

Queer Adolescence:

(Homo)sexuality in *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*

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The crisis of the modern novel of adolescence or 'coming-of-age' novel is often a sexual crisis. Though the adolescent protagonist may face other crises – social crises, race crises, crises of power – these are commonly bound up with the desperate and confused struggle with his or her own burgeoning sexuality. Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood – protagonists of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* – are in many ways typical or even prototypical of the sex-haunted protagonist of this genre. Their sexual coming-of-age has provided material for many a critical study.¹ But one of the more puzzling – and so far largely unexamined – features of both novels is their peripheral but persistent concern with homosexuality.

Homosexuality, it seems, plays some role or roles in the coming-of-age of these supposedly heterosexual protagonists. In this essay, I will perform close and comparative readings of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar* in an attempt to determine what those roles might be. I will argue that, for Holden and Esther, the homosexual is a medium through which they grapple with their own, ostensibly non-queer sexuality and identity.² I will further argue that a symmetry exists between modern conceptions of adolescence and homosexuality, and that Holden and Esther's negotiations with homosexuality are symptomatic of what Eve Sedgwick has called the 'incoherence' of 'modern homo/heterosexual definition' (1990, p1).

Before we can understand what roles homosexuality plays in Holden and Esther's sexual crises, we must first understand the nature of those crises. When we meet both Holden and Esther, they are disgruntled virgins:

¹ See for instance Bundzen, 1989; Ellman, 1970; Vail, 1990; Lundquist, 1990.

² I should say here that I use 'the homosexual' to refer not to any particular character, nor of course to any variety of actual persons, but to conceptions of homosexuality held by the protagonists, conceptions which in the course of the novels are embodied in several characters.

adolescents alternately drawn to sex and repelled by it. For example: Esther entertains the idea of sleeping with Constantin, the simultaneous interpreter, on their first and only date (Plath, 1999, p.78). She considers going to bed with Eric, a minor acquaintance (Plath, 1999, pp.79-80). But after witnessing the foreplay between her friend Doreen and Lenny the disc jockey she feels 'dirty' and impure, and after seeing her boyfriend Buddy Willard's genitals she feels 'very depressed' (Plath, 1999, pp.19-20, 69).

For his part, Holden solicits a prostitute and, when she takes her dress off, asks her if she feels like talking for a while (Salinger, 1951, pp.94-95). He stares at his date Sally's 'little ass', then tells her that she is a 'royal pain in the ass' (Salinger, 1951, pp.129, 133). Five times in the novel he is about to telephone the girl he seems most attracted to, Jane Gallagher, then suddenly abandons the idea because he is not 'in the mood' (Salinger, 1951, pp.59, 63, 116, 150, 202).

Gestures such as these betray Holden and Esther's ambivalent sexuality. Both protagonists are constantly arrested by sexual desire and/or curiosity. Holden dubs himself 'the biggest sex maniac you ever saw' (Salinger, 1951, p.62), and Esther entertains fantasies about having children with – and, implicitly, having sex with – prison guards and 'virile' garage mechanics whom she barely knows or merely imagines (Plath, 1999, pp.133, 150). From time to time Holden bluntly admits that he is 'feeling pretty horny' or 'pretty sexy' (Salinger, 1951, pp.63, 92). Esther longs to keep not one but a 'pack of lovers' (Plath, 1999, p.77).

These desires drive Holden and Esther to the very brink of the sexual encounter: they drive Holden to the prostitute and Esther to Constantin's bed. But they are counterbalanced by an equal and opposite force that sabotages or postpones the sexual encounter, preserving their virginity and prolonging their adolescent sexual limbo. In the midst of these sexual crises both Holden and Esther encounter the homosexual.

Holden encounters homosexuality in the person of Luce, an acquaintance from boarding school. Holden tells about how Luce used to

'give these sex talks and all, late at night when there was a bunch of guys in his room. [...] He was always telling us about', among other things, '[...] flits and Lesbians' ['flit' being the word Holden uses for a male homosexual] (Salinger, 1951, p.143). Luce, it seems, has extraordinary *gaydar*: 'Old Luce knew who every flit and Lesbian in the United States was'. But Luce's ability to recognize the homosexual, and his penchant for talking about sex and especially for talking about homosexuality, arouse Holden's suspicion: 'The funny thing about old Luce, I used to think he was sort of flitty himself, in a way' (Salinger, 1951, p.143).

The funny thing about Holden's suspicion is that it is aroused by traits which Holden himself possesses. The text of *The Catcher in the Rye* is ample evidence that the narrating Holden, like Luce, likes to talk about sex. In a sense, the novel itself represents an extended and rather one-sided conversation about sex between Holden and the reader. One topic that comes up again and again in Holden's own 'sex-talks' is homosexuality (Luce is, as we will see, only one of several suspected homosexuals whom Holden tells us about). In talking about sex and especially homosexuality, Holden performs an act which, when performed by Luce, suggests that Luce may be a homosexual.

Luce's *gaydar* – his uncanny ability to identify the homosexual – also arouses suspicion. In suspecting Luce of being queer, Holden exhibits a *gaydar* of his own. He also, for no discernable reason, identifies the piano player at the Wicker Bar, and others throughout the novel, as 'flitty-looking' (Salinger, 1951, p.149). And Holden's *gaydar* penetrates beyond mere appearances. Take, for example, the following passage: 'The other end of the bar was full of flits. They weren't too flitty-looking [...] but you could tell they were flits anyway' (Salinger, 1951, p.142). Holden makes this observation just a paragraph before he reveals his suspicion of Luce. In doing so, he betrays an uncanny, Luce-ian skill for identifying the homosexual – despite or even contrary to appearances. It has been said that

it takes one to know one, and Holden certainly seems to know one when he sees one.

Again and again, we see unmistakable resemblances between, on the one hand, what Holden does and, on the other, what makes Holden suspicious. The following are certain of Luce's behaviours which Holden judges to be 'sort of flitty':

he'd goose the hell out of you while you were going down the corridor. And whenever he went to the can, he always left the goddam door open and *talked* to you while you were brushing your teeth or something. (Salinger, 1951, p.143, emphasis in original)

This supposedly 'flitty' behaviour strongly echoes Holden's own behaviour towards Stradlater (the very same Stradlater, by the way, whom Holden admits has 'a damn good build', and whom he dubs 'pretty handsome' and 'a very sexy bastard') (Salinger, 1951, pp.26- 27, 32). In an early scene, Holden follows Stradlater 'to the can and chewed the rag with him while he was shaving' (Salinger, 1951, p.26). During a lull in the conversation, Holden physically accosts Stradlater, who is naked to the waist:

All of a sudden – for no good reason, really, except that I was sort of in the mood for horsing around – I felt like jumping off the washbowl and getting old Stradlater in a half-nelson. That's a wrestling hold. (Salinger, 1951, p.30)

By his own standards, these gestures are 'sort of flitty' (Salinger, 1951, p.143). Though these behaviours are not identical to Luce's, the discrepancies between the two seem largely incidental. The correspondence between the dynamics of the described bathroom conversations, and also between the gestures of the 'goose' and the 'half-nelson', is self-evident. Once again, Holden behaves in ways that he himself deems 'flitty'.

In his encounter with Luce, Holden recognizes similarities between his sexuality and homosexuality, and begins to identify with the homosexual. This identification may or may not be performed unconsciously. There is at least one passage, though, in which Holden

perceives – if dimly and fleetingly – the (fearful) symmetry he shares with the homosexual. Fittingly, it is Luce's sex talks that prompt this epiphany:

He said half the married guys in the world were flits and didn't even know it. He said you could turn into one practically overnight, if you had the traits and all. [...] I kept waiting to turn into a flit or something. (Salinger, 1951, p.143)

The formulation of Luce's admonition is such that, in admitting his anxiety about 'turning into a flit', Holden concedes that he bears 'the traits' of a closeted homosexual. These symptoms include, as we have seen, a habit of talking about sex and especially homosexuality, an unusual skill at identifying the homosexual, and various faintly homoerotic patterns of behaviour.

Significantly, Holden's conception of homosexuality conspicuously excludes the penetrative sexual act. According to Holden's formulation, one need not have sex to become a homosexual – as Luce points out, you can be a flit without even knowing that you are one. If Holden is willing to talk about acts of bestiality, about 'guys that go around having affairs with sheep', then it must be significant that Holden never mentions or even alludes to the homosexual act in any way (Salinger, 1951, p.143). It seems that, for Holden, flit-hood is more of a mode of being than a sexual behaviour, an identity rather than a practice. To be a homosexual, one only needs to possess 'the traits', some of which are described above. The physical homosexual act is, for Holden, irrelevant and perhaps even non-existent.

This point is crucial because the lack of the sexual encounter defines not only Holden's conception of homosexuality, but also his own sexuality-in-crisis. It is the primary link between the two, and, therefore, the primary cause of Holden's identification with the homosexual.

Esther Greenwood is not a homosexual, but her double is – this is the bizarre claim of *The Bell Jar*. The novel deliberately and transparently sets up the character Joan Gilling as a double for its protagonist. Esther and Joan grow up in the same town, go to the same church, date the same boy, and,

after attempting suicide, end up in the same mental institution. Indeed, Esther herself calls Joan her 'beaming double' (Plath, 1999, p.205). This doubling of Esther and Joan, however, becomes a little more complicated (and infinitely more interesting) when we learn that Joan is a homosexual.

Esther's conception of homosexuality is, in certain respects, eerily similar to Holden's. The following passage accompanies a scene in which Joan sexually propositions Esther:

I remembered a minor scandal at our college dormitory when a fat, matronly-breasted senior, homely as a grandmother and a pious religion major, and a tall, gawky freshman with a history of being deserted at an early hour in all sorts of ingenious ways by her blind dates, started seeing too much of each other. They were always together, and once somebody had come upon them embracing, the story went, in the fat girl's room.

'But what were they *doing*?' I had asked. Whenever I thought about men and men, and women and women, I could never really imagine what they would be actually doing.

[. . .] I wondered if all women did with other women was lie and hug. (Plath, 1999, pp.219-220)

For Esther, as for Holden, homosexuality is characterized by a lack – a lack of the physical sexual act, of genital stimulation or penetration. It is a sexuality of mildness or gentleness, of lying and hugging and nothing further.

When the opportunity to lose her virginity presents itself – when Esther's pseudo-boyfriend Buddy Willard lights some candles, uncorks a bottle of Dubonnet, and proceeds to undress himself – Esther demurs. She feels 'very depressed' until she and Buddy 'kissed and hugged a while and I felt a little better' (Plath, 1999, p.69). Both the lesbians' lying and hugging and Esther's kissing and hugging are framed as benign or palliative alternatives to the heterosexual act.

Esther objects to the sexual encounter insofar as it places a woman 'under a man's thumb' (Plath, 1999, p.221). Specifically, the possibility of pregnancy creates or perpetuates a gendered imbalance of power in favour of

the man: 'A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line' (Plath, 1999, p.221). The prospect of pregnancy limits a woman's power by inhibiting her freedom to make certain (sexual) choices – meanwhile, the man's power is unassailable: he 'doesn't have a worry in the world'. Esther steers clear of the heterosexual act, in other words, to preserve what little power is available to her as a woman.

By shunning intimacy with a man, though, Esther falls into intimacies with fellow women – at her all-women's college, at her all-women's mental institution, at the fashion magazine whose staff is all women, and – with her father dead – at home with her mother. One might say that, like the suspected lesbians in her dormitory, she is 'seeing too much of' members of her own sex (Plath, 1999, p.219). Indeed, Esther's trajectory – away from the heterosexual encounter and towards non-sexual female intimacy – parallels that of the (alleged) dormitory lesbians (Plath, 1999, p.220). Placing these trajectories side-by-side, one begins to see the symmetry between Esther's sexuality and her conception of homosexuality, and, therefore, why it is that Esther's double is a homosexual.

For Esther, as for Holden, homosexuality represents a position of sexual stuntedness, one characterized by a suspiciously intense intimacy with members of one's own sex, and, most importantly, by the lack of the penetrative sex act. Their version of homosexuality, in other words, embodies their own sexual position. Whether consciously or unconsciously, both Holden and Esther look at homosexuality and feel the shock of recognition, seeing in it a 'wry, black image' of their own sexuality (Plath, 1999, p.219). It is no coincidence that the encounter with homosexuality is staged toward the end of both novels, for this encounter is the long-awaited, climactic encounter with their own sexual crises.

Towards the end of their respective narratives, Holden and Esther are (homo)sexually propositioned (or believe they are propositioned) – Esther

by Joan and Holden by his English teacher Mr Antolini. The proposition places them firmly in front of the overturned mirror that is homosexuality, and provokes a recognition – a clear and final and horrible recognition – of the nature of their own sexual crisis. In this moment of recognition, they must either accept and perpetuate their tortured, ambivalent sexualities, or, alternatively, reject them in favour of change.

For Esther, the proposition/recognition is indeed the catalyst for change. Immediately following Joan's advances, Esther gets fitted for a diaphragm and aggressively pursues her heterosexual initiation (Plath, 1999, pp.221, 229). Esther's sequential arrangement of these scenes suggests that the one gives rise to the other, that the moment of recognition is genuine and catalyzes change.

When the mirror that is homosexuality is held up, Esther does not like what she sees. Her condemnation of Joan's homosexuality – 'You make me puke' – and her implicit but nonetheless palpable condemnation of the homosexuality of the dormitory lesbians – whom she dubs the 'fat girl' and the 'gawky freshman' – seem to be projections of, or corollaries to her self-condemnation (Plath, 1999, pp.219, 220). We have seen how Esther's retreat from the heterosexual encounter is a retreat from its complicity with female oppression. In the moment of recognition, however, she realizes that her strategy of abstinence is just that: a retreat, a strategy of passivity and prevention rather than empowerment and assertion. With birth control, the threat of pregnancy no longer hangs over Esther's head, and as a result the heterosexual encounter no longer creates an imbalance of power in favour of the man (Plath, 1999, p.221). In fact, during a post-coital telephone call, it is Esther who exerts power over her deflowerer, playing off his desire and shame to make him pay her hospital bill (Plath, 1999, p.242).

It is no coincidence that immediately following Joan's proposition, Esther basically goes out and sleeps with the first guy she meets. And it is no coincidence that, in contrast to the benign anti-sexuality of the dormitory lesbians, Esther's heterosexual encounter is rough, painful and gory (Plath,

1999, p.229). She emerges triumphant, but bleeding profusely from between her legs. She throws off her sexuality-in-crisis in the most sudden and emphatic way imaginable, and, in doing so, renders her identification with the homosexual null and void. At this point, having a 'gay double' becomes unnecessary and, indeed, impossible. It seems appropriate, then, if disturbing, that immediately following Esther's heterosexual initiation, Joan kills herself. We have seen, however, that it was only the existence of the gay double that made Esther's sexual shedding-of-skin possible.

While the homosexual proposition drives Esther to immediate and profound change, for Holden it serves only to heighten his sexual crisis and to cement the status quo. The status quo, however, is all that Holden has ever wanted. The eponymous image of the novel is one in which Holden imagines himself as a guardian of stasis and sexual innocence. He tells his younger sister Phoebe that, more than anything, he would like to be a 'catcher in the rye', someone who stands 'on the edge of some crazy cliff next to a field of rye where 'thousands of little kids' play (Salinger, 1951, p.173). Holden's job is to 'catch a body comin' through the rye': to save these kids from going over the cliff (Salinger, 1951, p.173). This fantasy, of course, is a manifestation of Holden's desire to ward off adulthood, both his own and that of others. The maturity against which he struggles is not only a mental or emotional maturity, but a physical, even a sexual one: in this fantasy it is explicitly 'bodies' which he catches. Furthermore, the final image of the novel finds Holden watching Phoebe ride the carousel. The carousel is, of course, a vehicle of childlike pleasure and a symbol of stasis. Though in motion, the carousel merely turns 'around and around', going nowhere, ending where it begins (Salinger, 1951, p.213). Change, adulthood, and sexual intercourse have no place in this image, and Holden, watching, feels 'so damn happy' (Salinger, 1951, p.213). In the end, as these images reveal, Holden is content to defer his sexual initiation indefinitely, even if doing so means perpetuating the ambivalence and confusion of his sexual crisis.

The homosexual proposition, then, does not bring about any perceivable change in Holden's sexuality. It may, however, entail a realization that, despite their various symmetries, his sexuality and homosexuality are not the same. It may be one thing to (unconsciously) identify with the homosexual from afar, and quite another to face the reality of the homosexual act.

Or it may be that the proposition has strengthened this identification to the point where Holden is questioning whether his sexual crisis is the crisis of a burgeoning homosexuality after all. As we have seen, Holden subscribes to the belief that, where homosexuality is concerned, it takes one to know one. In a bizarre moment, immediately following Antolini's proposition, Holden admits that 'That kind of stuff's happened to me about twenty times since I was a kid' (Salinger, 1951, p.193). If being a homosexual bestows the ability to identify other homosexuals, then the frequency of these propositions may suggest to Holden that he is himself a homosexual. Perhaps in the homosexual he sees not his mirror image but his true self – a self that his culture has taught him to reflexively reject. In his conversation with Luce, Holden learns that the suspected homosexual has been to a psychoanalyst. Luce says that his psychoanalyst has 'helped me *adjust* myself to a certain extent' (Salinger, 1951, pp.148-149, italics in original). Did Luce, who now has a girlfriend, see a psychoanalyst to be cured of homosexuality? This is, of course, unknowable, but one can assume that the possibility crosses Holden's mind. In the final chapter, Holden makes it known that he, too, is seeing a psychoanalyst. Is it possible that the 'sick[ness]' for which he is treated for is something other than depression (Salinger, 1951, p.224)?

However, although each of these readings is valid, neither is authoritative. In the end, Holden's relationship to homosexuality remains profoundly confused, just as he remains confused about Antolini's alleged proposition:

I mean I wondered if just maybe I was wrong about thinking he was making a flitty pass at me. I wondered if maybe he just liked to pat guys on the head when they're asleep. I mean how can you tell that stuff for sure? You can't. [...] The more I thought about it, though, the more depressed and screwed up about it I got. (Salinger, 1951, p.194-195)

His confusion about the nature of his encounter with Antolini is a confusion about the nature of his own sexuality. He wonders how you can 'tell' 'for sure' whether someone is a homosexual or not, and decides that you cannot. Holden cannot tell whether Antolini is a homosexual, nor can he tell whether he is himself a homosexual. What depresses Holden most is that his inability to make clear distinctions between homo- and heterosexualities – his inability to tell whether he is a homosexual or whether he merely identifies with the homosexual – or, for that matter, whether he identifies against the homosexual. Unable to understand, on a basic level, what homosexuality is, and, conversely, what heterosexuality is, Holden's sexuality remains fundamentally confused and ambivalent.

This is not to say, however, that the encounter with the homosexual has loosened Holden's grasp of his own sexuality. On the contrary, the encounter has allowed to him to see all the more clearly the contradictions, confusions, and incoherences that lay at the heart of his sexual identity and epistemology – that is, his way of thinking about sexual acts and identities. And also, transitively, the incoherences that lay at the heart of modern Western sexual epistemology in general. 'Sex is something I don't understand', Holden says, 'I swear to God I don't' (Salinger, 1951, p.63).

His inability to understand sex and especially sexual identities cannot be chalked up to ignorance or naïveté – after all, is the reader able, any more than Holden, to discern whether Antolini, or Luce, or even the 'flitty-looking' piano player is in fact homosexual (Salinger, 1951, p.149)? Theorist Eve Sedgwick, in the germinal *Epistemology of the Closet*, discusses the incoherences inherent in 'modern homo/heterosexual definition' (1990, p.1). Sedgwick argues that although the dominant culture presents homosexuality and heterosexuality as 'symmetrical binary

oppositions', they 'actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation' (1990, pp.9-10). Which is a way of saying that not all people or acts can be so easily grouped into either of these supposedly antithetical categories, and that the ways in which we define and differentiate these categories themselves are often problematic, contradictory or otherwise incoherent. One of the incoherences discussed by Sedgwick is involves what she calls the 'minoritizing' and 'universalizing' conceptions of homosexuality – that is,

the contradiction between seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority [...] and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities. (Sedgwick, 1990, p.1)

Modern western culture, according to Sedgwick

holds the minoritizing view that there is a distinct population of persons who 'really are' gay; at the same time, it holds the universalizing views that sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities; that apparently heterosexual persons and object choices are strongly marked by same-sex influences and desires, and vice versa for apparently homosexual ones; and that at least male heterosexual identity and modern masculinist culture may require for their maintenance the scapegoating crystallization of a same-sex male desire that is widespread and in the first place internal. (Sedgwick, 1990, p.85)

In these novels we have seen both Holden and Esther fluctuate between these contradictory views of homosexuality. We have seen Holden distinguish homosexuals from the rest of humanity – 'you could tell they were flits' – and in the same scene talk about married guys who did not even know they were homosexuals (Salinger, 1951, pp.142-143). We have seen Esther talk about the homosexual Joan as her double, and at the same time claim complete ignorance of homosexuality – 'but what were they *doing?*' (Plath, 1999, pp.219-220, emphasis in original). We have seen apparently heterosexual persons 'strongly marked by same-sex influences and desires' – particularly memorable is Holden's accosting his semi-naked roommate

Stradlater. On a larger scale, we have at various points in the novels seen Holden and Esther identify themselves both with and against the homosexual – and often at the same time. Indeed, in a sense the incoherence of these categories is what enables these protagonists to perform their identification across the so-called boundary between homo- and heterosexualities. Esther exploits this incoherence, and the identification it makes possible, to gain an understanding of her own sexuality, even if she subsequently rejects both that sexuality and the identification with homosexuality that goes along with it. Holden, on the other hand, faces this incoherence and allows himself to be dragged into its murky depths. Brooding on it, he gains the understanding that, paradoxically, there is to be no clear understanding – not of his own sexuality-in-crisis, nor of the crisis of homo/heterosexual definition in general.

I started this essay by claiming that the crisis of the novel of adolescence is often a sexual crisis. I might make another, related claim that the crisis of the novel of adolescence is often a homosexual crisis. In a culture in which the most widely talked-about (or, conversely, not-talked-about) and most widely feared sexual 'problem' is homosexuality, it is inevitable that sexual crises of any sort will, at the very least, invoke the crisis of homosexuality as a parallel or a precedent, and even invite the suspicion that the two crises are actually one and the same. While this inevitability is played out by this essay, it is also, as I have tried to illustrate, played out in the novels themselves.

Indeed, the very roots of the sexual crisis of adolescence and the crisis of homosexuality seem to be intertwined. Sedgwick proposes that

many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured – indeed, fractured – by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition. (1990, p.1)

The incoherence of our culture's definitions of homo/heterosexuality is tied to a larger epistemological incoherence, a slippage in our supposedly binary definitions of, among other things, 'secrecy/ disclosure, knowledge/

ignorance' etc. One binarism which Sedgwick does not discuss, and which I believe to be affected by this incoherence, is adolescence/adulthood.

The supposed lack around which the protagonists' conception of homosexuality is organized – the lack of the sexual act – is less a lack than an obscurity, a dark space overfull of contradiction, incoherence, ambiguity, and confusion. The confusion that the protagonists feel about their own sexuality, and about their own coming-of-age, compels them to identify with the epistemological morass that is the homosexual. Indeed, there is a way in which, in modern Western culture, to be adolescent – that is, to be sexually and socially confused – is epistemologically comparable to being homosexual.

It is for this reason, perhaps, that the genre of the novel of adolescence, or the coming-of-age novel, has so relatively effortlessly incorporated the coming-out novel. The symmetries between the (sexual) crisis of adolescence and the crisis of modern homosexuality are hard to ignore. The coming-out novel has become arguably the most popular, and most socially acceptable form of gay literature. Would it be too bold to suggest that this is because the crisis of homosexuality was, in a certain sense, already at or near the heart of the coming-of-age genre? Or that it has been since at least mid-century and the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*? Really, it should come as no surprise that the coming-out novel, starting with Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* in 1982 and gay literature in general, has found an audience among straight as well as gay-identified demographics. Because we have all experienced adolescence, even those of us who consider ourselves straight can, in reading gay literature, identify to a certain extent with the experience of being homosexual. In doing so, we perform an identification not unlike those performed by Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood – insofar as they, like the reader of gay literature, gain some understanding of themselves, through identifying with the homosexual.

This identification – made possible by the incoherence of modern homo/heterosexual definition – is eventually thrown off by Esther, but not by Holden, who remains profoundly confused about his sexuality and sexuality in general. Readers sympathetic to the claims of queer theory would surely believe Holden's to be the more appropriate response. Neither child nor adult, and neither homo- nor heterosexual, Holden embodies perfectly the incoherences at the heart of modern Western sexual epistemology.

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