows the plot and writing of the original faithfully. The satirical tone is still there, although Fay has become Randall, and the often distracting game of referring to him in the feminine pronoun is dropped completely. Also, more explicit sex scenes are inserted where only veiled ones existed previously. One could argue, however, that these steamy portions still remain loyal to the tongue-in-cheek nature of *A Scarlet Pansy* via their liberal use of double entendre (Fay's policeman lover "discharges his meaty gun" for instance) and manage to stay (just) within the realm of risqué pulp novel rather than veer into pornography. However it is not the racier sex scenes, but rather the subtler shifts in characterization and plot device, that are the most telling means employed to update *A Scarlet Pansy* to fit more modern tastes.

Chapter 24 ('Trial by Love' originally; the Masquerade edition drops the campy chapter titles) deals with an incident at Fay/Randall's university. Fay's fellow medical school students suspect that their classmate may not be "one of them". In the original edition this is how they plot to expose Fay:

"Most of the members of her class discussed her, not too respectfully. She was above them in native intelligence, and even in her studies. Then, too, she was not "one of

them”, they did not understand her, and what we do not understand we either fear or hate. Secretly some of them tried for her favors. Fay stirred the imagination, and, in fighting their desires, they also fought Fay. So, after talking the subject over in a secret meeting of those who thought it their duty “to uphold the honor of the school”, one of their numbers, a man called Homans, was delegated to lead Fay on, to seduce her, and compromise her.”<sup>16</sup>

A gang of boys seeking to “out” a classmate suspected of being gay is by no means an unusual or dated scenario. However, the notion of designating one of the gang to have sex with the suspected (presumably to prove his guilt) somehow rings false to modern ears. The Masquerade edition seems to recognize the apparent inconsistency and attempts to explain, or complicate, the scenario a bit more:

“...he was not “one of them” and they did not understand him, and true to human nature, what they did not quite understand they either feared or hated. The truth is each was secretly willing to try for his favors. Always they were imagining the very exquisiteness of sensation that might be enjoyed. Their imaginations disturbed them and made them uncomfortable. So, in fighting their desires, they also fought Randall. The conventional are ever intolerant of those who live as they please. Jealousy of a freedom of spirit which they cannot attain drives them to seek to destroy such a freedom.”<sup>17</sup>

Both versions baldly say that Fay/Randall elicited the “imagination” of his classmates. However, only in the later edition does it say “their imaginations disturbed them and made them uncomfortable”. Also, while the earlier edition only mentions the classmates’ jealousy of Fay/Randall’s superior grades and intellect, the modern version inserts a convoluted passage about being jealous of a certain “freedom of spirit” they apparently do not possess.

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<sup>16</sup> Scully, *Scarlet Pansy*, 122-123.

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous, *The Scarlet Pansy* (New York, Masquerade, 1992), 174.

It seems the very thing that makes our protagonist “not one of them” has undergone a change with the times. The 1990s version is more than suggesting that the gang’s aversion to Fay/Randall is tied to the fact that they are “disturbed” and “uncomfortable” with their own secret sexuality: the closeted and “conventional” homosexual despises the flaming, “free of spirit” homosexual who reminds him of the “exquisiteness of sensation that might be enjoyed”. In the earlier version, however, the outrage seems to be more that a pansy has the audacity to outshine them at academics and that his flamboyant presence is sullyng the name of an honored institution. True, they also “fight their desires” for Fay but they are not disturbed or made uncomfortable by them. It is also telling that only in the earlier version is it stated that they discuss Fay “not too respectfully”. No one seems particularly tortured or disturbed with their desires, secret or otherwise. After all, they unashamedly assign a person to physically act out those desires in order to validate their suspicions! What they *are* disturbed by, however, is the fact that there is a fairy at their respected institution and one that is outperforming them at that.

Homan’s advances are rejected in both versions, Fay feeling “fairly indifferent” to them. In the later edition, however, he does have relations with another classmate who swears him to secrecy (and to which Randall good-naturedly agrees). Again, Fay/Randall’s homosexuality is presented as something that his straight-identified classmates may share, but are definitely conflicted by. In the 1933 edition, however, Homan is angered and insulted when Fay rebuffs his advances and actually lies to the others and claims they had intercourse anyway! Homan evidently doesn’t feel any shame or danger in admitting (or fabricating) sexual activity with Fay, but rather seems to see it as a means to confirm

Fay's pansy status and thus "uphold the honor of the school". During a dramatic confrontation Homan finally admits lying about the tryst, saying "I told you fellows what I thought was the best thing to tell you to get rid of this person."<sup>18</sup> While the homosexual act itself would not tarnish Homan or the elite school, fairyism might. With the lie admitted, Fay is exonerated, and he triumphantly and snidely "wiggled her hips out of the room" putting an end to the entire ordeal. As mentioned, despite his camp behavior Fay outperforms most of his classmates and, as John Loughery wittily points out, displays rather masculine valor in World War I:

"As a medic in the trenches, Fay is unfazed by the blood and gore. The he-men she ministers to have a more difficult time of it. Her voice may be high-pitched and her wrist limp, but she has a self-sacrificing spirit."<sup>19</sup>

The other gay novel published in 1933 (albeit obscurely) was Charles Henri Ford's and Parker Tyler's collaborative effort *The Young and Evil*. This novel also has many interesting insights about the public and private gay world, gender, and the 1920 and 1930s notion of trade/fairy sex. While completely different in tone and style, and coming from a different perspective (New York Bohemia), the major element that *The Young and Evil* and *A Scarlet Pansy* share is their clear view of the role played by gender in a prewar reading of sexuality. A highly biographical and autobiographical novel –and one that was meant to shock via its stripped-down realism and disjointed organization– it shows

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<sup>18</sup> Scully, *Scarlet Pansy*, 123-124.

<sup>19</sup> Loughery, John, *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities, A Twentieth Century History* (New York, Owl Books, 1998), 85. John Loughery's study covers much of the same territory as Chauncey, he devotes a few paragraphs to some of the gay-themed novels of the 1930s.

New York gay public cruising, gay interactions at bars and cafeterias, and the fairy/trade phenomena in surprisingly similar terms as the farcical *A Scarlet Pansy*.

The widespread belief that blue collar men would be susceptible to pansies, and very willing to procure pansies for sex, permeates *The Young and Evil*. Many of the characters seem to be able to switch on and off their camp behavior as easily as changing clothing, and often seem to play the role of pansy in order to elicit masculine male attention (at one point referred to as “the kind that make homosexuality worthwhile”). One character, Karel, uses an eyebrow pencil and preens vainly throughout the novel. Again, as with Fay’s policemen and sailors, it is precisely the feminine traits and artifices which are thought to elicit sexual interest from working-class men. In this scene the two protagonists, introduced by a mutual friend but having only communicated via letter thus far, get a room together and size each other up:

“The room was in the best order of another decade. Julian loosened his collar and Karel arranged his long black hair. Karel had written that he used makeup achingly but unobtrusively. His eyebrows though Julian thought might cause an Italian laborer to turn completely around. They lit cigarettes.”<sup>20</sup>

Plucked or heavily penciled eyebrows turn up frequently in the gay novels of the early 1930s, as well as accounts by gay men from the time, as sure-fire signs used to recognize pansies in the heterosexual public sphere. So attached is Karel to his eyebrow pencil that in a chapter entitled ‘Cruise’ (where he and another character Frederick are arrested for

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<sup>20</sup> Ford, Charles Henri & Tyler, Parker, *The Young and Evil* (New York, Richard Kasak Books, 1996), 16. The 1996 Kasak edition is a reprint of the 1988 Masquerade printing which was the first to feature the introduction by Steven Watson.

public cruising), having to relinquish it to the police is presented as one of the main hardships of a night in jail.

The notion that sailors and other working-class men constitute the main sexual diet for pansies is looked at both facetiously and admonishingly by several characters in *The Young and Evil*. Although the characters all consider themselves well above the common street fairy, and do jump in and out of each others' beds with abandon, the notion that the invert above all else wants an otherwise "straight" masculine male is prominent. One bedroom scene with Karel and Louis, a tougher more masculine type, is very telling:

"Don't be a bitch. What are you looking for? Something like Julian? You homos don't like each other.

Don't be crude. Just because—

You've got your eyes fixed on the male symbol. Your feet get mixed up with each other's in the rush. You couldn't fall in love with each other.

That's not what I was thinking about. You have a talent for diverting the issue. I've paid homage to that. But I meant something else.

I know what you meant: you think I'm not thinking about *your* symbol. What gave you the idea that I was queer?

Oh—so you're not. I suspected that.

Louis smiled broadly and reached out.

Karel didn't take the embrace but said don't.

You know you like me to do it. Don't you?

Karel shrugged. Of course. Under the proper circumstance.

You guys aren't realists."<sup>21</sup>

At the same time as Louis enjoys the company, sexual and otherwise, of Karel and Karel's queer circle, he admonishes them for wanting actual relationships with non-queers like himself. He does not consider himself queer—even while in bed with another man—and finds it is unrealistic that Karel and others would desire relationships. Louis'

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<sup>21</sup> Ford & Tyler, *Young and Evil*, 143-144.



denial of being queer does not strike Karel as inconsistent or unbelievable either. In fact, it seems he had “suspected that” already.

Another passage in *The Young and Evil* that has many parallels to *A Scarlet Pansy*, and demonstrates the vastly different reading of male-male sexuality to 1930s audiences, concerns the attempted rape of a character by gangsters. Gabriel relates this story to Karel and Julian:

“I went through all that last week. You’ve heard the expression to have the shit scared out of you? Such a thing was demonstrated to me to be based on truth...about dawn I was walking along Fourth Street when a car of four gangsters who had come out of the coffee pot on Fourth and Sixth drove toward me. They saw me and called out hey faggot as they passed by. I kept walking but when I heard them turn the car around I started to run. They sped up and were even with me when I ran inside a building I knew and locked myself in the toilet in the back of the hall. I was just in time for both the locking of the door and the toilet...I suppose I would have been raped by those bastards.

Karel opened his mouth into an oval and his eyes became wide. My God Gabriel think of me! Oh, the fiends! He lay down on the couch.

Julian said are they that dangerous?

They were probably drunk or I don’t see how they mistook *me*...

Yes you do have a face like a truck-driver.”<sup>22</sup>

Gabriel’s story flies in the face not only of most modern ideas of sexual identification and orientation, but also of modern perceptions regarding homophobic violence against gay men. At first, in the context of yelling “hey faggot” the male harassers would be assumed to be anti-gay ruffians. However, Gabriel’s fear is clearly of *sexual* violence and not just physical violence or gay-bashing. Just as in Whitey’s story of the thwarted gang rape in *A Scarlet Pansy*, sexual violence against pansies seems to have little, if any, connection to the rapists’ orientation. In fact, shouting the epithet faggot seems to be the main

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<sup>22</sup> Ford & Tyler, *Young and Evil*, 45-46.

reason Gabriel thought rape was their intent. As in *A Scarlet Pansy*, the perceived criminal and violent proclivities of working-class men and the gender-defined role of pannies creates a scenario for rape.

The popular cultural connection between plebeian *sexual* violence and effeminacy is scarcely remembered today. Occasional echoes of it are still present, however. In 1998 Camille Paglia suggested (in her online *Salon* article) that the death of Matthew Shepard was a case of a youthful foray into rough trade gone violently wrong:

"...Shepard's death was immediately transmogrified into a moral parable of a sweet, saintly gay boy set upon by bigoted thugs and crucified for his homosexuality. But the truth seems to be (from the scanty evidence thus far) that Shepard was attracted to his assailants because they *were* thugs. Does anyone really believe that Shepard, educated in Switzerland, thought those two, barely literate hoodlums were gay or that he left the bar with them for cozy tea and conversation....It used to be called 'rough trade'."<sup>23</sup>

Mainstream media avoided this angle to the story altogether. By the time of the Shepard murder, middle and upper-class Americans, as a whole, viewed themselves as being *more* sympathetic, *more* accepting, *more* knowledgeable of homosexuality and *more* exposed to homosexuals than their blue collar counterparts. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century gay men are perceived as much more likely to interact and intermingle in middle-to-upper class circles. Violence against gay men is deemed a mere manifestation of either brutish ignorance or religious bigotry: two traits associated with lower classes. Another echo of the older, more sexually-laden theory of gay violence and class came in a 1984 *Village Voice* interview with author James Baldwin. Referring to traditional blue collar men and their (1980s) popular perception as having greater anti-gay tendencies:

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<sup>23</sup> Paglia, Salon.com, 10/28/1998.

“And that is why they need faggots. They’ve created faggots in order to act out a sexual fantasy on the body of another man and not take any responsibility for it...I think it’s very important for the male homosexual to recognize that he is a sexual target for other men, and that is why he is despised, and why he is called a faggot. He is called a faggot because other males need him.”<sup>24</sup>

The story Gabriel relates is doubly telling. Not only does it show how Gabriel and his circle view his would-be attackers, but also how they perceive themselves. Of Gabriel’s listeners Karel is the most visibly alarmed, crying “My God Gabriel, think of me!” Being the most effeminate and physically striking of the bunch (hadn’t Julian believed Karel’s mere eyebrows would turn laborers’ heads?) Karel knows that he would unquestionably be recognized as a faggot. Yet he also thinks that *because* he is more fairylike, and by insinuation more attractive, he possesses an increased desirability as rape victim. Gabriel readily concurs, and obviously (like Louis) does not view himself as a pansy (“I don’t see how they mistook *me*...”), even explaining it away to the harassers’ drunkenness. Karel’s comment that he possesses a “face like a truck-driver” enforces that it is not the idea of gangsters raping a man that shocks them, but rather that a non-pansy had been their target. Whether the hooligans were indeed intoxicated, or whether Gabriel isn’t quite as macho as he seems to believe, is left to conjecture.

***“a serious, sensitive treatment”***

If *A Scarlet Pansy* is the decade’s most flamboyant example of an “insider” novel written for gay men’s enjoyment, and *The Young and Evil* an esoteric glimpse into unashamed

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<sup>24</sup> Baldwin, James, “Go the Way Your Blood Beats: An Interview with Richard Goldstein”, *Village Voice* (6/26/1984).

sexual adventurers, Blair Niles' *Strange Brother* is the ultimate example of an "outsider" novel written for middle-class, presumably straight, American sensibilities. Published in 1931, it seems to be the only one of the early 1930s batch to have received any mainstream book reviews, attracting brief-to-moderate mentions in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *Philadelphia Record*, and others. *The Saturday Review of Literature* –which gave the book the largest notice– summed up its review with "this is less a novel than a piece of special pleading".<sup>25</sup> In many ways *Strange Brother* can be viewed as the flip-side to *A Scarlet Pansy*: while the latter is farcical, the former is sober; *A Scarlet Pansy*'s Fay melodramatically dies for love in the French trenches and *Strange Brother*'s Mark dies in tortured, self-loathing suicide; one's protagonist is effeminate and celebrates New York's public gay scene while the other is masculine and avoids and demonizes it. Lastly, while *A Scarlet Pansy* is so blatantly "insider" in its language and in-the-know descriptions it seems likely it was written by a gay man (however pseudonymed), *Strange Brother* was written from the more distanced view of a heterosexual woman, and a respected author at that. Blair Niles already possessed some degree of fame for her adventure-travel themed books set in exotic locales. Writing as an observing outsider in her previous books about Ecuador or the West Indies, with *Strange Brother* she essentially takes the same anthropological approach of describing another exotic milieu, albeit one that exists in the very midst of New York City. Austen finds this sexual tourist point of view unsatisfactory, saying it is "given through the eyes of a vaguely embarrassed matron rather than from the viewpoint of a flesh-and-blood gay male, who might be expected to respond with more than mere sympathy".<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "The New Books", *Saturday Review of Literature* (10/31/1931).

<sup>26</sup> Austen, *Playing the Game*, 66.

The most likeable character, and the one through whom the story is primarily told, is not a matron but a young divorcee named June Westbrook. A reporter, she meets Mark Thornton by chance while slumming at a heavily gay and black Harlem nightclub. As mentioned, Austen and Levin find Blair's straight female observer perspective problematic and Susan Stryker is not far off the mark when she says "*Strange Brother* is really a novel about a heterosexual woman's platonic relationship with a gay man".<sup>27</sup> Yet I feel that Niles actually deserves credit for employing the vehicle of sexual tourist June Westbrook rather than disingenuously attempting to write from a first-hand gay male perspective. June serves as a stand-in not only for the author, but in all probability for the main audience who would be reading *Strange Brother*. True, this vehicle is not always successful and Austen's claim that Niles is simply unable to capture the "immediacy of the gay experience" does have some merit. However, *Strange Brother* was indubitably the highest-profile book from the period and it remained in print well into the 1950s.

*Strange Brother's* protagonist Mark Thornton is indeed portrayed as pathetic, and the book does have its faults, chief among them a pedantic heavy-handedness in its "special pleading" for tolerance. Nonetheless, both of the major critiques of the novel to have come out in the late 1970s/early 1980s (Austen's and Levin's) are unduly harsh and ignore many historically fascinating aspects to the book. While Mrs. Niles may very well be a "vaguely embarrassed matron", she also knew she was not preaching to the proverbial choir. The majority of her readers would not have been part of the New York

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<sup>27</sup> Stryker, *Queer Pulp*, 100.

gay world, nor would they have been a part of that straight world which intermingled with the gay world circa 1930: urban working-class and immigrant groups. *Strange Brother* seeks to inform middle and upper-class straight readers that not all strange brothers are the painted pansies of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. Also, Niles clearly is trying to reveal to her respectable readership the risks (arrest, blackmail, exploitation) gay men face daily—that the comedic drag queens and burlesque gaiety on stage may have a sobering flipside. The *New York Herald Tribune* said *Strange Brother* was “a sympathetic statement of the problems which confront a sensitive intermediate”.<sup>28</sup> I feel that *Strange Brother*, more than any other gay novel, itself served as a sensitive intermediate between the prevailing ideas of sexuality in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the burgeoning view which was to solidify by the 1950s. By the time Avon reprinted *Strange Brother* as a cheap pulp novel in 1952 the term “intermediate” was archaic. For all its literary failings, Niles’ book reflects how middle-class Americans’ familiarity with the existing urban pansy gay life, widespread acceptance of Freudian psychology, and popularization of science and anthropology were all amalgamating into a new concept of what a homosexual was.

In order to appease this middle-class readership which was becoming increasingly enamored of popular psychology, sociology, and biology, actual causes of homosexuality would need to be explored. While urban working classes would tolerate the pansy model, as it still fitted into traditional chauvinist gender roles, Middle America was increasingly changing its views on the validity of a static feminine role. Niles herself certainly fits into the much-lauded New Woman of the 1920s and early 1930s with her divorced status and adventure-seeking lifestyle, as does her heroine June Westbrook. Also, class

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<sup>28</sup> 12/23/1931.

snobbery is at work. *Strange Brother* readers may very well have been aware of the pansy subculture, but many would have disapproved of it for the same reasons “cleanliness crusades” of the time targeted lower-class women and prostitutes: the belief that unwashed immigrants and rough working classes were naturally more promiscuous and a main culprit behind the spread of venereal disease. So effective were some of these crusaders’ education campaigns to keep men away from prostitutes, Chauncey’s research suggests that some working-class men began soliciting fairies in the belief homosexual oral sex was less risky than vaginal sex. Thus, for the novel to achieve the same degree of special pleading for tolerance, Niles had to separate the pansy from the prostitute but yet still depict that familiar character to keep authenticity with her audience. *The Saturday Review of Literature* evidently also thought most of its readers would be quite familiar with the pansy when it noted that “other, *less conspicuous*, types of homosexuality are brought to our attention”.<sup>29</sup>

Knowing that the pansy-type was not unfamiliar to her urban readers, Niles injects a bit of Freudian psychology to explain why someone may act and dress femininely, even at the risk of arrest. Simultaneously she criticizes a judicial system that penalizes people for something for which they might not be to blame. “Nelly”, a patron of the bar where June meets Mark, stands before a municipal judge on solicitation charges:

“What makes you want to do it...dress up that way? What’s the idea? A man in woman’s clothes?”

“I’m happier so, your honor. Since I was a child I’m happier so. There were five older brothers at home and mother wanted me to be a girl. She let me dress in girl’s

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<sup>29</sup> “The New Books”, *Saturday Review of Literature* (10/31/1931), emphasis mine.

things when I was small, and let me play with dolls. I used to help her with the housework, and I liked it. Liked sewing too.”

The court was quite still, staring at Nelly who looked so much more like a girl in man’s dress than like a boy with shaped eyebrows, waved blondined hair and a gilt bangle.

On the evidence of superficial physical appearance Nelly could have been arrested as a woman in, what the officer would have called, “male attire”.

The judge took up his pen. While he wrote out the sentence there was, here and there, a snicker among the spectators.

“You ought to be ashamed”, the judge went on.

Nelly’s eyes followed the pen which wrote down his fate.

“Ashamed! A man going about looking like that. A man getting himself up like a female. Why do you do it? Why don’t you cut it out? That’s what you ought to do.”

“I’m happier so,” was all Nelly had to say, his eyes still wide and fixed and scared, in a face that was white without its rouge. “I’m happier so, that’s all, your honor.”<sup>30</sup>

Niles is clearly trying to argue –counter to common beliefs– that fairies may not be the same as female prostitutes, and that their affliction is not moral failing but rather something outside of their control, perhaps stemming back to childhood. The judge is baffled by why Nelly would risk arrest, but Freudian thought argues every trait and neurosis can be a product of those first few years—Nelly cannot help that he’s “happier so”. Niles also explains Mark’s upbringing as being one with an absent father and dominant mother. While this is not quite the overbearing, emasculating mother scenario that, coupled with an absent father, would become a mainstay of middlebrow American literature in the 1950s (*The Sling and the Arrow*, *Peyton Place*, and others), it does flirt with the notion. Presenting all homosexuals as being like Mark Thornton would be unrealistic. However, by toying with the idea of a deep-rooted cause to homosexuality, Niles can portray even the most garish types as worthy of sympathy and compassion.

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<sup>30</sup> Niles, Blair. *Strange Brother* (New York, Avon, 1952), 63. Unless otherwise indicated all quotes from *Strange Brother* are taken from the “Complete and Unabridged” 1952 Avon reprint.



Another character in *Strange Brother* is Lilly-Marie, a gay youth Mark meets one night in Central Park. A former chorus boy who developed an addiction to heroin, Lilly-Marie meets Mark just a couple days after serving a prison sentence at Welfare Island. Through Lilly-Marie, Niles is able to comment on the curious, and noteworthy, place the third sex occupied in men's prisons during the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, it would be not long after the publication of *Strange Brother*, in 1934, that New York's Mayor LaGuardia would undertake a well-publicized clean-up of penitentiaries. While the overall reform project targeted guard corruption, bribery, and contraband within the prison system, the most sensational aspect it sought to remedy was the elaborate and semi-sanctioned gay prison hierarchy. Most tellingly, the segregation of homosexual prisoners demonstrates how in 1931 gender identification and effeminate demeanor were the signifying factors, for no attempt was made to segregate homosexuals based on actual homosexual conduct or even their crime. Lilly-Marie is sent to Welfare Island for drug possession, not male solicitation or public transvestism. As Chauncey points out in his chapter 'Trade, Wolves, and the Boundaries of Normal Manhood', it seems clear the rationale behind segregating fairies was that many, if not most, male prisoners were believed to be sexually susceptible to fairies. The mixing of fairies with "normal" men was thought not only to entice men into sexual relations, but cause rivalry, competition and possibly violent confrontation between the men.

"They can't stop it even on the Island, you know"

"Stop it?"

"Yes, stop men taking a fancy to us, you know."

"Oh, I see...Tell me, do you live in cells over there?"<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 185.

Indeed, the pansy had such an established place in the social strata of Lilly-Marie's cell block that the guards' wives donated lipstick or other cosmetics to them in exchange for good behavior! Lilly-Marie also talks about drag shows and musical numbers orchestrated within the prison walls for special occasions, the decorating of the cells, and paints a not altogether unpleasant picture of an all-male world where "the girls" are given a degree of freedom –within their gender-appropriate position, of course– shedding the need for secrecy or decorum:

“And we made the most of everything. Prison teaches you that. And the girls are dainty too, and proud of their cells.

“You see the other kind—the strong man sort—don't often get convicted. It's those who look the part that get sent over to the Island. Sometimes the charge is soliciting. Sometimes they're caught in female dress and convicted for that. So you get the dainty ones over there on the Island, and they fix up their cells and keep them nice.”

“And you had to work?”

“All of the girls were put to work in the laundry. We were segregated, you know. Ate by ourselves in the mess hall, worked together, and our cells were all in the same block. We were segregated, but just the same we had our friends. Prison never stops that.”

“I suppose not”

“And say” Lilly-Marie ate the last crumb. “You won't forget the mauve face powder for Nelly, will you? I'll get it over to the Island. I can manage to get it over.”<sup>32</sup>

Segregation of fairies in prison even extends to being given lighter, more womanly work in the laundry. While Lilly-Marie is also used as a segue to the shadowy, drug-addled life that supposedly awaits most gay men (and it is this aspect I will explore in the next section), his descriptions of Welfare Island are a telling glimpse into the traditional gender roles played out between the men in the prison system. Today the prevalence of prison sex among inmates is just as often the subject of serious expose or crass humor, albeit usually explained away as “situational homosexuality”. Unlike today, however, in

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<sup>32</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 185-186.

the 1930s pannies were seen as a distinct type whose unique status as intermediate sex procured them certain chauvinistic allowances.

According to Lilly-Marie even segregation cannot help prison men from “taking a fancy to us”. The comment about “the strong man sort” rarely being convicted suggests that his manly friends made in prison would ordinarily, outside of the prison walls, be considered normal straight men. It is Mark Thornton, however, who is meant to elicit more sympathy than drug-addled Lilly-Marie. In part this is because he faces the same legal dangers as Nelly and Lilly-Marie, but the implication is also that without *becoming* a Nelly or Lilly-Marie he is doomed to live a life of loneliness and solitude. He is just as unstirred sexually by women as they are—just not as effeminate, showy or promiscuous. For many of the readers of *Strange Brother* this would have been a completely new concept.

To make a case for tolerance Niles inserts many other theories as to the cause of homosexuality, but never commits to one. Often it seems as though Niles is indiscriminately throwing out a cluster of causes just to see what sticks, but this technique succeeds in the purpose of portraying homosexuals as being no more deserving of discrimination than African-Americans or any other group whose minority status is through no fault of their own. Niles drives this point home by showing Mark as having many African-American friends in Harlem. In fact, aside from June, only his friends of color are clued in to his true sexuality. Presumably these friends are more sympathetic to his marginalization than his “respectable” white colleagues and acquaintances, since they

share an outsider status to the greater American status quo. Likewise, Mark is portrayed as especially sensitive to African-Americans and their community.

Some of the theories of origin in Niles' cluster include homosexuality as nature's way of checking an overcrowded population, the theory that most great artists have been homosexual and that art itself is the outlet and product of those urges being refocused (she has an adventuresome artist friend of Mark's administer that theory). She also introduces a foreign scientist, Hesse, to propose several biological and hormonal theories:

"I was talking about variation in sex forms" Hesse began. "You see the generative gland is made up, not only of the gland of reproduction, but of a gland which manufactures the chemicals that cause a man to be masculine in temperament, and a woman feminine.

"Both of these chemicals are found in every human embryo. But if normal development does not take place, the feminine chemical may predominate in a male, or the masculine in a female. And we then get a man attracted by men, or a woman attracted by women"<sup>33</sup>

Hesse's hormonal theories reflect some of the first "inborn" theories to gain scientific credulity during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although more widespread in Europe than in the United States (no coincidence on Hesse's nationality there). While never as thick in the American popular consciousness as Freud, Jung, or other social-psychologists, the inclusion of the good Dr. Hesse's monologue shows Niles' research, if not complete adherence to, European hormonal theories. In fact, it reads strikingly near to this passage in Dr. David Keller's 1928 *Sexual Education* series, a series widely used in American colleges:

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<sup>33</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 114.

“It was also shown that at one time in the life of the fetus it was impossible to determine the sex, that it had sexual organs, but was neither male nor female. Later on, there was a predominance of the male elements, and the fetus turned into a male or the female elements grew faster, and the result was a female. Thus, at one time in our lives, we were all as much of one sex as of the other. This is dimly remembered in these homosexual adults.”<sup>34</sup>

In another volume of the series, *Sex and Society*, the idea of a prenatal “as much of one sex as of the other” phase influencing sexuality is further discussed as a “new European” discovery and is even extended into life outside the womb:

“...during intra-uterine life the sexes are, for a certain period of development, not differentiated. Even after the sexual form is well defined, psychic and instinctive hermaphroditism continues during the later months of foetal development and during the years of infancy and childhood. In other words, instinctive and psychic hermaphroditism persists much longer than organic hermaphroditism.”<sup>35</sup>

*Strange Brother*, while not providing much biological rationale outside of the words of Dr. Hesse, repeatedly toys with the idea of “psychic hermaphroditism”. Mark refers to himself repeatedly as “half a man”, while simultaneously professing that his feelings are as intrinsic and inborn as that of any heterosexual. He tells June:

“Physically I’m just like any other man—body, parts and passions, as they say. I’m capable of falling in love to the deepest possible extent, but by some strange quirk I can fall in love only with men, and never with women. And that’s so much the truth that I would not change myself if I could. Any more than you would be willing to shift around and be attracted to women instead of men. The idea of changing is just as absurd and repulsive to me as it would be to you. To change would be to me to acquire a vice! It’s as though I had the body of a man and the psychology of a woman!”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Keller, David, *Sexual Diseases and Abnormalities* (New York, Roman, 1928), 79.

<sup>35</sup> Keller, *Sex and Society* (New York, Roman, 1928), 53-54.

<sup>36</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 98.

To be sure, this is not so much different than the idea of a third sex or intermediate. The difference is that Niles throws a biological spin onto the invert as were other social-theorists of the time. Unlike the older notion, whether or not Mark *acts* or would prefer to dress like a woman is not the main concern. The point of interest is, rather, that he *feels* and *thinks* as a woman. The 1928 *Sexual Education Series* acknowledges this shift in thinking, but—in keeping with the overall prescriptive nature of the series, which slants in a reactionary direction against emerging 1920s American sexual permissiveness—has the disclaimer that “most cases of homosexuality are real perversions rather than true inversions”.<sup>37</sup> Writing from an early 1980s standpoint, Levin dismisses these theories as being discredited even in Niles’ time, and claims that she must be “confused” to toy with them alongside other environmental causes they seemingly contradict (e.g. Nelly’s childhood feminizing). Interestingly, hormonal and genetic scientific evidence have re-emerged since Levin’s critique proving that there is no more a “cause consensus” post-Stonewall than there was in 1931. Niles’ intent, though, was not necessarily to promote any one cause of homosexuality, but rather just bring the subject away from speakeasies and subway lavatories and into middle-class drawing rooms.

Lest we think this move was only for her heterosexual middle-class audience, Chauncey’s extensive research and interviews also suggests that many middle-class gay men themselves disliked the way fairy culture was the most visible and notorious aspect to gay life. Many gay men in the 1930s, while perhaps not as celibate or sanctimonious as Mark Thornton, would readily share his sentiment that: “The Nelly type disgusts me.

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<sup>37</sup> Keller, *Sex and Society*, 52.

They make me feel uncomfortable.”<sup>38</sup> Today most queer theorists would describe that as a case of self-loathing or intra-minority prejudice. While that may have been a factor, research shows that those whose masculinity was beyond reproach, blue-collar men, seemed not so prone to “feel uncomfortable” among fairies or be afraid of being tainted by their association with them. Fairies’ flashiness, sexual or otherwise, was a primary quality that made them distasteful to many middle-class men and contributed to the emergence of the term “queer”: a term originally signifying a male whose sexual tastes matched the fairy, but not look or demeanor. Chauncey elaborates:

“But the cultural stance of the queer embodied the general middle-class preference for privacy, self-restraint, and lack of self-disclosure, and for many men this constituted part of its appeal. Similarly, one source of middle-class gay men’s distaste for the fairy’s style of presentation was that its very brashness marked it in their minds as lower class—and its display automatically preempted social advancement.”<sup>39</sup>

Chauncey’s interviews with older homosexual men in the 1980s suggest that many did not necessarily view the mainstream emergence of “gay” as synonymous with “homosexual” as a linguistic triumph; many of them still felt “gay” had frivolous connotations.

The scant information available on Kennilworth Bruce’s *Goldie* also suggests that the class split between fairies and masculine, discreet men was thought to be a major hurdle standing between homosexuality and mainstream societal acceptance. *Goldie* has the distinction of being the only novel to contain an actual gay-rights political group (the

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<sup>38</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 99.

<sup>39</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 106.

aptly named Twilight League). What analysis I've found on *Goldie* confirms that it definitely fits into the 1930s gender-influenced notions about sexual orientation and class. So much so, in fact, that the Twilight League ultimately fails because a sizable contingency attempt to turn it into an escort agency where—"through an elaborate card system and a photograph gallery"--queers can obtain fairies to date!<sup>40</sup> Despite the best intentions of its founders, homosexual men in the years following World War I were unwilling to ally themselves politically to fairies, but jumped at creating a vehicle to meet them apart from public parks, dockyards, and bars in tawdry neighborhoods.

Carrying on Niles' move away from speakeasies and public restrooms was Richard Meeker's *Better Angel*, published by Greenberg nearly two years after *Strange Brother*. *Better Angel* is the story of one man, Kurt Gray, growing up and coming to terms with his homosexuality. Kurt's evolution is not far off from any contemporary coming of age story as the young Midwestern boy discovers masturbation, homosexuality, love triangles, a move to the big city, a trip to Europe, and a successful career. The tribulations he faces are essentially timeless ones: deciding whether a close female friend could indeed constitute a relationship and whether it is wrong to have sex with someone with whom he is not in love. There is definitely some outrage at society's treatment of homosexuals (including a case of police entrapment of one character) but the story is more internal than external. It is often cited as the only prewar work of gay fiction that ends on a positive note. In fact, its happy ending seems to be the paramount feature *Better Angel* is remembered for, and its other 200-odd pages tend to get ignored, or treated as inconsequential, in the process. Perhaps this is because the book itself does not

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<sup>40</sup> Austen, *Playing the Game*, 71.



tackle homosexuality as an “issue novel” as *Strange Brother* does, nor in a salacious way as do *Butterfly Man* or *Twilight Men*. The gay immediacy that Levin, Austen and others feel is lacking in *Strange Brother* definitely exists in *Better Angel*. Paradoxically, its lack of tortured characters also incurred skepticism. The *Mattachine Review*, an early gay newsletter, gives Kurt credit for being “perhaps the healthiest homosexual in print” but then states “I wouldn’t bet that they lived happily ever after”.<sup>41</sup> Writing in 1957, the author of the review, Richard Meyer, could not countenance a gay man escaping relatively unscathed by society’s oppression.

In some ways Meeker, like Niles, seems to be tackling a portrayal of the non-pansy homosexual for respectable audiences and chose a sensitive, shy protagonist to elicit more sympathy. One character, David, remarks on the public knowledge of one facet of the homosexual world but ignorance toward the others:

“You’ve felt it, we’ve all felt it, the savage vindictiveness the normal man has toward our sort. We’re all the same, to him, like the street-corner ‘fairy’ of Times Square—rouged, lisping, mincing. Those chaps too, once, had something in them too tender, and they went under. It’s the army of us that doesn’t quite go under that suffers, though. The streetwalker doesn’t, in his heyday at least, any more than the prostitute. He can be open in his tastes and obvious in his manner, and when the vaudeville comedian makes dirty cracks about him, he can laugh, somehow. It’s we who can’t laugh that matter”.<sup>42</sup>

Much like Niles’ courtroom scene with Nelly who is just “happier so, that’s all”, Meeker seems to have a sort of admiration at the audacity and defiance of the New York pansy

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<sup>41</sup> Meyer, Richard, *Mattachine Review*, 1957. My thanks to Hubert Kennedy for providing this rare 1950s reaction to *Better Angel/Torment* in his introduction to the Alyson edition (1987).

<sup>42</sup> Meeker, Richard, *Better Angel* (Los Angeles, Alyson, 2000), 192. Beginning with the 1995 edition, *Better Angel* credits Forman Brown as the author “writing as Richard Meeker”. Unless otherwise noted, I quote from the 2000 Alyson edition which includes afterward by the author.

that won't "go under", but simultaneously is angry that the only viable place for homosexual love and sex exists within that narrow subculture. Levin and Austen also criticize the sensitive artist-homosexual as another stereotype. Levin, predictably, saying it perpetuates a stereotype "not far removed from gender confusion"<sup>43</sup> Yet Kurt can be seen as the next evolutionary step from the completely one-dimensional Mark Thornton of two years earlier. He is not campy and promiscuous like Fay Etrange or amoral like Julian and Karel, but neither is he a celibate loner like Mark Thornton. From a religious Midwestern family, he only encounters the New York gay life from the outer fringes, his introduction being through Ann Arbor university life. He is remarkably straightforward about his homosexuality, only attempting to go straight once in a last-ditch attempt presented as completely futile and hopeless from the start. In the two years since *Strange Brother's* publication Meeker also does not seem to need to throw around theories of origin, and for the most part avoids the gender-influenced terms which would have been the norm just a few years earlier. In fact, via his protagonist he makes comment on the new terminology which was rapidly gaining in common usage. In this scene Tony, a worldly playboy Kurt meets in Europe, speaks bluntly to Kurt:

"Of course I do. You're homosexual"

Kurt sprang to his feet and strode to the door, his hand on the latch, his mind pounding with confusion. At last Kurt turned again, and leaning against the door, fixed his eyes on Tony, who was smiling strangely.

"I don't like that word."

"It's highly scientific."

"Oh, I know that, but it makes me sound like a biological freak of some sort—to be classed with morons and cretins and paranoiacs."

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<sup>43</sup> Levin, James, *The Gay Novel in America* (New York, Library of Congress, 1991) 36. Originally publishing in 1983, the Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publishing Data Source published a library edition in 1991, with a new foreword from the series editor, new introduction from the author, and one additional chapter ('The Enigmatic Eighties') concerning gay fiction of that decade.

“And that’s probably just what the jolly little scientists would think about it. No, Kurt, it’s not the word that hurts you, it’s having your little secret dragged out into the light. I was right, wasn’t I?”<sup>44</sup>

Kurt would not be the only person to whom the word homosexual would have a vaguely unpleasant scientific ring to it circa 1930. As the word began the move from textbooks into the vernacular there was some initial confusion on its usage (homosexualist often pops up referring to the individual who practices homosexuality) and likely some resistance akin to Kurt’s. After all, the 19<sup>th</sup> century “love that dare not speak its name” (to quote Lord Alfred Douglas) was being given a “highly scientific” name with clear connotations of affliction or defectiveness. While the notion of homosexuality as an immoral or unfortunate affliction certainly still exists, and may always exist, the original definition in the 1909 edition of *Webster’s New International Dictionary* was “morbid sexual passion for one of the same sex”. However, by the 1934 edition of *Webster’s* the term was defined simply as “eroticism for one of the same sex”.<sup>45</sup> Tony’s talk with Kurt in many ways reflects this significant shift. While the majority of Meeker’s readers would probably be familiar with the term homosexual, many would still not view the attraction or orientation as being an affliction in and of itself. The 1909 definition implies that mere sexual passion for someone of the same sex did not necessitate its own name, but *morbid* sexual passion certainly did.

Two years earlier, in 1931, Andre Tellier’s *Twilight Men* was published by Greenberg. Evidently enjoying some success, it was reprinted several times throughout the 1940s and

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<sup>44</sup> Meeker, *Better Angel*, 131-132.

<sup>45</sup> Katz, *Invention of Heterosexuality*, 92-93.

was repackaged in a mass market paperback edition by Pyramid Books in 1957. Packed full of thinly drawn stock character-types (effeminate foreigners, lecherous rich old men, drug addicts, neurotic women in love with gay men), melodramatic dialogue and implausible situations, *Twilight Men* pretty much personifies what prewar gay novels are considered, if considered at all. However, it is hard to come away with one clear-cut reading of *Twilight Men* whose motives and goal audience seem as unclear and flighty as the plot itself.

The protagonist of Armand Bironge spends the first half of the book (in France) a sensitive dreamer, mollycoddled by his nannies and tutors. He becomes infatuated with men but is clueless as to why everyone finds him effeminate and womanly (“you lack only breasts and curls hanging down your back”, his father reprimands). The second half of the novel (in New York City) finds Armand attempting a writing career—with the help of another gay character Stephen Kent—while simultaneously sinking into the Manhattan gay underworld of drag balls, drugs and alcohol. Its ending tone is as dark as *Strange Brother*—darker perhaps because *Strange Brother* has the mild uplift of June’s enlightenment (“through Mark she had learned to see life, not in one dimension, but with a depth of focus...”). At some points it seems to be arguing for some degree of tolerance like *Strange Brother*, and Armand’s homosexuality is unquestionably presented as something inborn and irreversible for him. In fact, in a unique twist I have not found elsewhere, Armand’s homosexuality is squarely blamed on the (hetero)sexual promiscuity and excesses of his father!<sup>46</sup> Yet, Armand’s demise seems to come with his

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<sup>46</sup> Dr. Keller’s *Sexual Diseases and Abnormalities of Adult Life* does (perhaps) obliquely refer to this inherited affliction idea: “Something went wrong when they were growing, or twisted in some past

breaking of celibacy, and the gay world as a whole is presented as especially empty and perverse. Oddly, Stephen Kent –who tries to help Armand, and falls in love with him– is presented as a fairly healthy and happy homosexual although he is practically asexual, and distrusts the gay world at large, much like *Better Angel*'s Kurt and David do. The strange inherited angle to Armand's homosexuality is unequivocally linked with his effeminacy, love of art, and physical beauty (it seems every man and woman who meets Armand is hopelessly smitten). Yet Stephen, also an artist and homosexual, is presented as a masculine, non-pansy type. To muddy the waters further, a villainous character, Judge Adrian Ware, is not only depicted as completely masculine, but also as an avid lover of the arts and young male artists.

The depictions of presumed gay male artistry and sensitivity fit within historic attitudes toward the third sex, as do the negative and destructive views of the homosexual subculture, both of which I will discuss further. However, in the context of the 1930s changing perceptions of what exactly constitutes a homosexual, I would argue the secondary character of Adrian Ware is perhaps the most noteworthy. Armand is, more or less, a typical 1920s/1930s pansy, albeit one of foreign, affluent birth and artistic leanings. Tellier perhaps adds a new aspect with the paternally inherited angle, but Armand's effeminacy and histrionics would have, in all likelihood, marked him as a familiar type to most readers and applicable to the pansy craze of the time. Armand's gayness is still couched in classic pansy terms ("being more than half a woman he was

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*generation*, and the result is that they have a perfect body but a biased, distorted sexual mind and soul..." (81), emphasis mine.

licensed to be as capricious as one”<sup>47</sup>) and even his ashamed father states that the womanly characteristics designating all intermediates appear while still in childhood. Again, Stephen Kent’s masculinity (and celibacy) refutes the Comte’s sweeping assertion, but the gay norm is definitely presented as Armand and his girlish, high-strung clique of friends.

Yet Adrian Ware’s demeanor and sexual behavior is unique among the 1930s gay novels. He is presented as a handsome and charming man of thirty-eight. A married municipal judge who seems to have struck an agreement with his society wife, he surrounds himself with New York’s gay art world. When Armand is arrested for public cross-dressing and intoxication, Judge Ware lets him go with only a reprimand. He then commences with an affair with Armand, yet thinks Armand’s attempts to glorify their coupling “absurd” and “grandiose” and even views Armand’s poetry –influenced by their relationship– as “reminiscent of moon-struck adolescence”.<sup>48</sup> Adrian Ware is not a stock 1930s “temperamental”, his masculinity and dominant role in the relationship automatically preclude him from traditional pansy status, and yet he clearly does not fit into the category of trade either. Tellier distinctly depicts his marriage as one of propriety, the couple maintaining separate residences but being seen out together just enough to keep tongues from wagging. He frequents gay parties and has (albeit brief) relationships with gay men, unlike the traditional trade model which primarily uses pansies for sexual release alone. In many ways, Adrian Ware is a prewar precursor to what would be

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<sup>47</sup> Tellier, Andre, *Twilight Men* (New York, Greenberg, 1931), 183.

<sup>48</sup> Tellier, *Twilight Men*, 201.

perceived as the postwar norm: a man whose *orientation*, and that only, marks him as homosexual. Tellier gives us Ware's own views on his status:

“He had given up all hope of ever meeting a monogamous homosexual, and had learned years before that therein lay the tragedy of the inverted. He was not concerned with moral issues, as was Stephen. He recognized himself for what he was and gave way to no rhapsodizing on the subject of his desires. He thought them unfortunate, but he saw no alternative and accepted himself as one might an unwelcome relative, and made himself as comfortable as he could under the circumstances”<sup>49</sup>

Adrian is jaded, and his hardened view of “the tragedy of the invert” was probably meant to elicit disapproval, but he is explicitly not grouped in with *Twilight Brother's* most pathetic bunch of gay characters: ageing queens, alcoholics, and drug addicts. Levin's 1981 brief analysis of *Twilight Men* misses the mark entirely when it comes to Judge Ware. He dismisses Ware as a classic villain, despite the fact that Adrian Ware does extend help to Stephen at end of the novel, following Armand's death. To be sure, the judge's ending of his relationship with Armand is less than admirable (he publicly snubs Armand at a party, lavishing attention on his latest interest, a rising young Italian pianist) but Armand's infatuation with the judge is definitely presented as immature. Armand's use of morphine is also surely a reason for Ware to wash his hands of the affair, his “cadaverous appearance, pallor and affected mannerisms” becoming a liability to his reputation. Levin is also completely mistaken when he attributes a passage on page 147 as being a description of the Judge:

“Armand did not realize that he was seeing the most tragic figure that haunts the shadowy, hysterical world of the temperamentally misfitted, the homosexual who has lived past the age of physical attraction and must depend upon wealth...”

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<sup>49</sup> Tellier, *Twilight Men*, 201.

At this point in the novel the character of Adrian Ware has not even been introduced, and Armand is, rather, observing an intergenerational couple dancing at a gay party. Levin's assertion that Tellier is derogatory and ageist in this depiction of Adrian Ware is inaccurate, for Adrian's good looks and magnetic personality are made clear upon his introduction as a character. I agree with Levin's assertion that "there are constant warnings in the book about the evil which lurks in the public gay world"<sup>50</sup> and the above passage certainly illustrates this. However, aside from his jadedness, I don't see the judge fitting quite so neatly into this negative view. Villain or not, Tellier managed to include a character who was a "twilight man" via his orientation alone, which was not a common concept in 1931. While respectable American readers of the time were assured that the mainstay of twilight men consisted of pansies and their trade, or sensitive Europeans like Armand, Judge Ware provided a rare example that he could also be one of their own. Following World War II the Adrian Ware type (minus the judge's nonchalant attitude) would become a common homosexual character type to be either pitied or vilified. Placed among the visible pansy subculture of the early 1930s, however, this married man with a secret is the exception. The idea of homosexuality being an invisible cross to bear, a concealed trait that could exist in unsuspecting middle-class marriages, belongs to a later era.

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<sup>50</sup> Levin, *Gay Novel in America*, 32.



## II

*Shadow Worlds and Higher Planes: Gay Male Subculture*

A common theme in all of the 1930s gay novels is the concept of a gay shadow world, a subculture existing alongside and only marginally hidden from that of the ordinary man and woman. Often times the secret brotherhood is presented as something that one is born into, almost as if a member is marked from birth. At other times the viewpoint is that the shadow world is a Masonic-like club to be initiated into. Whether presented unapologetically as part of the larger Bohemian subculture (*The Young and Evil*), as a piteous side-effect of society's damnation (*Strange Brother*, and to a milder degree, *Better Angel*), or as a hedonistic subculture of neurotics and narcotics (*Twilight Men*, *Butterfly Man*), every example of the 1930s gay novels has at least a glimpse into a secret fraternity of gay men. The gay shadow world (as it is referred to at least once in each of the novels) was not only presented as a source of scandal or sensationalism, although that quality is common. The novels are divergent on the overall merits and implications of this fraternity or club, but not one novel suggests that gay men live in isolation.

*"not concerned one way or the other"*

This is a good place to discuss *The Young and Evil* by Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler. Untraditional and Bohemian in form, style, syntax and subject matter, its young American authors (a first novel for both) display beautifully and often shockingly their

New York subculture circa 1930. Obscurely published in 1933 by Obelisk Press in Paris, no American bookstore ever carried a copy on their shelves, United States customs officials having halted all imported copies. British customs also seized and destroyed a shipment of 500 copies. The small Olympia Press reprint in 1960 was probably the first time the novel was ever legally sold or purchased in the US, and then in all likelihood only in avant-garde bookshops. Steven Watson's research for the 1988 reprint claims that Ford and Tyler did initially approach larger American publishers, encouraged by the publication of *Strange Brother* and *Twilight Men* in 1931. But even that publisher, Horace Liveright, would not touch the novel, writing: "I read with infinite pleasure your brilliant novel, but I could not think of publishing it as a book—life is too short and the jails are unsatisfactory."<sup>51</sup>

Despite its limited initial publication, *The Young and Evil* has found many admirers over the succeeding decades, including Gore Vidal and Djuna Barnes. This is probably due, in part, to the fact that both Tyler and Ford went on to later notoriety as poets, film critic (Tyler) and publisher and photographer (Ford). Ford's diaries from 1948 to 1957 (*Water from a Bucket*) were recently published by Turtle Point Press. Parker Tyler went on to write one of the first books on homosexuality in film: *Screening the Sexes* (1972), as well as a noted Chaplin biography and several other works relating to film studies. In Vidal's own book, *Myra Breckenridge*, his hero(ine) is obsessed with film critic Parker Tyler.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Watson, from the introduction to Richard Kasak Book Edition, 1996.

<sup>52</sup> This was, in part, a parody of Parker Tyler's own lifelong fetish for silent matinee idol Carlyle Blackwell. Gore Vidal quipped in 1968: "I did for Parker Tyler what Edward Albee did for Virginia Woolf."

Austen's *Playing the Game: The Homosexual Novel in America* praises *The Young and Evil* profusely and seems to use it as the yardstick by which to measure most pre-1960 gay novels, baldly stating that it "towers above anything else written in the thirties", a decade whose gay fiction he deems "a wave of mediocrity".<sup>53</sup> While in terms of literary merit this may very well be the case (although I frankly wonder if Gertrude Stein's well-known endorsement isn't a major contributor to its high regard), I feel that in terms of historical importance and interest Austen elevates *The Young and Evil* to a height undeserved. To be fair, the main criterion to his invaluable and exhaustive 1977 study clearly is "how much could they get away with" and to what degree gay-themed works "played the game" to get published or read at all. In that sense *The Young and Evil* is indeed unique, with its sexually free characters, coffee house politics, late night revelry and even a gay threesome. While never pornographic, it does have an unabashedly raw anti-establishment thrust that refreshingly treats homosexuality and gay sex matter-of-factly and never as a curse or cruel burden. At publication in 1933, however, it is unlikely any American homosexuals outside of the tightly-knit literary/artsy circle of Ford and Tyler's own ever read the novel. Even the Olympus Press reprint in 1960 was relatively obscure, and its editions now fetch nearly as much as the original printing. Of course, part of the reason it succeeds so well, both as an enjoyable and surprisingly modern read and in depicting guilt-free gay characters, is that it is a tale within the narrow confines of the New York Bohemian art world. This world was already so identified with the rejection of bourgeois values and mainstream social acceptance that the homosexual lives and behavior of its characters come across as merely incidental. While the lack of gay self-loathing is refreshing, there is no call made for gay liberation

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<sup>53</sup> Austen, *Playing the Game*, 62.

or societal acceptance either. The characters sneer at polite society, and revel in their shunned status. The joining of the Bohemian poet fringe and gay underworld is cemented in the novel in a scene where Karel, the most flamboyantly gay of the bunch, dons drag to deliver a half-serious diatribe on art and politics at a speakeasy. For “Karletta”, drag, self-mockery, and film-actress pastiche constitute their own jab at respectability (he is likened to Joan Crawford and Norma Shearer, and not only while in drag), and he believes that living his own life freely and unapologetically is sufficient political statement:

“On the face of it, I am not concerned one way or the other about political freedom, because I have been accustomed to think of myself as an individual and not as a member of the mass of society. I feel that I am as “free”, in the ethical sense, as the limitations (that is, the inherent limitations) of the individual permit me to be.”<sup>54</sup>

The extreme individuality and political apathy purported by the brazen characters of *The Young and Evil* are similar and contemporary to the strong, independent “New Woman” of the 1920s and early 1930s. Often she was criticized –especially by her older suffragette sisters– as being naively apolitical, frivolously fixated with individuality and indiscriminately dismissive of previous generations’ mores. The New Woman and the flapper (cinematically personified circa 1930 by Joan Crawford and Norma Shearer) was often accused of only wanting to follow the vices of men –alcohol, money, single life– without any altruistic concerns for womankind as a whole. Julian, Karel, Louis and the rest of their circle certainly fit into this Lost Generation pattern (and criticisms of it), as does their equally young and evil girlfriend Theodosia. Overall, *The Young and Evil*’s gay shadow world seems to be formed more by the generational hedonism of the

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<sup>54</sup> Ford & Tyler, *Young and Evil*, 118.

characters than by their sexuality. In *The Young and Evil* one is reminded of the Lost Generation quip by Malcolm Cowley: “Did other generations ever laugh so hard together, drink and dance so hard, or do crazier things just for the hell of it?”<sup>55</sup>

***“one of the most closely-knit social fabrics in existence”***

As mentioned before, *Better Angel* is by far the least salacious of the 1930s novels with its coming-of-age focus and essentially happy ending for Kurt and David. Levin calls their happy ending “completely divorced from any part of the gay subculture”<sup>56</sup> and implies that while it is refreshing to see some gay characters from the period who are not drug-addled or alcoholic, there is a moralistic and virtuous underlay to the quiet coupling-off of Kurt and David. It is true that other paths in the gay world are given, and not in very favorable terms. For instance, David does end up with Kurt, but his happiness and salvation comes only after breaking with the party-loving circle of homosexual men in New York. While Meeker doesn’t demonize the gay subculture to the extent of *Twilight Men* or even *Strange Brother*, he does not describe the gay circuit in healthy terms either:

“They’re a strange sad lot, finding a feverish and hysterical kind of happiness in new associates—always new boys, new men. You’re carried away with it when it’s new, and sometimes even when you’re older. There’s a circle that’s always getting wider. You get known, and sought after or avoided, but you get known. It’s like some great and terribly secret society, with its own life, its own passwords and signs; and once you’re in it, it’s the very devil to break out. You get older, and you try to look younger. Your taste gets more and more jaded and you demand more and more perverse diversions, and what

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<sup>55</sup> Strauss, William & Howe, Neil, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584-2069*. (New York, William Morrow, 1991), 260.

<sup>56</sup> Levin, *Gay Novel in America*, 36.

happens to you at last—God knows. But the terrible part of it is, you're known, and marked, wherever you go. There's a circle here in New York, there's one in Philadelphia, and Boston, and Detroit, and Chicago, and Hollywood—and anywhere at all you go there's always someone who knows you.”<sup>57</sup>

This idea of an almost mafia-like society of gay men turns up in most of the 1930s novels to some extent, showing that gay circuits—and the admonishments against them—are by no means an exclusively contemporary phenomenon. *A Scarlet Pansy* treats them facetiously, and has Fay Etrange spend an entire summer joyously circuit-hopping around North America making connections and conquests. However, even while *Better Angel* disapproves of the promiscuousness of the gay circles, sexually adventuresome characters like Derry and Tony do not meet with dire endings or unhappiness, and Kurt's affairs with both are treated not as shameful indiscretions but as maturation steps to the eventual reconciliation of his spiritual and carnal impulses—a journey that culminates in his relationship with David.

This happy ending and comparative absence of expeditions into a depraved homosexual underworld may actually have left many readers unsatisfied. The desire to capitalize on the pansy craze's popularity was perhaps the impetus to get the otherwise non-sensational, subdued *Better Angel* published. Indeed, in 1951, when it was repackaged by Universal Publications the title was changed to *Torment*, despite the relative lack of torment experienced by its characters. Even into the late 1950s, when pulpier, racier novels with lurid gay themes were a common feature in bus stations, drugstores, and other places where lowbrow literature was sold, the tame *Better Angel* (disingenuously reincarnated as *Torment*) was sold beside them. As mentioned earlier, 1957's *Mattachine*

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<sup>57</sup> Meeker, *Better Angel*, 169.

*Review* could not believe the novel's optimism. Levin states that "it is this very wholesomeness which caused it to be seen as less than realistic in a period when few gays thought well of themselves" and that Meeker is "so very positive in comparison with his contemporaries that it is easy to overlook his cautions about proper lifestyle for gay men".<sup>58</sup> Even in 1986, when Alyson Books was reprinting older gay novels, "Richard Meeker" remained a mysterious pseudonym from the largely forgotten and ignored pre-war, pre-Stonewall gay past. However, around 1990 the elusive Richard Meeker identified himself as Forman Brown, alive and well and living in Los Angeles. At the age of ninety-four, over sixty years after publication, he was now ready to have his given name attached to *Better Angel* and even write an epilogue for the latest edition:

"In the early 1930s, when *Better Angel* was originally published, there were no gay bookshops, no gay press, and no acknowledged gay community. I was lucky, in fact, to find a publisher willing to take a chance on a book "on a very sensitive subject", as the blurb on the jacket said.

To my surprise, the book did rather well and to my delight, reached a good many of those who, as I hoped, would understand and appreciate it. Indeed, I received 30-some letters from men, young and old, who had found in it some hope and dignity and who thanked me for telling their own stories."<sup>59</sup>

Forman Brown died shortly after publication of the 1995 edition of his book. His epilogue explains the highly autobiographical element to the novel, including the fact that he (Kurt) and Richard Brandon (David) remained a couple for over sixty years, until Brandon's death in 1987.

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<sup>58</sup> Levin, *Gay Novel in America*, 35. Levin softens his *Better Angel* criticisms somewhat between the 1983 and the 1991 edition of his book, perhaps in response to the "coming out" of Foreman Brown as the author in the interim.

<sup>59</sup> Meeker, *Better Angel*, 211 (epilogue).

In all likelihood it is the lack of lurid gay depictions or emphatic calls to societal tolerance that have kept *Better Angel* contemporary and poignant for so long. To my knowledge, *Better Angel* is the only one of the 1930s novels still in active print. While the others are certainly still readable, and the case has certainly been made that *The Young and Evil* has greater literary merit, they evidently are thought not to resonate with modern gay audiences. The very sensationalism of a *Twilight Men* or *Butterfly Man* seems to place it in a category of kitsch or historical oddity nowadays, the warnings to gay men and characterizations of gay men deemed fantastic. Recently I have discovered the cover of the 1952 Avon reprint of *Strange Brother* (complete with tagline “The Story of the Men Who Are Different”) used as a campy nostalgia poster. Its attempts to scandalize are now viewed as quaint and humorous. Conversely, *Better Angel*’s Kurt, David, Tony and Derry –previously thought to be unrealistically well-adjusted– seem to find a new audience with each passing decade.

*Better Angel* is the exception, however, and in the other novels the portrayals of the sensational side to the gay shadow world take a more prominent place. That is not to say that there was not a large degree of accuracy in these portrayals. For instance, the drag ball features prominently in *Twilight Men*, *Strange Brother*, *A Scarlet Pansy* and *Butterfly Men* (and to a lesser degree in *The Young and Evil*), showing how much the event was a social high holiday—a rare opportunity to flaunt and display the gay underworld unabashedly. George Chauncey’s research shows how vital and visible the drag ball became in New York, drawing immense gay and straight audiences alike. Also, while the picture of alcohol and drugs’ dominance in homosexual circles is dire, most of the



gay underworld during the Prohibition years did indeed exist as a subcategory of the growing cultural tone which flouted temperance. The “Negro craze” of the time, likewise, was appealing to white middle-class Americans precisely because it was wedded to the speakeasy scene of the Prohibition years. Drug use was also becoming more and more a part of that scene, and many lobbyists who wished to revoke Prohibition (it was eventually repealed in 1933) pointed to the surge of cocaine, marijuana, and morphine use as examples of what happens when ordinary Americans are forced to disrespect the law and intermingle with unsavory elements in order to obtain liquor and have a gay time. The very phrase “having a gay time” in 1920s and 1930s vernacular was used to denote having fun while “being up to something”, whether or not that meant dancing, drink, or sexual impropriety. Men, using it in conjunction with unspoken cues and innuendoes, used it more specifically. The soulful blues sound to come out of Harlem at the time was heavily influenced by heroin and other narcotics, appearing in the music of Billie Holiday and others. Since *all* alcohol-serving nightlife now operated on an elaborate system of covert patronage and police bribery, the social fencing between the gay underworld and straight underworld in urban areas weakened.

*Strange Brother* introduces this subculture to the reader in precisely the way many urban Americans were being introduced to it: the speakeasy. June Westbrook goes to Harlem to hear African-American blues and in the process becomes connected to the overall “gay” world of the speakeasy as well as the specific gay world of men. Hopping among several different night spots, each more racially and sexually mixed than the last, she winds up at a venue operated by a black lesbian. It is on the street outside this speakeasy

she sees the arrest of a young man for solicitation and begins her friendship with Mark Thornton.

*Strange Brother* may have the most tortured protagonist of the 1930s, but it also has the least licentious one. Niles keeps her main descriptions of the gay shadow world to those arenas where it crossed with adventurous heterosexuals: Harlem speakeasies and the annual drag ball. There is only one brief scene at an exclusively gay party and it comes across stiltedly and awkwardly. Other male-only realms of the gay underground are described fleetingly or with restraint. Gay cruising is by and large presented as a terrible end result of the inability to attain “normal”, monogamous love:

“Most of us in this shadow world soon give up the search for the ideal. There’s no honorable state for us. We’re gradually driven to become promiscuous, taking our sex sustenance as animals take their food—when we can get it.”<sup>60</sup>

Mark briefly describes to June a movie theater where all the patrons are men, and mentions “the sordid tragedy of men’s lavatories—underground in the subway”. None of these situations are actually shown, there is no attempt at even a backhanded titillation. Mark’s view, and Niles’, is that these unsavory scenarios are as much the moral failings of society as they are the moral failings of the men involved. His description of gay public cruising is mainly used as a launch-pad to describe the horrors of blackmail which gay men face. One gets the distinct sense in *Strange Brother* that Niles’ view of the gay shadow world, or at least parts of it, are not that far removed from more lurid portrayals in other novels, but that she is pointedly attempting to avoid crass sensationalism.

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<sup>60</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 100.

*Twilight Men*'s New York gay circuit of parties and drag balls has more immediacy, for not all the gay characters who dwell within it have the same moral restraint as *Strange Brother's Mark*. The idea of it being a secret society, a network of prominent New Yorkers, is stressed along the same lines as David's description in *Better Angel*. Armand attends one of these parties, his first:

"What an amazing thing that such a restless, active world can be contained so near the border of conventional being, and not to be suspected, except by a very few!"

"I didn't know of its existence until just a few weeks ago," Armand said. "I lived most of my life in a very small French village, and didn't go about much even there."

"It's one of the most closely-knit social fabrics in existence," MacKin declared. "It may sound improbable, but our host has undoubtedly met every queer person who lives in New York. He may not know them well, but he has at least met them at one of his own parties, or at a drag."<sup>61</sup>

John Wright, the host of the party, is a sad, pathetic character. Ageing and alone, he throws party after party as an expensive diversion and as a way of living vicariously through the drama and affairs of the younger set.

The ageing, often bitter, male homosexual seems to figure largely in every book from the period except *Better Angel* and *The Young and Evil*. His role seems to be that of cautionary example. If one can survive alcoholism, drug abuse, suicide or blackmail, this loathsome characterization shows there is still an eventual price to be paid for the male invert. So accepted as factual is this view, apparently, that even the otherwise uplifting *Better Angel* has David warn Kurt: "You get older, and you try to look younger. Your

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<sup>61</sup> Tellier, *Twilight Men*, 149.

taste gets more and more jaded...”<sup>62</sup> Perhaps the most famous prewar gay novel, and probably the most read, was the lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*. Its publication in 1928 unequivocally forced open the door for the publication of the male homosexual novels of the 1930s. The early dust jackets and advertising posters for *Twilight Men*, *Strange Brother* and *Better Angel* all refer to Radclyffe Hall’s novel in an attempt to trade on its success. *Twilight Men* boasts “better than *The Well of Loneliness*”, and according to Levin the obscure *Goldie* had a dust jacket touting “Not since *The Well of Loneliness* has the delicate theme of sexual inversion been handled so artistically.”<sup>63</sup> Radclyffe Hall’s vision of the gay male world and what awaits those who dwell within it for too long sets the stage for a theme that would be repeated to varying degrees in most of *The Well of Loneliness*’ male counterparts. She describes a gay tavern:

“That merciless, drug-dealing, death-dealing haunt to which flocked the battered remnants of men whom their fellow men had at last stamped under; who, despised of the world, must despise themselves beyond all hope, it seemed, of salvation. There they sat, closely herded together at the tables, creatures shabby yet tawdry, timid yet defiant—and their eyes, Stephen never forgot their eyes, those haunted, tormented eyes of the invert.”<sup>64</sup>

John Wright’s party in *Twilight Men* is depicted with much of the same sense of despondency and desperation:

“Once he caught a glimpse of a young, fresh-faced boy dancing in the close embrace of an elderly, loose-lipped man. For a moment he was displeased and wished they had not come there. He rather expected all affection, all love, to cease at a certain age. To him,

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<sup>62</sup> Meeker, *Better Angel*, 168.

<sup>63</sup> Austen, *Playing the Game*, 69. Austen does not agree with the publisher’s claim.

<sup>64</sup> Hall, Radclyffe, *The Well of Loneliness* (New York, Doubleday, 1990), 387. Originally published in the UK by Doubleday, the edition quoted is from their Anchor division’s US edition.

as to almost all young persons, the thought of sexual passion in a man past forty was abhorrent. Armand did not realize that he was seeing the most tragic figure that haunts the shadowy, hysterical world of the temperamentally misfitted, the homosexual who has lived past the age of physical attraction and must depend upon wealth and willingness to forgo affection and respect in his attempts to dispel loneliness.”<sup>65</sup>

Of the two least mainstream, and most “insider” novels –*The Young and Evil* and *A Scarlet Pansy*– there is not nearly as negative a picture painted of ageing within the prewar gay world. *The Young and Evil*’s is via omission, however; its narcissistic characters never seem to interact or even think of life outside their own young, vibrant circle. Lost Generation sensibilities eschew the older generations completely. *A Scarlet Pansy* has several older gay characters called Aunties, who take on maternal, clucking roles to their younger associates. Like nearly every aspect of the novel, they are often used for good-natured laughs and the delivery of bitchy one-liners. Yet they do seem to play a semi-important role as part of larger gay social community, and are not an object of fear or foreboding.

In a seeming contradiction, one curiosity that I have discovered in most of the 1930s gay novels is the notion of male residents of the shadow world somehow cheating time—at least in terms of their appearance. Armand’s beauty is much lauded throughout *Twilight Men*, his maintenance of a youthful appearance seemingly successful until his final descent into drug addiction renders his body “cadaverous”. In *Strange Brother*, when spotted at the speakeasy, Mark is described as possessing “a look that’s young and old at the same time” and another character comments that “they often look younger than they

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<sup>65</sup> Tellier, *Twilight Men*, 147.

are, but he can't be over thirty."<sup>66</sup> Several times throughout *A Scarlet Pansy* Fay is referred to as appearing much younger than his years. By the end of the novel, enlisted in the army and serving in France, Scully describes Fay (still employing the pronoun switch, of course):

"Fay was now at the height of her beauty—thirty-three years of age, and looking ten years younger, as so many of her kind do for some queer reason. Conquests were easy; she had, in turn—and lost, either through their orders to new duty or by her own discard, three captains, ten lieutenants, twenty-five sergeants, and a sprinkling of privates that were unusually handsome."<sup>67</sup>

The "queer reason" the 1930s novels depict gay men as seemingly more youthful is fairly easy to explain, and Fay's situation—and long list of conquests—touches on why the lonely and piteous older gay man is also such a staple of the time and genre. The freedom—both sexual and economical—of single life is allowed, even encouraged, in men during youth. By the 1930s, however, the theory of a youthful, love-based "Companionate Marriage" had taken precedence in middle-class American popular psychology as the healthiest ideal. The 19<sup>th</sup> century's norm had been for men to remain single until financial security deemed it time to seek a (preferably younger) wife. Companionate Marriage, however, de-emphasized the traditional idea of men sowing their wild oats for as long as possible. *Strange Brother* acknowledges this shift with June's suitor Seth Vaughn who is described as "reasonably modern" and "not bitter about Companionate Marriage, although his support was not too ardent."<sup>68</sup> Niles readily acknowledges that

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<sup>66</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 33.

<sup>67</sup> Scully, *Scarlet Pansy*, 209.

<sup>68</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 11.

perhaps even “normal” men like Seth might not be quite so eager to relinquish youthful freedoms and jump on the Companionate Marriage bandwagon, despite its newfound vogue.

Any bachelor successfully ducking Companionate Marriage and living the single life well into their thirties would appear and seem younger than their same-aged wedded cohorts, perhaps even eliciting envy. Thus, pansies and inverts would especially be perceived as younger—having no middle-life period of settled adulthood or parental responsibility.

Youthful appearance and a gay life seems a priced privilege, however, and that is why the older gay man seems to be frequently portrayed in such dire, unflattering terms. Much has been written about Companionate Marriage creating a rift between late 19<sup>th</sup>-century feminists and the New Woman of the 1920s. Often referred to as “the first generation of bachelor women”, by age 60 a full nine percent of the earlier, 19<sup>th</sup>-century generation of women had never married, a figure still not quite matched by any subsequent generation in the United States.<sup>69</sup> This new model also created another side-effect of casting a shadow of suspicion over that same late 19<sup>th</sup>-century generation of bachelor men. The gay man had no place within the Companionate Marriage model, Dr. Keller’s *Sexual Education* series baldly stating: “they miss all in adult life which makes it worth the living. Home, wife, children are to them unknown names.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Strauss & Howe, *Generations*, 239. It is very probable that the Baby Boomers (born 1943-1961) will be the first generation of American women to exceed this record once all boomers have reached the age of 60.

<sup>70</sup> Keller, *Sexual Diseases*, 82.

At this juncture it seems only fitting to discuss *Butterfly Man* by Lew Levenson, for not only does it contain nearly every sordid vice ever presented as part of the gay world, but also has a wholesome protagonist who is led into this world via exploitation by older gay men. Originally published by Macauley in 1934, it apparently enjoyed some measure of popularity, for it was later reprinted by Castle and remained available throughout the 1950s. Unlike the other 1930s novels which were successful (*Strange Brother*, *Better Angel*, *Twilight Men*), *Butterfly Man* comes across as episodic, jarringly pulpy and reeks of slapdash writing. It is also riddled with unlikable and unbelievable characters and boldly correlates homosexuality with alcoholism and drug use. Indeed, *Butterfly Man* could be read as the story of the protagonist's struggle with alcoholism just as much as it is the story of his struggle with homosexuality. Even removing the alcoholics and drug addicts, the image presented of the gay world and most gay men is a bleak and pathetic one indeed. As in *Twilight Men*, there is one gay character, Howard Vee, who seems more or less untouched by these vices but he is presented as completely nonsexual. It is even hinted that his celibacy may not be through choice, but due to impotency, more than suggesting that he would be just as debased as the rest of them given the chance.

Texas athlete Ken Gracey begins his journey when he is brought to California by the man who holds his father's mortgage. From there one person or another leads Ken astray, whether homosexual banker Mr. Lowell, his alcoholic dance partner turned prostitute Anita, or a Chicago gangster called Rocco. If it sounds preposterous, it is. Roger Austen



doesn't mince words when he says "even those gay readers blinded by self-loathing must have quickly recognized it as anti-faggot trash."<sup>71</sup>

It makes sense that *Butterfly Man* arrived on the scene when it did, and it is even more telling that the postwar Castle reprint enjoyed more success than the original Macauley one. Whereas 1950s pulp fiction readers were more than likely let down by the *Better Angel* repackaged *Torment* or frustrated at *Strange Brother's* tendency to gloss over the sordid, *Butterfly Man* delivers the goods: corruption, organized crime, prostitution, drugs, venereal disease, and cross-dressing. Salvation is presented through the heterosexual woman. Its style also bears more similarities with the racy pulp novels of the 1950s than with the earlier novels. As shown, all the 1930s novels feature lurid and tantalizing glimpses into the gay male world, but none do it with quite as harsh a cautionary tone as *Butterfly Man*. Its overall tone of seediness, stylistic conventions and societal implications suggest that unlike the other novels which were products of the pansy craze, *Butterfly Man* was a part of the backlash to the pansy craze, a craze which was already well on the wane by 1934.

As the Depression dug in its claws, many Americans began to view the 1920s and early 1930s as periods of excess and immorality, some even equating the Jazz Age's sexual permissiveness and rampant materialism as direct and indirect causes of the country's mid-1930s woes. Speakeasies and the theater world (where the pansy craze originated) increasingly were viewed with greater revulsion as Prohibition ended and alcohol could now be regulated by the state and resume its place among restaurants and respectable

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<sup>71</sup> Austen, *Playing the Game*, 72.

taverns, as opposed to illegal speakeasies and risqué venues. The Prohibition experiment had convinced most politicians that alcohol-seekers were more than willing to meddle with other illegal, unsavory elements in order to procure drink. In New York City the new mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, issued orders clearing public streets of drag queens in the Times Square area in 1933. The Hollywood Production Code came into enforcement in the spring of 1934 in response to increased moral outrage at Hollywood's excesses (and successes) with films exploiting taboo topics, hitting a peak with the early 1930s talkies. Appendix II, Section 2 declared "sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden". Almost overnight, veiled and not-so-veiled references to homosexuality practically disappeared from the silver screen. Comparing the queen of sexual innuendo, Mae West, in her pre-Code films and post-Code films provides an ideal example. After 1934 the sexual dialogue is drastically diluted (she compensates with increased use of suggestive eye-rolling and trade-mark purr) and there are no more pansy or "cherry sister" references as in the pre-Code *She Done Him Wrong* (1933). By 1935 the speakeasy, the flapper, and the pansy had all largely fallen out of fashion or been nudged out of vogue via legislation.

*Butterfly Man* seems a product of this shifting of tastes, for it does not contain a titillating or campy homage to the pansy (like *A Scarlet Pansy* or to some degree in *The Young and Evil*), nor does it aim at tolerance and respectability like *Better Angel* and *Strange Brother*. Gender inversion and "having the psychology of a woman" language is essentially absent in *Butterfly Man*. Indeed, Ken—former high school football star—is presented as entirely masculine. When gender terminology is used, it is in a broader,

anthropological sense, as in this scene where a professor Ken meets at a gay bar delivers a soliloquy on prescribed gender roles and the modern erosion of them:

“It’s the logical result of modern tendencies” he said. “The feminization of men is due to the breakdown in the paternalistic world. A boy can no longer aspire to become the all-powerful head of his house. He envies his elegantly dressed toil-free mother, his gentle school teacher, his sheltered sisters, their colorful clothes and their lovely bodies. If he is rich, he enjoys the thrill of changing sex. If he is poor—ah, there I have a rare theory. The poor boy is driven by blind instinct toward race suicide. What has the modern world to offer so completely uninhibited as the freemasonry of our kind? Women hate each other. Men are natural enemies of each other. We of the third sex enjoy perfect love, fruitless love. We are not fecund. We create no evil. For us, life is all. No false conception of immortality. No sons to jibe at us. No soul to perish in eternal damnation. No jealous wives hovering over us, no laws barring our free association with each other.”<sup>72</sup>

This is a very different view of homosexuality than that presented in any of the other novels, and a discombobulated one to be sure. Although delivered by a gay man, about the only thing it seems clear on is an overriding criticism of modern times. What is the professor’s meaning that a rich boy who envies his “toil-free” mother can enjoy the “thrill of changing sex”? Cross-dressing? Adapting pansy characteristics? Considering the fact that pansy culture thrived more in urban working classes than among the upper-middle class renders the professor’s meaning more jumbled. Also, these elegant female schoolteachers who the professor implies are feminizing young boys is clearly a harsh critique on modern trends for women—until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century primary and secondary education was a male-dominated field. The professor’s comments about the poor and “race suicide” have several implications, although it is likely he refers to perceived working-class promiscuousness, interracial sex, and even venereal disease—race suicide

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<sup>72</sup> Levenson, Lew, *Butterfly Man* (New York, Castle, 1950), 213. Unless otherwise noted all *Butterfly Man* quotations are from the Castle reprint.

was widely attached to all these vices during the 1920s and 1930s. This term was also frequently batted around in the United States when describing the sharp immigration spike in the early 1900s. There was a resurgence of racism, urban class antagonism, anti-Semitism and anti-Catholic rhetoric as alarmists claimed the “native” Americans of Anglo-Saxon and Dutch/Nordic stock would be absorbed and outnumbered by the new wave of Eastern and Southern Europeans and Jews. Tellingly, *Butterfly Man’s* blonde, all-American hero’s descent includes not only his seedy stint in Tijuana, but also mingling with Italian-American organized crime (performing a private nude dance for a head mobster no less) and the eventual contraction of syphilis.

The professor, in his monologue about the supposed breakdown in the paternalistic world, is not content with just implicating feminism and immigration as causes of homosexual behavior, however. His odd mention of “no soul to perish in eternal damnation” –sandwiched between a slap at burdensome sons and a jab at harping wives– serves to admonish and demoralize the gay world while keeping the façade that he is singing its praises. Readers can pity, empathize and even take up the cause for a minority which humbly seeks tolerance or appeals to a basic American sense of fair play à la Blair Niles or Richard Meeker. It is harder to support a flagrantly amoral minority which flaunts its escape from cherished societal mores like church and marriage. The professor finally brings his point of the flouting of society by gay men to its logical conclusion with the claim that there are “no laws barring our free association with each other”. This statement was not entirely true even circa 1930, and as the Depression and gay backlash deepened it would be made preposterous, city to city and state to state. In 1931 Blair

Niles could use stories of police entrapment to rouse sympathy from the public; in 1934 Levenson claims the third sex is putting one over on the public.

Whereas the scarlet pansies and strange brothers of the other novels were “born half a man” or “just happier so”, Ken’s problems seem to be scarcely related to internal feminine impulses and more due to outside feminine influences. His first female influence, Anita, is primarily responsible for getting Ken hooked on gin while the two of them travel up and down the Pacific coast as dancing partners. There is no mother mentioned in Ken’s upbringing either, although that fact is not pursued too strongly. As the professor’s diatribe suggests, there is a vein of misogyny throughout *Butterfly Man*, and the central character’s attitude toward women remains antagonistic. He admires Anita’s dancing skills but is repulsed by her sexually and only succumbs when exceptionally intoxicated. Here Levenson clearly coordinates a fear or hatred of women with Ken’s homosexuality:

“Thus like a rankly rich orchid, the perverse attachment between Anita and himself grew, reared its violently colored head, and drooped. The woman still craved the touch of his mouth. The man feared her scalding lips and drew back more and more from the chalice of her body. Yet he could not escape from her. He must obey her—although he hated her because she was a woman.”<sup>73</sup>

While this pulpy and overblown passage could easily be inserted into that of a hard-boiled detective novel of the same vintage, *Butterfly Man* is riddled with similarly misogynistic passages. As Ken begins to break away from Anita (fortified from the guidance of a fey Mexican priest whose orientation is hinted as being akin to Ken’s), he

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<sup>73</sup> Levenson, *Butterfly Man*, 97.

becomes more and more convinced she is responsible for his downfall, and the anti-woman sentiment becomes more outlandish:

“The woman, Ken knew, was black as sin. She was unclean. She was conceived in slime. In slime she lived, into slime she would finally descend.

Underground she moves, her belly like the snake’s, moving coldly on the fecund earth, giving birth to horrors unspeakable.

The woman, Ken believed, must be ignored. She must be regarded as a thing. A damned thing.”<sup>74</sup>

Although the language could very well be reserved for only the slattern Anita, the correlation between Ken’s homosexuality and female influences (or lack of proper female influences) also rears its head with the character of Connie Leeds. Connie meets Ken accidentally on one of his New York benders (by now he has lost another job and is also hooked on marijuana as well as gin), naked in an elevator! Her views on Ken’s homosexuality sum up well the tone of the novel, with its emphasis on outside influences such as Anita, Mr. Lowell, and the gay shadow world in general:

“Is it true” she asked, “what Harry Hayes said about you?”

“What did he say?”

“That you were always a good dancer, always charming, that you started to go around with...queer folks...and then went completely blotto?”

“He said that?”

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

Ken did not reply.

“I can’t believe you are basically wrong. You’re a man. Don’t ask me how I know, but I do. I majored in psychology at Columbia. I know the pathological ropes perfectly. You’re a messy neurotic who needs attention, mothering, loving. You’ve never really been loved, have you?”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Levenson, *Butterfly Man*, 107.

<sup>75</sup> Levenson, *Butterfly Man*, 299.

The *deu la machina* of Connie Leeds in the last fifty pages of the novel ultimately fails. So it is possible that Levenson intended to refute Connie's psychological assertions that Ken could be cured by womanly attention, despite her Columbia credentials. Or perhaps it could just be that Ken didn't want to change badly enough? Ken's final drowning in the Hudson, intoxicated and delusional (he's convinced he can walk home to Texas), assigns the role of ultimate villain to drugs and alcohol more than anything else. Yet the above passage illustrates that *Butterfly Man*, more than any of the 1930s novels, veers into postwar-era Freudian language: 'neurotics' and 'pathologicals' instead of 'intermediates' and 'pansies'.

That mainstay of the 1930s gay novels, the drag ball, is given a completely different slant in *Butterfly Man*. While historical evidence shows that throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it was the one urban, semi-sanctioned, public display of pansy culture largely *for* heterosexual audiences, *Butterfly Man* describes it as exclusively gay, underground and bacchanalian. Even in *Strange Brother* –with its celibate main character who is quite removed from and often disdainful of the larger gay culture– Niles' description of the drag ball contains little of the debased, misogynistic angle *Butterfly Man* presents as typifying the ball. A comparison of the 1931 and the 1934 descriptions of drag ball participants reveal the drastic contrast in tone:

From *Butterfly Man*:

“Here was no cerebral sex game. Here was fleeting reality. Here life was almost too good to be true. The wanton sport, played privately, secretly, was here sport no longer. Good food stroked the palate; wine warmed the heart and beauty maddened the senses. Desires which had been covertly exposed, obliquely displayed, paraded here unashamed.

Eyes moved eagerly now. Falsetto voices piped higher and higher; hands were arched in an unfelt caress as the manners of the hated female were mimicked, then exaggerated.”<sup>76</sup>

From *Strange Brother*:

“In the men’s assumption of feminine graces and mannerisms there was just enough emphasis and selection to transpose such qualities from the world of Nature to that of Art; the usual, by skillful exaggeration, taking on the accent of novelty, so that the beholder saw freshly and consciously characteristics long ago become blurred by familiarity”<sup>77</sup>

*Butterfly Man*’s whole description of the drag ball suggests more an orgiastic underground gay party –or a writer’s imagined one– than the larger, more public, and more formal 1930s extravaganza of the drag ball. *Strange Brother* points out that on these rare nights the New York penal codes are ignored, with the police even providing escorts and crowd control for the massive numbers of mixed-gender attendees. June, a heterosexual woman attending a drag ball for the first time, has a rather positive take on the whole affair and certainly does not feel mocked or hated. Not only is she awe-struck and admiring of the drag performers’ artistry, but also experiences a poignant moment of realization that even brings a tear to her eye. Watching two youthful, non-drag men dance together and gaze at one another with “that suffused tenderness with which the young of one sex regards the young of the other”<sup>78</sup> June realizes, amidst the spectacle and freak-show qualities of the drag ball, how normal and ordinary homosexuals actually are. This is indeed quite different from *Butterfly Man*’s frenzied dance floor of sinful excess.

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<sup>76</sup> Levenson, *Butterfly Man*, 202.

<sup>77</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 136.

<sup>78</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 139.



While *Butterfly Man*'s portrayals of and references to "secret societies" and homosexual "freemasonry" obviously are intended to recast the gay underworld heterosexual audiences craved in an insidious light, the other novels do often employ the same exclusionary language. Ken's drinking partner the professor may (erroneously) claim the gay secret society has "no laws barring our free association with each other" (and via the debauched portrayals throughout the novel one gets the sense Levenson is persuading the reader that there *should* be), but in other novels the concept of being an exceptional breed, outside mainstream society, even above mainstream society, is employed with less alarmist undertones.

***"on a higher level than those normally sexed"***

As discussed earlier, *A Scarlet Pansy* contains a thwarted rape, enforcing the notion that working-class laborers and other thuggish types at the time were viewed as more likely to have sexual contact with effeminates and pansies. In the chapter 'Conversation at a Drag' a group of older homosexual men (aunties) discuss this apparent contradiction in what they term "true he-men". The aunties criticize what they view as the younger generation's foolishness (and futility) in desiring actual long-term relations with the rugged, entirely masculine sort. They also correct the younger men's misguided belief that all blue-collar men qualify as the he-man ideal. Upon prodding by Fay and others, the aunties theorize that, conversely, "real he-men" and "complete inverts" occupy the highest state of sexuality: an exemption from restrictive monogamy and prescriptive sexual mores:

“The almost-innocent Miss Stepp now spoke up--”Don’t you think you can tell real he-men by the way they run after women all the time?”

“My Gawd, dearie, no!” It was Miss Savoy speaking again, with the voice of authority. “Half of that running after women is an attempt to reinforce their feeling of imperfect manhood. No real he-man ever runs after anything. But whatever comes his way, he’s ready for it—and I said *whatever!*—and then he forgets it as soon as it’s all over. A real he-man will take all the petting you will give, and enjoy it, but won’t bother to pet back again. Why, a real he-man would never even bother to get married if some woman didn’t keep on pestering him and making a nuisance of herself until he did. And believe me, no real he-man can ever remain faithful to one woman, unless that one woman keeps all the others away from him.”<sup>79</sup>

While played lightly, like all of *A Scarlet Pansy*, the party conversation about he-men is the polar opposite of *Butterfly Man*’s assertions about the secret society. It is the unique *immunity* to feminine influences that makes them outside (above?) society and in a special club rather than the result of “feminization”. The aunts clearly believe the virile and robust heterosexual man who resists female entrapment is a co-member of that club and thus the ideal sexual partner. The exclusivity of the aunts’ purist definition of a he-man is not lost on Fay, however:

“Then, speaking plainly,” continued Fay, “it is my belief that real he-men are only about as common as fairies are.”

“Well, then, how do women ever get—along?” demanded Aunty.

“They put up with the makeshifts, grab the best thing they can get—not the thing they really want.”<sup>80</sup>

Unlike the professor in *Butterfly Man*, the aunts are under no misconceptions about where their sexual club fits among broader societal mores and legalities. Indeed, they express outrage that the middle-ground, grey-area majority should suppress and legislate against those who, by luck of birth, occupy the pure ends of the spectrum:

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<sup>79</sup> Scully, *Scarlet Pansy*, 155, emphasis mine.

<sup>80</sup> Scully, *Scarlet Pansy*, 156.

“What in hell has so-called morals got to do with my life anyway?”

“But you are digressing, Oswald!” said the hostess. “Have a sense of humor. Remember, Gawd must have his little jokes on the human species.”

“I feel bitter, bitter against the half-men who make our laws. Come on; let’s legislate against the tides too!”<sup>81</sup>

While few of the other novels are brazen enough to claim politicians and law-makers are inferior “half-men”, every one of the gay novels has characters who view themselves as being on a higher plane than their ordinary straight counterparts. Even the most conflicted and unhappy protagonist has moments where he realizes he is part of a selective club, however misunderstood or persecuted. The laundry list approach of naming notable figures from the past who are presumed homosexuals—Byron, Plato, Whitman, Michelangelo, Wilde and others, appears in *Strange Brother*, *Better Angel*, *Twilight Men*, *Goldie* and even *Butterfly Man*. *Goldie*’s list is by far the most exhaustive:

“Diocles, Achilles, Homer, Alexander the Great, Pythagoras, Demosthenes, Julius Caesar, Virgil, Benvenuto Cellini, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Francis Bacon, Leo X, Francis I, Henry IV, Louis XIV, Louis XV, the Marquis de Sade, scions of the House of Orleans, Oscar Wilde, William II, James I, and many others of the world’s great geniuses.”<sup>82</sup>

Someone like the Marquis de Sade may seem a dubious role model, but these lists were not only about pointing out admirable gay men or their accomplishments. They clearly were aware that gay men constructed a shared history via this name-dropping approach, whatever the authors’ own opinion was on the subject lists’ sexuality. Characters are not necessarily in agreement about every member of the list, either. *Strange Brother*’s

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<sup>81</sup> Scully, *Scarlet Pansy*, 157.

<sup>82</sup> Austen, *Playing the Game*, 69-70.

characters debate whether Shakespeare should be included, while *Better Angel*'s Kurt exclaims "all I want is to show people we're not monsters any more than Shakespeare was"<sup>83</sup>. The fact that these lists were so commonplace demonstrates that the notion of an honorable collective history was proving a useful tool for 1930s homosexuals to construct a more honorable *present-day* collective identity.

Even those novels that do not have a nod to a famous list have gay characters who view themselves in terms of superiority and a kind of specially-favored status. All of the characters in *The Young and Evil* possess a grandiose self image that borders on superiority complex. In other novels sometimes the main character is conflicted by his homosexuality and it is the secondary characters who possess the unconventional-but-gifted view of themselves. This is definitely the case in *Strange Brother*. Whereas Mark Thornton surely regards himself as cursed, his rather well-adjusted friend Tom Burden (a traveling adventurer and anthropologist not unlike Ms. Niles herself) urges Mark to accept and refocus his exceptionality into his writings. Tom invokes the image of a shared, pride-worthy past:

"Tom wrote that wherever he went, among all people, there existed manly love, though not openly, as in Greece in the days when she led the world in arts and letters and philosophy.

And in Tom's last letter, he has said that he was planning a pilgrimage to Greece and to Crete, to see for himself the lands where the love of man for man had reached its pinnacle of beauty"<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Meeker, *Better Angel*, 170.

<sup>84</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 120.

The language of the time is laden with the idea of homosexuals being naturally more artistic and refined. Also, and used with even more abandon, is the terminology associated with the supposed *side-effects* to being more artistic and refined: “sensitive”, “emotional”, “a nervous sort”, “high-strung” and, what is probably the granddaddy of them all, “temperamental”, are all used profusely to describe gay men (or suspected gay men) by gays and straights alike in films, books and plays of the 1930s. The linking of gay men and the arts was so taken for granted that adjectives describing artists could stand on their own as queer euphemisms. Indeed, adjectives like “temperamental” are used interchangeably with “homosexual” or “fairy” as nouns. Chauncey refers to personal advertisements in the 1930s using this coded language for gay men to meet and match with each other, often under the guise of roommate seeking or soliciting pen-pals: “Want to correspond with temperamental artist, musician, writer or actor who is interested in the better things of life” reads a particularly telling 1930s want-ad in *Broadway Brevities* magazine.<sup>85</sup>

It is not only the gay characters in these novels who detect this exceptional quality, but also parents and family members who seem to observe quite early that their offspring are specially marked and elevated above ordinary (straight) folk. Interestingly, it often appears before the perfunctory artistic talents emerge, so that parents are left viewing their sons as different or special without being able to pinpoint exactly why. *Better Angel*'s Kurt is strongly, and repeatedly, described in these terms, and at times it even creates a barrier between him and his parents, unbeknown to the young Kurt:

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<sup>85</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 288. Chauncey cites numerous personal ads in *Brevities* which drip with gay innuendo, plus many exposes on New York City's “fairyland”.

“But there was, even when the boy was very young, an unaccountable feeling on the part of the father that in this small body and brain there was a latent superiority, a tenuous spirituality of some sort which he could never have analyzed, or understood, but which, when the two were alone together, as they were so infrequently, made the man slightly reticent; slightly and inexplicably fearful that he would not please the boy, and that his son was ashamed of him. It was a feeling Kurt certainly did not share, consciously at least, but it created between them a wall not to be penetrated”<sup>86</sup>

Kurt’s “latent superiority” does eventually turn into musical talent, but what makes him different in childhood is clearly not described as mere talent or precociousness. In *Strange Brother* Mark describes how the older family friend Tom Burden surmised that he was also “marked” and uses the themes of sensitivity and artistic appreciation:

“And all sorts of little things had told him. He’d recognized that I had a passionate, emotional nature. He knew that I was restless and nervous and that I didn’t sleep well. He’d noticed how I didn’t care about girls, not shy with them—just not interested. He said one of the first things he noticed was how I’d always speak of a man’s looks. If I admired a girl, Tom said it was the way I admired a flower or a landscape.”<sup>87</sup>

The actual artistic abilities of Armand Bironge in *Twilight Men* are dubious, but there is no question that the label “temperamental” fits Armand like a glove. Adrian Ware, the homosexual realist, finds Armand’s poetry narcissistic and adolescent, but Stephen Kent sees real talent being wasted. Indeed, Armand’s remarkable beauty seems to find him more admirers than his work does. Nonetheless, his high-strung nature and sensitivity mark him as “in the club” by his uncle and father even in childhood (“He loves soft

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<sup>86</sup> Meeker, *Better Angel*, 12.

<sup>87</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 90.

things, dreams over Christina Rossetti, scatters caresses to horses”<sup>88</sup>). When Armand attends his first gay party (after publishing his first poetry collection) many attendees are lying in wait for him:

“I know your work” said MacKin. “I like it.” He smiled. “I rather thought I’d see you here some time or other.”

“Why?”

“All the temperamental artists and writers get here if they stay in New York long enough.”

Armand was not wholly pleased with his frankness.<sup>89</sup>

In 1931 so linked with sexuality is the term “temperamental” that the shy Armand views its use not as decorous euphemism but bold frankness.

Roger Austen also agrees that the period’s language of shadow worlds, freemasonry and temperamental fraternities often is steeped in a sort of prideful elitism. Writing from the standpoint that the 1930s gay novels were a mere “wave of mediocrity”, he theorizes that most urban gay men probably did indeed view themselves as “slightly above average” (as *The Young and Evil*’s Karel professes) and perhaps during that decade were so concerned with fostering the image of sophistication via appreciating and collecting the arts that they produced no noteworthy written arts of their own. While I may disagree with Austen concerning the importance and even quality of the 1930s novels, I do concur that the largely apolitical, decidedly non-proletarian nature of the novels suggests that the gay shadow world may have been perceived by its own residents as unusual or even

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<sup>88</sup> Tellier, *Twilight Men*, 3.

<sup>89</sup> Tellier, *Twilight Men*, 148.

scandalous—but not nearly so consumed with feelings of inferiority or downtroddenness as later generations would have us believe.

James Levin, looking back from 1983, claims that gay men in the 1930s must have felt completely relegated to “an inferior status”, and he chastises Austen for even suggesting that gay men may have felt distinguished or special. While it is certainly true many characters in the novels do feel marginalized, even the most tortured examples are quite verbal about it mainly being society’s cruel treatment that relegates them. Also, it seems unlikely that the celebrity listing approach would be used quite so consistently and often (seven times in *Strange Brother* alone) if it were not at the very least accepted urban folklore among gay men of the time. In addition, Levin’s reading completely misconstrues or ignores the novels’ many secondary characters who describe gay cliques in clear tones of superiority. Furthermore, other non-fiction writings from the time strongly suggest that at least some gay men did feel numbered among an exceptional cadre. Even the work of those who *did* feel the gay world was inferior or unnatural note that many members were stubbornly free from self-loathing. Dr. Keller’s *Sex and Society* writes:

“They have pointed with pride to the great poets, authors and artists who have had this sexual twist and on account of their greatness have excused themselves for similar conduct. They have even tried to have their sexual relations legalized by both church and state.”<sup>90</sup>

Interestingly, Dr. Keller does not try to dispute the list of famous homosexuals, but rather argues that society cannot legitimize unnatural acts merely because those who have

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<sup>90</sup> Keller, *Sex and Society*, 51.



remarkable talents in other fields engaged in them. In a similar work from the 1920s, Dr. William Robinson's *Nature's Sex Stepchildren* (1925), the author grudgingly admits that many of the self-professed homosexuals he interviewed and studied believed that they "stand on a higher level than those normally sexed, and they are the specially favored of the muses of poetry and the arts".<sup>91</sup>

Levin's hostility toward the notion of 1930s gay elitism probably relates to his broader-reaching contentions with common gay stereotyping in fiction. While I readily admit the sensitive, artsy gay protagonist can –and does– get tiresome, it did serve an important purpose in depicting a positive side to the secret world of gay men that these books purported to expose. Images of seedy parties and speakeasies may be what many readers retained from the novels as the essence of this twilight world, but nearly all of the books at least acknowledge the belief that the club was also one of culture, distinction and talent. In many cases the two images are presented didactically as two sides of the same coin. If even those novels written for a primarily heterosexual, middle-class audience felt the need to present that alternative side it seems unlikely that most gay men of the time viewed it as a complete fiction.

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<sup>91</sup> Robinson, William J, "Nature's Sex Stepchildren," *Medical Critic and Guide* (12/1925), 475.

### III

#### *A New Breed: Changing Postwar Perceptions*

As mentioned earlier, the pansy craze was already on the wane as the decade of the 1930s reached midpoint. Broadway and Hollywood alike began to eliminate its references to gay issues, the large, lavish drag balls ceased, and the repeal of Prohibition meant that via state liquor boards the government now could regulate where, what hours, and who could be served liquor. World War II, in many ways, provided the final axe-blow to the pansy novel which less than a decade earlier had proved to be so popular. Just as the war connected thousands of young gay men (and women) from small towns and rural areas to each other, and opened their eyes to the reality of urban gay subculture, it also forced the ultimate necessity of the closet door. While sodomy had long been forbidden in the armed forces, there had never been the direct question “Are you a homosexual?” until World War II. As the 1930s novels show, not only was the term homosexual of a “highly scientific” nature—but there was little agreement on what exactly made one a candidate for this new label. *A Scarlet Pansy* and *The Young and Evil* both have characters dipping in and out of “the gay life” yet still rejecting the label of homosexual completely. By the 1940s the label of homosexual had not only gained in mainstream usage, but it also had developed clear consequences, unsuitability for military service being one.

However, with the exception of *Butterfly Man* (a novel I have argued was at least partially written in backlash to the pansy craze), the 1930s gay novels rarely presented

homosexuality as a harmful influence to others or to society. Perhaps frivolous and decadent –and often there is a dire price to be paid by the homosexual himself– but not especially threatening to outsiders, even when the most negative portrayals emerge (in *Twilight Men* for instance). Pansies might be mockingly presented as a source of ridicule or patronizingly depicted as creatures deserving sympathy, but never as damaging to the larger fabric of society. However, George Chauncey argues that this perception began to change in the 1940s:

“At the same time, the culture at large paid increasing—and increasingly hostile—attention to this new breed of gay man. Indeed, the homosexual hardly disappeared from public view after the early 1930’s, for police bulletins and press coverage continued to make him a prominent, but increasingly sinister, figure. As Americans anxiously tried to come to terms with the disruptions in the gender and sexual order caused by the Depression and exacerbated by the Second World War, the “sex deviant” became a symbol of the dangers posed by family instability, gender confusion, and unregulated sexuality and violence. A number of children’s murders in the late 1930s and the late 1940s, sensationalized by the local and national press and interpreted as sexual in nature by the police, fanned a series of panics over sex crime, which became the vehicle for a wide-ranging discourse about the boundaries of acceptable sexual and gender behavior”<sup>92</sup>

This is not to say the fiction to emerge in the 1940s and 1950s only depicts homosexual men as sex fiends or child molesters. Indeed, they often present a sympathetic –if tragic– view of homosexuality. However, there is a much stronger tone of psychological questioning and soul-searching; the burden of being homosexual is not societal censure but rather *internal* struggle and self-hate. *The Fall of Valor* (1946) by Charles Jackson is an exemplary case study in the new, 1940s view of homosexuality. John Grandin, a married man with two children, does not even realize that his feelings for Cliff Hauman

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<sup>92</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 359.

are sexual in nature until the last third of the novel. A forty-four year old English professor, his marriage failing, he is unable to pinpoint the exact cause of his unhappiness and frustration. Once he does realize his true feelings, his perspective is melancholy indeed:

“In view of what had happened, Grandin was a fine one to be placed in the position of adviser to youth. He felt the irony keenly. Professors in personal conference with the young were supposed to serve as examples of behavior, to represent an exemplary manhood; indeed, that is why he received such an appointment. True, neither the faculty nor the students need know of what had happened, and would not. But what about himself? University prestige notwithstanding, he would feel himself a hypocrite through and through; and as such, he would be unable to meet the students with a free and honest mind. His conscience and his guilt—in short, his new knowledge of himself—would stand in the way of the rapport essential between him and the students. He had no doubt that he could get away with it; what upset him was his own state of mind. For him to set himself up to advise youth in any capacity seemed an outrageous dishonesty”<sup>93</sup>

All this and John Grandin has not so much as kissed another man! Merely, he has made the discovery that his attraction for the handsome, amiable Cliff contains an erotic element. In 1944 terms, however, this “new knowledge” is so problematic, so damning, that he could not possibly continue as a capable teacher even if he never acts upon it.

That he discovers his affliction at the age of forty-four is something the 1930s novels, and 1930s readers, probably would have regarded with great suspicion indeed. Again, with the exception of the postwar forerunner *Butterfly Man*, every gay protagonist of the 1930s batch was at the very least “different” beginning in childhood (*Better Angel*, *Strange Brother*) if not a full-fledged third-sexer (*A Scarlet Pansy*, *Twilight Men*, *The Young and Evil*).

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<sup>93</sup> Jackson, Charles, *The Fall of Valor* (New York, Rinehart, 1946), 238-239.

1931's *Strange Brother*, with all its heavy-handed talk of curse and tragedy, still never comes close to the self-opinion espoused by *The Fall of Valor*'s main character. Mark's eventual suicide comes because of an attempted blackmail:

“He realized that until the shadow world is simply and naturally recognized by society, it must remain furtive, skulking, ashamed of itself. Because tradition and the herd instinct are so strong, his world could not even respect itself; secretly to see in itself an object of contempt and derision. And no matter how high the ideals of individuals there would always be moments when the poison of herd contempt would pollute their ideals”<sup>94</sup>

This is indeed a dismal and bleak picture, but it is clear that Mark's view is that it is *society's* cruel treatment –blackmail, harassment, intolerance– which drives him to suicide. It is the public's omnipresent damnation of homosexuals that makes homosexuals hate themselves. While changing or influencing individual's treatment of homosexuals (June Westbrook for instance), he is resigned to the fact that changing society's opinion is futile, and that the “herd contempt” would always leave most gay men ashamed of themselves.

John Grandin's homosexuality is portrayed in terms of a mental disease, something that was asymptomatic and buried deep within him until Cliff Hauman came on the scene and triggered it. Mark, on the other hand, never questions his own homosexuality as a moral failing, a trait he can alter, or a condition to be cured. In fact, Mark is quite adamant about it being quite the opposite:

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<sup>94</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 205.

“And that’s so much the truth that I would not change myself if I could. Any more than you would be willing to shift around and be attracted to women instead of men. The idea of changing is just as absurd and repulsive to me as it would be to you. To change would be to me to acquire a vice!”<sup>95</sup>

Mark Thornton has been characterized by Levin and others as “self-loathing”, but his is actually a far cry from postwar depictions of guilt and mental anguish. Mark Thornton and *Better Angel*’s Kurt Gray do not question themselves as morally fit teachers or doubt their ability “to advise youth in any way” as John Grandin does. Indeed, at the end of *Better Angel* Kurt gives helpful guidance to a sensitive boy who it is more than suggested is experiencing the same adolescent gay soul-searching Kurt once did. Mark’s despair (keeping in mind he is the *most* tortured protagonist of the 1930s batch; picturing Fay Etrange, or Karel and Julian, with Grandin’s melodramatic guilt is downright laughable) is because he must constantly hide his homosexuality from others and has given up on ever finding another homosexual such as himself.

By removing homosexuality entirely from the realm of gender roles or sexual tastes and inserting it into the realm of latent disorders, as *The Fall of Valor* does, homosexuality becomes a condition like Alzheimer’s disease or schizophrenia: something that can suddenly emerge from the brain during adulthood as in the case of John Grandin. It also puts it in the realm of conditions that can be suppressed, cured or treated—something essentially absent from the earlier novels. Even in the one 1930s novel where a “gay cure” is proposed (*Butterfly Man*), it results in failure.<sup>96</sup> While Austen and Levin accuse

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<sup>95</sup> Niles, *Strange Brother*, 98.

<sup>96</sup> I suppose De Rasbon’s attempt to get his mistress Marianne to seduce his son Armand is also an attempted homosexuality “cure”. It too is a complete failure.

the 1930s novels of having discordant views on the causes of homosexuality (and they do), many of the postwar novels blatantly jumble other distinct disorders (transvestism, voyeurism, pederasty) with homosexuality.<sup>97</sup> *The Sling and the Arrow* (1947) contains a “gay” protagonist who dons women’s clothing, watches his wife have sex with her lover (imagining himself as the woman), and eventually murders the wife when she becomes pregnant! Whilst modern gay sensibilities might not care for linking homosexuality with archaic and pseudo-psychological terms like “gender inversion” or “intermediate sex” as the 1930s novels did, most would probably agree that it is preferable to equating it boldly with psychotic violence or proven mental derangements.

The postwar removal of gender-based terminology and pansy-style protagonists was by no means all-encompassing. While it disappeared from the mainstream, critically-praised literature –Gore Vidal’s *City and the Pillar* (1948), Loren Wahl’s *The Invisible Glass* (1950), James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956)– other less respectable books retained their scarlet pansies and gender intermediates and were marginalized for it. By the 1950s class consciousness about homosexuality had undergone a significant shift. No longer was reading about homosexuality a middle-class thirst for tales of exotic, taboo, or working-class novelties.

*The Gaudy Image* (1958) by William Talisman is essentially a more explicit version of *A Scarlet Pansy*. Protagonist Thomas Schwartz is reborn as the flamboyant, irreverent

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<sup>97</sup> This is not to say Levin and Austen are embracing of the late 1940s and 1950s gay-themed novels. Austen especially is critical, referring to the pulpy *The Sling and the Arrow* as “the sort of novel that gives homosexuality a bad name”. He also levels some criticisms at the postwar novels which enjoy greater literary reputations both as literature and “ground-breaking” works: Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* and Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*.

Titania, Queen of the Fairies in a working-class gay bar (even christening himself with sprinkled beer) and the following 250 pages or so narrate his madcap adventures in New York's gay subculture. Talisman even utilizes the Scully pronoun switch for Titania (Tit for short) and is referred to in the feminine throughout the novel. 1920s and 1930s-style fairies, trade, gangsters and aunties populate the novel, although set solidly in 1950s blue-collar New York. Obscure publisher Olympia Press gave the novel one printing only, as part of their *Traveler's Companion* series of plain-covered, avant-guard material (they are the same publisher that gave *The Young and Evil* a reprint in 1960). The novel's original readership was smaller than even *A Scarlet Pansy's*. However I feel *The Gaudy Image* is worth mentioning as a notable exception to the postwar norm of gay fiction. Most 1940s and 1950s novels that tackled gay themes and subjects were set solidly in middle-class realms: *The Fall of Valor's* college professor, *The City and the Pillar's* soldier-turned-writer, *Giovanni Room's* traveling American ex-pat, *The Invisible Glass's* army officer. However, only *The Gaudy Image* takes place in the same rough, working-class urban world that served as the main subculture for visible prewar gay life. In 1931 Blair Niles used a middle-class, educated protagonist to challenge existing views about homosexuality (had not the *Saturday Review of Literature* marveled that "less conspicuous types of homosexuality" were included with the pansies and the prostitutes?), but by 1958 educated, middle-class homosexuals were the norm. Postwar afflictions and psychology were the territory of the middle classes, and homosexuality came along with it. When read among the other postwar works, *The Gaudy Image's* Titania seems an amusing throw-back to Fay Etrange, Karel, Lilly-Marie and many of the



other characters of the 1930s gay novels: “she” has no soul-searching epiphanies, nor any qualms, concerning her femininity, promiscuity, or homosexuality.

As the postwar years moved on, more and more loosely defined “gay fiction” appeared on the scene. So much so, in fact, that it becomes impossible to identify one cohesive genre of gay novel that defines a decade’s changing view of homosexuality in quite the same way the 1930s novels do. By 1960 certain gay-themed books had achieved literary interest and critical attention (Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar*, Philips’ *The Bitterweed Path*, and particularly Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*). Many critics even went out of their way to be clear that these novels had literary merit despite their inclusion of homosexuality (one *New York Herald Tribune* critic praised the quality of writing in *The Bitterweed Path* but wrote he would rather Philips had “chosen a more rewarding theme”<sup>98</sup>). Simultaneously, by 1960 a distinct pulp fiction genre had started to emerge which was targeted more at gay men themselves and as publishing laws relaxed they could become more salacious, pornographic or just plain camp, depending on desired marketing. Thus, when one speaks of postwar “gay fiction” it could also encompass this distinct genre of pulp writings: *Muscle Boy*, *The Killer Queens*, *Skid Row Sweetie* and countless other titles which were unlikely to be found in respectable bookshops but rather at magazine stands and drugstores. As mentioned earlier, some paperback publishers repackaged certain 1930s titles and sold them within this new market. The revamped 1960s versions of *Strange Brother*, *Twilight Men*, and *Better Angel* could not possibly have titillated readers in quite the same way the later pulp novels did. However, I feel the 1930s novels had a more significant task than mere titillation: they sated a unique 1930s

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<sup>98</sup> Howard, John *The Bitterweed Path* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1996), introduction.

popular fad while catering to an audience whose perceptions of homosexuality were mainly still rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Today Eisenhower-era perceptions of homosexuality constitute the “older” viewpoint that popular gay fiction caters to, acknowledges, or challenges. Also, because so much fiction on all levels –from pulpy lowbrow novels to titles considered for Pulitzer and Booker prizes– have included gay themes and gay topics, it has become nearly impossible to separate a “gay novel” from a “straight novel”. While certain aspects and examples of the 1930s novels still contain a great deal of coming-of-age poignancy (*Better Angel* for instance), most of the novels’ notions of gender and orientation run counter to current, neatly defined homo/hetero dividing lines. Seventy years on, the class differences and prejudices on homosexuality that a novel like *Strange Brother* sought to bridge have been turned topsy-turvy. On the other hand, the parodying, irreverently gay world of *A Scarlet Pansy* probably reads better in today’s world of gay comedy on television and in film than it would have in the closeted, psychological era of the 1950s or the more politicized 1970s. It is probably safe to say that by the time the gay novels reach their centenary, the cultural landscape will have once again altered enough to foster a whole new reading of them.

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