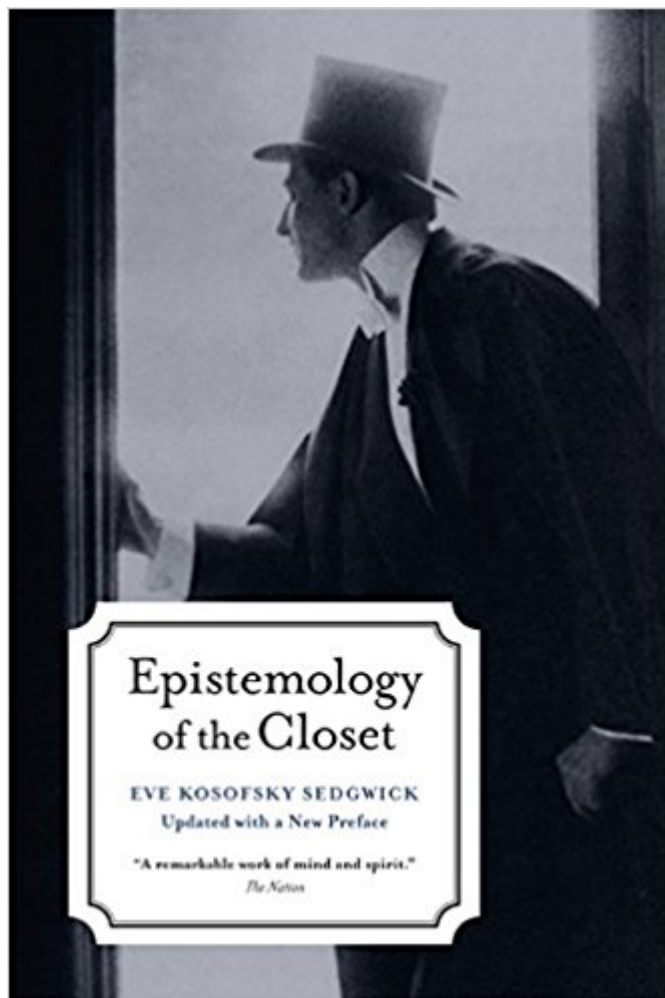


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# Epistemology Of The Closet



## Synopsis

Since the late 1980s, queer studies and theory have become vital to the intellectual and political life of the United States. This has been due, in no small degree, to the influence of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critically acclaimed *Epistemology of the Closet*. Working from classic texts of European and American writers—including Melville, James, Nietzsche, Proust, and Wilde—Sedgwick analyzes a turn-of-the-century historical moment in which sexual orientation became as important a demarcation of personhood as gender had been for centuries. In her preface to this updated edition Sedgwick places the book both personally and historically, looking specifically at the horror of the first wave of the AIDS epidemic and its influence on the text.

## Book Information

Paperback: 280 pages

Publisher: University of California Press; Updated with a New Preface edition (January 17, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520254066

ISBN-13: 978-0520254060

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.7 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars 15 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #192,549 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #68 in [Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Gay & Lesbian Studies](#) #71 in [Books > Gay & Lesbian > Nonfiction > Bisexuality](#) #114 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Literature > Literary Theory](#)

## Customer Reviews

Since the late 1980s, queer studies and theory have become vital to the intellectual life of the U.S. This has been, to no small degree, due to the popularity of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critically acclaimed *Epistemology of the Closet*. Working from classic texts of European and American writers—including Herman Melville, Henry James, Marcel Proust, and Oscar Wilde—Sedgwick delineates a historical moment in which sexual identity became as important a demarcation of personhood as gender had been for centuries. Sedgwick's literary analysis, while provocative and often startling (you will never read *Billy Budd* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the same way again), is simply the basis for a larger project of examining and analyzing how the categories of "homosexual" and "heterosexual" continue to shape almost all aspects of contemporary thought. *Epistemology of the Closet* is a sometimes-dense work, but one filled with wit and empathy. Sedgwick writes with

great intelligence and an eye for irony, but always makes clear that her theories and critical acumen are in the service of a politic that seeks to make the world a better and more humane place for everyone. An extraordinary book that reshapes how we think about literature, sexuality, and everyday life. --Michael Bronski --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The homosexual closet, by Sedgwick's yardstick, is "the defining structure for gay oppression in this century." She disagrees strongly with those who separate gays and straights as "distinct kinds of persons," with no common humanity. Her close readings of Melville's *Billy Budd*, Wilde's *Dorian Gray* and of Proust, Nietzsche, Henry James and Thackeray bristle with keen observations relating entrenched fears of same-sex relationships to contemporary gay-bashing and obvious displays of heterosexual or "macho" attitudes. But Sedgwick (*Between Men*) does not prove her overstated thesis that homo/hetero distinction obtains with gender, class and race in determining "all modern Western identity and social organization." Obtuse, cumbersome, academic prose limits the appeal of this treatise. Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Most surveys of sexual variations seen in the historical context fail to take into account that sexuality has been defined and categorized differently in almost every era and culture. In western cultures, the current sexual categories became defined somewhere between the Civil War and world War I. In other words, there were no homosexuals (in the modern sense) before the Civil War. There were men who loved, and sometimes slept with, other men, but they didn't form a separate category. Social opprobrium was reserved for the practice of sodomy, whether it was practiced between men or men and women. Having sex with other men was simply something that wasn't discussed in public, although it happened all the time. Ms. Sedgwick has taken on the task of seeking to discover just how it is that we came by our current ideas of sexuality, why, for instance, that we seem to think that everyone is either heterosexual or homosexual, ignoring the reality that according to Kinsey, the vast majority are bisexually attracted, to at least some degree. She also examines the ways in which the public discussion of sexuality has changed and developed in the critical years between the two wars, using literature of the period for her sources. She contends, in my opinion successfully, that the gay/straight debate is the key issue for western culture, in terms of defining person-hood. Western culture has become obsessed with sex. It follows then, that issues of the conflict between the private and public spheres is central to her discussion. On the minus side, her prose is uneven, sometimes beautiful, sometimes turgid to the point of constipation. Her analyses are uneven, as

well. I would have preferred a more thorough analysis of fewer examples, Billy Budd in particular. Taken on the whole, it's an important work by an important thinker who has added substantially to the discussion of sexuality and gender studies, well worth the effort required to read it with comprehension.

I had taken this book out of the library so many times, I finally decided that it was time to buy it, and I'm so glad I did! I am referring to it constantly throughout my dissertation. Sedgwick was so far ahead in her theorization of the non-reality of the gender binary. For a scholar of performance, and gendered power, this book is the best way of thinking forward that I have yet encountered.

I have a degree in English/Creative Writing and still found it difficult to read. Her message is nearly unintelligible, obscured by rhetoric, as illustrated by the following sentence: "Like the effect of the minoritizing/universalizing impasse, in short, that of the impasse of gender definition must be seen first of all in the creation of a field of intractable, highly structured discursive incoherence at a crucial node of social organization..." My thoughts exactly! Incoherent!

The quality of the book was very nice and the book itself, its cover and its content, was exactly what I thought I was getting. I hate it when the covers advertised do not match what I get, and that wasn't the case here.

Sedgwick's style may be ornate and sometimes difficult, but potential readers should be aware the the introduction to the book is a model of clarity. That intro presents "axioms" for thinking about sexuality that are lucid and have had an enormous influence on the two decades of queer theory that followed this book. This is one of the four or five most important works of queer theory ever written. It's no more difficult than Foucault, and the style is not just complex, it's also fun: it helps you get what Sedgwick feels when she reads Proust, James, and Wilde. If you avoid this book because it's not written like Hemingway or an office memo, you're losing out on a great intellectual and aesthetic experience.

This scholarly text is the second academic publication by Sedgwick, who has made a name for herself by becoming one of the prominent researchers of 'queer theory'. Sedgwick is a professor of English at Duke University. In this book, she elaborates her focus on the study of male homosexuality in Western texts, and so reads between the lines, as it were, of mainly canonical

works by authors such as Melville, Wilde, James and Proust for signs of obscure queer themes and subtexts. Sedgwick's main argument is as follows: she believes that homosexuality - male and lesbian - tends to be represented in both society and in literature as though it were an unstable, even deviant or perverse alternative to the fixed norm of heterosexuality. Homosexuality is all too often a thing of 'the closet'; it is a secret waiting to come out; it is the 'love that dare not speak its name'. In Sedgwick's preface to this book, she introduces a note of urgent contemporaneity to her writing that continually resurfaces later on. Clearly, Sedgwick perceives an urgent topicality in her subject matter. This argument is sound. The execution is mostly fine. Occasionally Sedgwick seems to truncate her examination of works as soon as she has provided us with the bare outlines of their queer subtexts. For instance, she tells us that Claggart in Melville's 'Billy Budd' is gay, and that his testimony against the short story's title character contains an array of important, yet pervasively subtle, sexual connotations. Sometimes this approach borders dangerously on dispensing cheap thrills as Sedgwick proceeds to list terms that constitute sexual innuendo. Having done this, she does not try to link other themes in 'Billy Budd' - issues of legality, of social hierarchies and of mutiny - with the theme of homosexuality. Thus she doesn't always carry her analysis far enough. Why is Claggart gay, but not Billy Budd himself, or any of the other sailors aboard the Bellipotent for that matter? Why does Sedgwick make this seemingly petty distinction when the text itself is, as she rightly argues, deliberately secretive to the extent that it refuses to make such details explicit? Still, this is an admirable and well-intentioned effort to create a foundation for further studies of queer theory. At the same time Sedgwick tries to emphasize the broader social relevance of her concerns. But here's the final catch: her style of writing is so densely compacted, so obfuscatory, so Jamesian in its complex morass of never-ending clauses that it's bound to marginalize a potentially much larger audience than the one it has now. And so this text, which is relevant in one sense, is esoteric in another. Moreover, Sedgwick likes to combine eloquence with banal profanities as freely as she mixes readings of Proust with Willie Nelson. For those who are phased by such language games, this set of reviews is where your intimacy with Sedgwick ends. For those remaining, Sedgwick's writing is a rare treat.

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