

# Right-to-Life Issues in Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Literature

*Jeff Koloze\**

ABSTRACT: Although it may seem as though gay and lesbian fictional works would have nothing to do with the life issues, this research examines several instances where the right-to-life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia are mentioned in gay and lesbian fiction. Moreover, there is enough evidence to suggest that the literature comports more with a life-affirming philosophy, if not an overtly pro-life one. That is, the literature employs characters with same-sex attraction who do not necessarily support the killing of the unborn, the handicapped newborn, or the medically vulnerable or aged. Finally, this study demonstrates how using the five questions of right-to-life literary theory can provide an opportunity for persons with same-sex attraction to renounce their allegiance with the destructive elements of the contemporary gay and lesbian movement and, instead, align themselves with the pro-life movement, which is more compatible with their efforts to seek authentic love.

**T**HIS STUDY EXAMINES a rarely explored area of pro-life academic (as opposed to legislative, healthcare, or general activist) concern: the impact of the gay and lesbian movement on the life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. Of course, the reverse may be possible. That is, instead of discussing whether the gay and lesbian movement affected the pro-

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\* *Jeff Koloze* has taught academic skills courses for undergraduate and graduate students as well as courses in English, Communications, and Humanities since 1989 at various colleges and universities, including the University of Phoenix, South University, Catholic Distance University, Lakeland Community College, Lorain County Community College, and Walsh University. Dr. Koloze's primary research interest is the presentation of the right-to-life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia in literature; most of his publications are available in conference proceedings and on the web. He has presented over fifty papers before academic and professional organizations on these topics. He is the author of *An Ethical Analysis of the Portrayal of Abortion in American Fiction: Dreiser, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos, Brautigan, and Irving* (2005) and *Testament to a Niagara Obsession* (2014). Dr. Koloze is president and founder of Koloze Consultants, whose objective is to assist faculty and students "to conduct research on the life issues for presentation and publication."

life movement, it could be argued that the three life issues may have influenced the gay and lesbian movement, especially, for example, in end-of-life care of persons with AIDS.<sup>1</sup> While colleagues in organizations such as University Faculty for Life have investigated other aspects of the life issues in English and the humanities (adolescent, African-American, Latino, Muslim, and even South Korean literature), reviewing literary works produced by or for the gay and lesbian communities has not been addressed. Thus, this project begins unique research.

In fact, it seems that academics who are not formally part of the pro-life movement and who may either be aligned with or generally support the gay and lesbian movement themselves may not have bothered with the life issues in gay literature. The lack of scholarly interest became evident in the review of the literature for this study. The difficulties in obtaining gay and lesbian fictional literature that addresses the life issues are most perplexing.<sup>2</sup> While academics have penned many articles on legal issues in the gay and lesbian community (the overthrow of heterosexual normativity in all things legal and social being a primary goal of the aggressive gay and lesbian movement), little criticism exists regarding what gay and lesbian literature has to say on the life issues.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> At least two studies address end-of-life care, discussing the gay and lesbian communities' ideas on assisted suicide or euthanasia instead of palliative care. Gary L. Stein and Karen A. Bonuck discussed these initial topics in their 2001 article, "Attitudes on End-of-Life Care and Advance Care Planning in the Lesbian and Gay Community," *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 4 (2001): 173-90 (doi:10.1089/109662101750290218). Thirteen years later, Mark Hughes and Colleen Cartwright broached euthanasia-focused questions further in "LGBT People's Knowledge of and Preparedness to Discuss End-of-Life Care Planning Options," *Health & Social Care in the Community* 22 (2014): 545-52 (doi:10.1111/hsc.12113).

<sup>2</sup> Unless significant works can be discovered that address the life issues, transgender literature, a subset within the gay and lesbian category, must be relegated either to future research or to persons who have a stronger desire to investigate such literature.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, there is some literary criticism that, however well-intended as an effort to summarize some aspect of gay and lesbian literature, is written in language which contemporary students and other readers would find much too vague and loaded with politically-correct academic buzzwords, as in the following lugubrious passage of eighty-three words from Byrne R.S. Fone, elaborating the claim that American gay and lesbian literature has affected world literatures: "Further, though more addressed to academe than to the greater public, gay studies centering on the recovery of gay male literature and history have also entered the list of combatants against homophobia and,

Moreover, even though the pro-life movement has over a half century of activism in the United States and has developed resources in many fields (including the creation of the Pro-Life Alliance of Gays and Lesbians, which began in 1990), scholarly research on gay literature within the past two decades continues to neglect the life issues. If the indexes of these works are any indication, then abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia do not figure in *Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality*, a 1995 compilation by Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Leigh Foster.<sup>4</sup> Nor do the life issues appear in *The New Lesbian Studies: Into the Twenty-First Century* (1996) by Bonnie Zimmerman and Toni A.H. McNaron,<sup>5</sup> Scott Bravmann's *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (1997),<sup>6</sup> Gregory Woods's *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (1998),<sup>7</sup> Colm Tóibín's *Love in a Dark Time and Other Explorations of Gay Lives and Literature* (2001),<sup>8</sup> and William Mark Poteet's *Gay Men in Modern Southern Literature: Ritual, Initiation, & the Construction of Masculinity* (2006).<sup>9</sup>

Even the magisterial 2015 anthology *Critical Insights: LGBTQ Literature*, edited by Robert C. Evans, does not identify any of the life issues in its chronological review of such works from the Stonewall riots of 1969 to the

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in a sometimes uneasy though fertile dialogue with feminism and lesbian studies, has initiated a major reevaluative project that ambitiously aims to critique and if need be alter or deconstruct all previous interpretations of homosexualities in all academic disciplines (often enrolling this project within the confrontational discipline of queer studies)." *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature: Readings from Western Antiquity to the Present Day* (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998), p. 731.

<sup>4</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Leigh Foster, *Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality* (Bloomington IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman and Toni A.H. McNaron, *The New Lesbian Studies: Into the Twenty-First Century* (New York NY: Feminist Press at the City Univ. of New York, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Scott Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven CN: Yale Univ. Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Colm Tóibín, *Love in a Dark Time: And Other Explorations of Gay Lives and Literature* (New York NY: Scribner, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> William Mark Poteet, *Gay Men in Modern Southern Literature: Ritual, Initiation, & the Construction of Masculinity* (New York NY: Peter Lang, 2006).

present.<sup>10</sup> Although the lugubrious *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature: Readings from Western Antiquity to the Present Day* (1998), edited by Byrne R. S. Fone, does not have an index, the final section of the volume (about two hundred of the 829 pages), covers literature since Stonewall.<sup>11</sup> This era coincides with the history of anti-life agitation, yet it is remarkable that the life issues that dominated American culture and history since then are neither mentioned nor included in the study.<sup>12</sup>

### 1. From Negation to the Structure of this Study

It may help to make clear what the study does not address before proceeding into what it will cover. This study does not summarize the millennia-long history of same-sex attraction, nor does it generalize the history of the part of same-sex attraction that has become known as gay and lesbian agitation for legal recognition of certain practices that throughout human history have been regarded as disgusting, immoral, physically harmful, reprehensible, or sinful. This study does not address policy changes by professional organizations, such as the American Psychological Association's declassification of homosexuality and lesbianism as not disordered.

Nor does this study argue against the erosion of Judeo-Christian sexual values (the eradication of such values being the political and social objective of the current aggressive gay and lesbian movement). This study does not engage in the refutation of what proponents call the legalization of same-sex marriage and what opponents identify as the gay and lesbian distortion of heterosexual marriage. Although some argumentation is ineluctable from a

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<sup>10</sup> Robert C. Evans, *Critical Insights: LGBTQ Literature* (Ipswich MA: Salem Press, Grey House Publishing, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Byrne R.S. Fone, ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature: Readings from Western Antiquity to the Present Day* (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> In contrast to these sources, Robert R. Reilly clearly explains the rationale behind the aggressive gay and lesbian movement's support for abortion in his *Making Gay Okay: How Rationalizing Homosexual Behavior Is Changing Everything* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2015 [2014]). Reilly devotes several pages to the abortion connection. The causal chain that ends his commentary on the U.S. Supreme Court's *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey* decision (pp. 77-82) is most instructive as a legal summary for purposes of this research: "The separation of sex from procreation logically leads to the legalization of contraception, then to abortion, and finally to homosexual marriage and beyond. The logic is compelling, in fact, inescapable. Only the premise is insane" (p. 82).

humanities perspective, detailed debate against the moral positions of those who equate behavior resulting from same-sex attraction with heterosexual behavior (for example, by claiming that sodomy between homosexual men is “just as good as” sex between a husband and wife) must be deferred to apologists, attorneys, psychologists, sociologists, theologians, and others in the contemporary culture wars.

This study does, however, discuss the following. First, it will present five attributes of this literature culled from a close reading of gay and lesbian works. The study then considers a series of works exemplifying the gay and lesbian attitude towards reproduction and abortion. These works include Sarah Schulman’s *Girls, Visions and Everything* (1986),<sup>13</sup> Annie Proulx’s “Brokeback Mountain” (first published 1997),<sup>14</sup> and Chelsey Johnson’s *Stray City* (2018). Infanticide from a gay and lesbian perspective is considered in Angelina Weld Grimké’s “The Closing Door” (1919).<sup>15</sup> The study then considers several novels regarding AIDS patients and the absence of assisted suicide or euthanasia as a solution to the pain and loss of dignity created by the disease. The study closes with an application of the five questions of right-to-life literary theory by focusing especially on the search for authentic love by persons with same-sex attraction.

## 2. Five Attributes

The political basis of the gay and lesbian attacks on heterosexual normativity need to be identified to understand why gay and lesbian activists align themselves with anti-life forces. As early as 1980, Edmund White claimed that, although some philosophical disagreements became evident between feminists and gay activists, “[t]his fairly recent rupture, however, should not obscure the debt that gay liberation owes to feminism. The members of both movements, for instance, regard their inner experiences as political.”<sup>16</sup> In his 1998 anthology, Fone asserts not only that “[s]ince Stonewall, American gay writers have inaugurated a debate that explores the personal and the social

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<sup>13</sup> Sarah Schulman, *Girls, Visions and Everything* (Seattle WA: Seal Press, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Annie Proulx, *Brokeback Mountain* (New York NY: Scribner, 1999 [1997]).

<sup>15</sup> Angelina Weld Grimké, “The Closing Door” in *Black Like Us: A Century of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual African American Fiction*, ed. Devon W. Carbado, Dwight A. McBride, and Donald Weise (San Francisco CA: Cleis Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Edmund White, “The Political Vocabulary of Homosexuality” in *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature*, p. 780.

but especially the political implications of ‘coming out’,<sup>17</sup> but also that

Post-Stonewall writers...have moved coming out away from being a question of private recognition and acceptance and translated it into the realm of public political action, arguing that coming out is a necessary political act and the primary political weapon in the battle against homophobia.<sup>18</sup>

Devon W. Carbado, Dwight A. McBride, and Donald Weise confirm the impact of the feminist agitation to legalize abortion on gay and lesbian activism in their 2002 anthology on African-American gay literature.<sup>19</sup> A recent example of the interconnectedness of the push for keeping abortion legal and the purposes of the gay and lesbian lobby occurs in Katrina Kimport’s 2016 research, wherein she argues that the “abortion rights” movement can learn much from the putative success of the “marriage equality” movement.<sup>20</sup>

Given the political bases of the gay and lesbian movement, it is common knowledge that the gay movement aligned itself with left-leaning causes and political factions, especially after Stonewall. For example, even though the warrant for its position is not provided, the Human Rights Campaign (which, according to its website, “represents a force of more than 3 million members and supporters nationwide” and is “the largest national lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer civil rights organization”) lists “abortion rights” as a key

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 729.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 730.

<sup>19</sup> Their terminology is decidedly biased against pro-lifers, referring to feminist agitation for the overthrow of protective laws as the “reproductive rights movement,” abortion as a “right,” anti-lifers as “pro-choice groups,” and pro-life politicians as “right-wing legislators who sought to overturn” *Roe v. Wade* (*Black Like Us*, p. 274).

<sup>20</sup> Katrina Kimport, “Divergent Successes: What the Abortion Rights Movement Can Learn from Marriage Equality’s Success,” *Perspectives on Sexual & Reproductive Health* 48 (2016): 221-27; doi:10.1363/48e10416.

item in its political action criteria.<sup>21, 22</sup> Now that the Democratic Party has especially renounced the values of those who made it a political force since the New Deal (ethnic and religious, especially Catholic, voters), the gay agenda has enjoyed not only political but also economic power. One thinks invariably of people like the Clintons, the Obamas, and George Soros, who fund efforts to destabilize heterosexual marriage and promote nine-month legalized abortion in America and around the world, especially targeting Catholic countries like Ireland for the public relations value that a change in moral and legal values can generate.<sup>23</sup>

While the preceding paragraphs collapse several decades of the political heat generated by those who support and oppose the gay and lesbian legal, political, and social agenda, the intention here is to focus on the literature,

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<sup>21</sup> The full criterion reads: “HRC undertakes an in-depth interview with each candidate seeking HRC’s endorsement, which allows the organization to educate candidates on issues that affect the LGBTQ community, as well as gauge their level of support. In place of an interview, an incumbent’s support for issues of concern to the community is based on his or her voting record. Candidates are assessed on the following issues which form the basis of HRC’s legislative agenda: the Federal Marriage Amendment, employment fairness, hate crime prevention, open military service, marriage, domestic partner benefits, adoption and other family issues, HIV/AIDS, lesbian health, abortion rights and others as they arise.”

<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Campaign, “Federal PAC: Political Action Committee Criteria,” <http://www.hrc.org/resources/federal-pac>; accessed 27 May 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Certainly, not all gay and lesbian activists are anti-life, nor are these activists content to remain in their disordered sexuality. One can point to the mission and work of Courage to meet the needs of Catholics who have same-sex attraction. For those who have same-sex attraction and do not want to renounce their allegiance with the gay and lesbian movements entirely, the writing of Aimee Murphy summarizes the division in the lesbian community between anti- and pro-life views on abortion when she writes that “there’s a sizable portion of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual, queer community that believes in the intrinsic right to life, from conception to natural death. And I think the pro-life movement has a lot to learn about the necessity of radical inclusivity in building movements. If we want to bring an end to the violence that is abortion, we need everyone to stand with us, to believe in the principles of equality, nondiscrimination, and nonviolence towards all. We need to make sure that queer folks like myself have a welcoming hand extended towards them, have representation in the leadership of our millions-strong movement, and have spaces wherein their worth as human [sic] is affirmed as they work for the life and dignity of every human being.” Aimee Murphy, “We’re Here, We’re Queer, Life Begins @ Conception!”, *Life Matters Journal*, 11 July 2017; <https://www.rehumanizeintl.org/single-post/2017/07/11/We-re-Here-We-re-Queer-Life-Begins-Conception>”, accessed 14 June 2018).

particularly gay and lesbian fiction. What are the characteristics in gay and lesbian literature itself whose identification can assist readers to understand and evaluate it? Using the close reading technique of standard formalist criticism, we can identify the following five attributes.

First, a reading of contemporary gay and lesbian literature illustrates a confusion<sup>24</sup> over the four traditional categories of love (*agape*, *eros*, *philia*, and *storge*), which are well-distinguished by C.S. Lewis in *The Four Loves*.<sup>25</sup> Second, the literature focuses on the obvious, a tendency to regard the satisfaction of sexual desire to be the most significant aspect of humanity. Third, gay and lesbian literature repudiates the Jewish and Christian view of human sexuality. Fourth, the literature directs hostility against one denomination, Roman Catholicism, more than any other; this hostility can be further trifurcated into “mild,” “intellectually dishonest or misunderstood,” or “extremely hostile” categories. Lastly, despite the loss of the standards that

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<sup>24</sup> Perhaps what is noted here as confusion of the loves is actually ignorance. If so, the question then becomes determining whether a gay or lesbian author deliberately chose such ignorance to advance his or her political purposes or whether the author is simply stupid.

<sup>25</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York NY: Harcourt Brace, 1988 [1960]). If his monograph were viewed as an eloquent and finely crafted essay on the four categories of love when it was first published in 1960, referencing it today is countercultural and possibly litigious, especially since gay and lesbian activists use the courts to stifle free speech rights of heterosexuals whenever possible. Lewis’s admonition then is a mandate now for heterosexual normativity. While saying “[i]t has actually become necessary in our time to rebut the theory that every firm and serious friendship is really homosexual” is relatively innocuous, a subsequent passage in the chapter on friendship would certainly arouse gay and lesbian activists to have Lewis’s work banned as homophobic: “The homosexual theory therefore seems to me not even plausible. This is not to say that Friendship and abnormal Eros have never been combined. Certain cultures at certain periods seem to have tended to the contamination. In war-like societies it was, I think, especially likely to creep into the relation between the mature Brave and his young armour-bearer or squire. The absence of the women while you were on the warpath had no doubt something to do with it. In deciding, if we think we need or can decide, where it crept in and where it did not, we must surely be guided by the evidence (when there is any) and not by an *a priori* theory. Kisses, tears and embraces are not in themselves evidence of homosexuality. The implications would be, if nothing else, too comic. Hrothgar embracing Beowulf, Johnson embracing Boswell (a pretty flagrantly heterosexual couple) and all those hairy old toughs of centurions in Tacitus, clinging to one another and begging for last kisses when the legion was broken up...all pansies? If you can believe that you can believe anything” (pp. 60, 62-63).

governed sexuality for at least five millennia and despite gay and lesbian activists' animosity towards any religiously-based defense of the unborn, the newborn, and the elderly, the literature still illustrates an abiding respect for life when it is threatened by abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia.

The ordering of these five attributes is not meant to indicate causality, the determination of which would require a lengthier analysis than can be provided here. For example, a character's anti-Catholicism may occur first, which then results in a loss of sexual fidelity or personal faith. The order of the five attributes, however, often approximates the trend in the literature to depict a character encountering confusion over his or her sexuality (the first principle), which leads to what the character thinks is a satisfaction of sexual desire by engaging in a practice contrary to what he or she has been taught (the second principle). If a character reflects on the philosophical foundations of sexual values, then he or she tends to reject Judaism and Christianity, the bases of Western culture (the third principle). If the character was raised as a Roman Catholic, then his or her renunciation of the branch of Christianity that is most forceful in protecting heterosexual normativity may occupy an important place in the fictional work (the fourth principle). Finally, the character will display respect for the unborn, the handicapped newborn, or the medically vulnerable or elderly even though he or she renounces Judeo-Christian sexual ethics (the fifth principle). Some examples from gay and lesbian literature will illustrate these principles.

To reiterate, first, there is a serious confusion in gay and lesbian literature between the four types of love. To use the terminology proposed by C.S. Lewis in *The Four Loves*, these are the loves called *agape*, *eros*, *philia*, and *storge*. Caring for all persons with AIDS and demanding respect for all members of the gay and lesbian community could manifest a universal love for mankind (*agape*); similarly, evidence for *philia* exists, certainly towards the person who is the object of one's same-sex attraction. However, the friendship that would normally develop generally declines into genital activity (a sequence in the plot development that is reached in most gay and lesbian fiction). Moreover, *storge* (familial affection) is often lacking, either because the gay and lesbian characters perceive their families to be hostile or because important members of the family unit are absent or the family unit is otherwise broken. One thinks of the affection and direction in life that Ennis did not receive from his father and the assault that Jack endured when his father urinated on him in Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain" or the remarks of the Latino gay activist John

Rechy when discussing his “strange, moody, angry man – my father” in his *City of Night*.<sup>26</sup>

Second, an essential attribute of gay and lesbian literature concerns sexuality. The gay and lesbian understanding of human sexuality is that its satisfaction is the most significant aspect of one’s humanity. Repeatedly, gay and lesbian theorists emphasize that sexual expression should be “liberated” from what some perceive as archaic religious views. This ironic position may account for the academic distortion of the ancient Greek view on sexuality, specifically same-sex attraction.<sup>27</sup> The irony, of course, should be evident. The Jewish and Christian understanding of human sexuality is denigrated as archaic while a distorted version of the Greek cultural perspective, which is as old as Judaism and Christianity, is not. This view seems to arise not through some carefully reasoned academic evaluation but from the utilitarian goal of the gay and lesbian movement to normalize unnatural genital activity.

Third, the Jewish and Christian understanding of human sexuality is specifically repudiated by gay and lesbian authors and theorists. While Judaism and Christianity have traditionally viewed human sexuality as a divinely ordained means to accomplish its inherent objectives (including the physical satisfaction of the spousal desires of married persons whose sexual activity is open to the procreation of children), twentieth-century sex-theory divorced the dual purposes of marriage from one another and championed a view of human autonomy that allowed a set of sexual beliefs and policies contrary to what has been the proper understanding of marriage and sexuality for millennia. The separation of the unitive and the procreative dimensions of spousal intercourse enabled the Anglican Church’s 1930 Lambeth Conference to permit contraceptive use. Failure to grasp the normativity of heterosexual marriage has led many to find homosexual conduct acceptable. The inherent logic of the culture’s distorted version of marriage, sexuality, and human generation permitted the Supreme Court to legalize abortion for the entire nine months of pregnancy (the *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* decisions in 1973). Of course, the denial that there are morally improper uses of sexuality has been prominent in the position of those involved in the drive for the legal and social acceptance of genital activity by gay and lesbian persons.

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<sup>26</sup> John Rechy, *City of Night* in *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, ed. Ilan Stavans (New York NY: W. W. Norton, 2011), p. 1027.

<sup>27</sup> Reilly discusses the ancient Greek view of homosexuality and how it has been distorted by contemporary academics in his *Making Gay Okay* (pp. 22-7).

Fourth, it is no surprise that hostility to Roman Catholicism has grown in those who have misunderstood the nature of love and abandoned traditional principles of heterosexual normativity, for it is a branch of Christianity that has stoutly opposed the permissibility of genital activity for gay and lesbian persons. The presence of anti-Catholic statements in gay and lesbian literature is pronounced and takes various forms, some mild, some intellectually dishonest or the result of misunderstanding, or some extremely hostile.

An example of a mild criticism of Catholicism is found in the 1986 *Autobiography* of the Quebecois lesbian author Marie-Claire Blais:

My years at the convent had given me a taste for study and discipline and I still kept my love for the pagan beauty of Roman Catholicism. Perhaps my admiration for Simone Weil, Georges Bernanos, Paul Claudel, and François Mauriac was born of the swarming aesthetic emotions which I think of as my religious feeling. But I hated the Catholic Church, its clergy, the nuns, and the ostracism of all those who were judged to be deviant.<sup>28</sup>

While examples of the category of “intellectually dishonest or misunderstood” ideas about Catholicism are, thus far, found more in the criticism instead of the literature, they are prominent enough to mention here since they disclose the perspectives of literary critics towards this religion, perspectives that could color their explication and review of gay and lesbian literature. When she introduces the excerpts from Blais’s *Autobiography* in her 1995 anthology, Dawn Thompson writes: “Christian imagery is gradually replaced by a more open and accepting spirituality,” the implication being, of course, that Christian spirituality is in her estimation closed and exclusionary.<sup>29</sup>

Two other critics who use similarly highly negative connotations are Paul Christensen and Colm Tóibín. Christensen argues that Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” uses “elements of repressive Christianity, militarism, and corporate

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<sup>28</sup> Marie-Claire Blais, *Autobiography* in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Companion*, ed. Sharon Malinowski and Christa Brelin (Detroit MI: Visible Ink, 1995), p. 43. Blais goes on to say: “But I am afraid that we are threatened all over again with a rebirth of a mediaeval kind of religion and that we will be victims again of the same intolerance and bigotry, which in the name of morality once forbade my books to be sold in bookstores. I still have a vivid recollection of the poverty of intellectual life in Quebec at the time when I came of age and I hope never again to see a time when the same kind of religious hysteria will trample on works of art” (p. 43).

<sup>29</sup> Dawn Thompson, “Marie-Claire Blais” in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Companion*, p. 38.

oligarchy” – all terms whose connotations are meant to be understood as highly negative.<sup>30</sup> Irish gay author Tóibín wrote in 2001 that

The Church has lost the war against contraception and divorce, and won the battle, at least for the moment, on abortion. But it still works its authority when it can. It won the right to have certain people – teachers and nurses mainly – excluded from recent anti-discrimination legislation, on the basis that the Church as an employer has a right to discriminate against those who do not support its ethos.<sup>31</sup>

The possibility of being open to a contrary view (the orthodox perspective on the question, namely, that the Church must uphold moral values received from its founder to fulfill its spiritual mission) is not acknowledged in Tóibín’s claim, for he knows that the connotation of “discrimination” is a negatively loaded term for anyone in Western culture.

An especially vituperative anti-Catholic instance occurs in Malcolm Boyd’s description of one of his sexual episodes:

He rose from the bed like a pillar of amber, like an avenging angel -- and noticed my clerical collar on top of the bureau. He picked it up with great delicacy. As I stood beside him, he looked at me. “You a priest?”

“Yes.”

“Well, how about that!” His eyes suddenly burst into flame. “I don’t want to make it with a priest.”

“Why? What’s the matter with being a priest?”

“I’ve got no time for the goddamn church. It hates gays. The church hates humanity. The church hates God because God made people. You’re a fucking priest in the goddamn church.”

I saw the fist coming toward me, felt a crash of pain....<sup>32</sup>

To object that this passage is not an instance of anti-Catholic bigotry on the grounds that Boyd is an Episcopal priest is irrelevant, for the text does not show the gay lover making distinctions among denominations; in his world, simply being a priest brings up the idea of the Church and an immediate visceral reaction.

Finally, despite the abandonment of the standards recognized for over five

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Christensen, “Allen Ginsberg” in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Companion*, p. 193.

<sup>31</sup> Tóibín, p. 257.

<sup>32</sup> Malcolm Boyd, “Take off the Masks” in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Companion*, pp. 95-96 (ellipsis in original).

millennia as governing sexuality and despite gay and lesbian activists' animosity towards religions that maintain for these standards, the fifth attribute of gay and lesbian literature is that it still illustrates a certain abiding respect for life threatened by abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. The following section will highlight specific passages that convey this consistent respect for life.

### 3. Specific Passages from Gay and Lesbian Literature

Gay and lesbian literature provides several interesting passages on the three life issues. One would think that abortion would be a relatively unimportant theme in gay literature. After all, persons with same-sex attraction and identify as gay or lesbian are not by those genital activities physically capable (absent assisted reproductive techniques) of creating new life, nor do they wish to manifest their presumed love for each other by the sort of genital activity that can result in the procreation of another human being. However, there is some evidence worth evaluating.

#### A. Sarah Schulman's *Girls, Visions and Everything* (1986)

Biographical commentary about Sarah Schulman notes her activism "in progressive politics and grass roots movements for social change" including "reproductive rights," which is code for the right to have an abortion.<sup>33</sup> An excerpt from Schulman's *Girls, Visions and Everything* mentions abortion explicitly:

Their talk was full of memories and associations, comfortable as old friends, but with the excitement of describing themselves to each other for the first time. Eudora Welty, the Allman Brothers, *Giovanni's Room*, Top Cat, reading Dostoyevsky in high school and finding out there were things to think about in life, like how much control you have and when to take it. They talked about woman things too. About rape, about abortion, about being straight.<sup>34</sup>

The placement of the term "abortion" in the final litany of terms is most curious and, when explicated using formalist close reading, can disclose the lesbian author's prioritization of sex as genital activity over sex as genital activity that is open to reproduction. The term is listed almost as an afterthought, as though it were utterly unimportant to the women engaged in

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<sup>33</sup> *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Companion*, p. 451.

<sup>34</sup> Schulman, p. 8.

conversation. The lack of importance is intensified since the term is placed, not in a complete sentence, but in a prepositional phrase, and the emotional power of the act of abortion is further decreased by its placement as a second of three nouns in a parallel series. The idea, therefore, must be that the purely sexual activities (rape, the imposition of presumably male-only force on the women, and lesbianism, a choice the women can make) are more important than the act of killing called abortion. Whether the seeming lack of concern about the anxiety and often torturous choice that a mother makes when she decides to abort is the result of a lack of empathy or a deliberate disregard of aborting women's anxieties (for fear that attention to such anxieties would detract from the lesbian political agenda) is a question that must be relegated to future research.

B. Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain" (first published 1997)

The following passage from a literary work that has more popularity and notoriety than the above relatively obscure lesbian passage concerns not so much abortion but the attitudes of the straight wife and the gay husband toward the dual purposes of sexuality. This excerpt from Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain" illustrates the tensions between these characters' views:

A slow corrosion worked between Ennis and Alma, no real trouble, just widening water. She was working at a grocery store clerk job, saw she'd always have to work to keep ahead of the bills on what Ennis made. Alma asked Ennis to use rubbers because she dreaded another pregnancy. He said no to that, said he would be happy to leave her alone if she didn't want any more of his kids. Under her breath she said, "I'd have em if you'd support em." And under that thought, anyway, what you like to do don't make too many babies.<sup>35</sup>

It is interesting to note that both heterosexual Alma and her gay husband are ambiguous about the purposes of heterosexual normativity. That Alma wants sex on the stipulation that Ennis uses condoms shows that she has as much a corrupted sense of the purposes of sexuality as her husband. That Ennis refuses to use condoms shows that he seems to respect the unitive aspect of sexuality, but his subsequent sodomization of his wife counters such a perception. Of course, the second purpose of sexuality is frustrated by both characters: Alma claims she would want Ennis's children, yet she places financial stipulations as a necessary condition; Ennis, similarly, claims that he would like more

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<sup>35</sup> Proulx, p. 271.

children, yet sodomizing his wife clearly testifies to what he most values, mere genital activity. Furthermore, this passage and the entire short story can be viewed as evidence of a married man who has not resolved his same-sex attraction; not having done so, Ennis effectively destroys not only the possibility of his own happiness but that of his wife and children and, of course, his lover's family.

### C. Chelsey Johnson's *Stray City* (2018)

Chelsey Johnson's *Stray City*<sup>36</sup> is a remarkable deflection from the typical agenda of aggressive gay and lesbian literature.<sup>37</sup> Angela Morales, the lesbian main character, does not follow the political dictum that giving birth is a manifestation of (as one of the "rules of the lesbian Mafia" contained in the novel reads) "white supremacist heteropatriarchy."<sup>38</sup> While Angela cannot account for her attraction to the eminently masculine (and, by definition, heterosexual) Ryan, she has sex with him enough to become pregnant.

Reminiscent of Hemingway's famous short story about abortion,<sup>39</sup> the following passages reflect Angela's anguish in choosing either abortion or carrying the pregnancy to term. In this first passage, Angela recounts her experience with an abortion business familiar to lesbians and others who advocate life-denying positions and reports her initial reactions to being pregnant:

I couldn't believe it was real, even as I dialed Planned Parenthood from a pay phone.... The voice on the line was kind, matter-of-fact. They called me "dear." They said they could see me next Tuesday. I said Tuesday sounded good. That was five days from now. How much could the cells multiply in five days? Not much, I figured. And I didn't want to know.

The receptionist suggested I bring a friend or partner for support. I said, "I'll be fine." I wanted it out, quick. The sooner it was gone, the more *over* this would all be. I was done with affairs. I was done with faking it. I was done with secrets. It was time to clean up my mess, all by myself. In five days I would expel this last trace of Ryan

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<sup>36</sup> The following discussion is a slightly altered and amplified version of this author's brief review of the novel posted on Goodreads.com, which was meant for a targeted audience. Please see my review of *Stray City* by Chelsey Johnson on *Goodreads.com*, 23 April 2018, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2370569308>.

<sup>37</sup> Chelsey Johnson, *Stray City* (New York NY: Custom House, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants" in *Men Without Women* (New York NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), pp. 69-77.

from my life. He didn't even need to know. No one did. I would box up the whole weird affair and store it in the farthest corner of the attic. Better yet, recycle it.<sup>40</sup>

In this next passage, a change in Angela's attitude slowly emerges, when she perceives the barest of fetological facts:

I went to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water. When I tried to drink from it, my hands shook so much I had to set the glass on the counter and brace myself. I walked out the front door and stood on the porch in the cool damp night. I slid my hand under my shirt and touched my flat abdomen. All I could feel was my own warm skin. Whatever was inside me was tiny and deep, secreted away....

The next morning I wrapped the used tests in a plastic bag and threw them into a Dumpster on MLK while walking Bullet.

I borrowed Summer's dog-eared purple copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The embryo was probably the size of a lentil or maybe a pea. That was nothing! A mere legume. It hardly even existed. Five days couldn't go quickly enough. I was seized by the urge to eradicate, eradicate.<sup>41</sup>

After she informs her lesbian friends that she did the unconscionable (not only had sex with a heterosexual man but became pregnant by him), and after she confirms her pregnancy with three home pregnancy tests, Angela reviews her circumstances and reaches an ineluctable conclusion:

That night in bed, I lay on my back and rested my hands on my abdomen. Of course it was too early to feel anything. But I knew it was in there.

"You and me," I whispered in the dark. Two selves. "Do you think we could do this?"<sup>42</sup>

This last passage is noteworthy for three reasons. First, it is a conversation between Angela (the mother) and her unborn child – not a narrator's summary of events. Second, the change in the pronouns in this brief passage is rhetorically substantial. Using the third-person neuter pronoun to refer to the unborn child indicates that Angela has begun from a standard life-denying position. But moving to the second-person singular pronoun "you" indicates that she acknowledges the existence of the child. That she uses the first-person plural pronoun "we" in her last sentence is especially remarkable, for it presumes that she accepts the child as much as she accepts herself. Third, since

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<sup>40</sup> Johnson, p. 162 (italics in original).

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, pp. 162-63.

<sup>42</sup> Johnson, p. 187.

her sentence is an interrogative, the expectation is that a response will be provided. Of course, the unborn child cannot answer for him- or herself (it is only later that one learns that the child is female), so the reader must presume that Angela will answer for both of them in choosing life. The choice that Angela makes is obvious: the child deserves to live.

While the novel could have ended after this life-affirming choice, doing so would have deprived readers of a lesbian perspective on the question of heterosexual normativity. Angela retains her lesbian lifestyle and, apparently, does not care to use her same-sex attraction in a nongenital way. Her character is, after all, supposed to be a fallen away Catholic, and so readers know just how stubborn (or ignorant) she chooses to be about her sexuality.

Johnson may have wanted to demonstrate the normalcy of lesbian relationships. That she has failed to do so cannot be held against her. After all, as deconstructionist critics claim, whatever an author says should not and cannot necessarily be trusted since words are inherently unstable. Besides that, even though the author may have wanted to illustrate the propriety of lesbian genital activity, other readers can see that the lesbian component of the novel reinforces the truth about heterosexual normativity much more.

Thus, whatever Johnson intended to convey in this novel, the heterosexual normativity governing the lives of the characters is inescapable. While the first half of the novel is about whether Angela should engage in sex with Ryan and then, when she is pregnant, choose life or abort Lucia, the second half of the novel revolves around a standard and stereotypical element of broken heterosexual families: her daughter Lucia, now nearing age ten, wants to meet her father. That the novel ends with Lucia playing innocently with Ryan's cat, her mother in tow, testifies to something that gay and lesbian authors tend to miss: the natural, heterosexual instincts of the human family cannot be denied, despite whatever censorship, neglect, or distortions gay and lesbian activists want to impose on them.

#### D. Angelina Weld Grimké, "The Closing Door" (1919)

In her research on an infanticide short story by Angelina Weld Grimké, "The Closing Door" (1919) Lorna Raven Wheeler has adroitly connect a significant passage with the non-reproductive intentions of the gay and lesbian movement. Grimké's short story concerns the infanticide of a newborn whose mother has learned about the lynching of her brother. Speaking of the main character Agnes, Wheeler writes:

While she may be nearly singular in her decision to commit infanticide, her anguish is the anguish of black women in the face of this kind of violence [the lynching of her brother]. Her emotion is read in the staccato of her exclamations:

“Yes! – I! – I! – An instrument! – another one of the many! a colored woman – doomed! – cursed! – put here! – willing or unwilling! – for what? – to bring children here – men children – for the sport – the lust – of possible orderly mobs – who go about things – in an orderly manner – Sunday mornings!”

Arguably, this passage (and not the description of the lynching) is the most important speech of the story. Certainly, it is the most emotional. The punctuated outbursts and the use of the dash and the subsequent lower-case phrases present Agnes’s horror and anguish clearly. Even more interesting are Grimké’s words themselves. This passage is the key to Grimké’s take on *birth control*. She argues, through Agnes, that it is the reproductive “instrument,” the *mother* of “men children” who, among women, suffers the brunt of lynching.<sup>43</sup>

This compelling narrative combines, Wheeler asserts, a lesbian relationship that informs Agnes’s infanticide actions with her attitude on infanticide and abortion. Carbado, McBride, and Weise note the significance of the anti-life and lesbian connections when they comment that the short story was

Written specifically for Margaret Sanger’s *Birth Control Review*.... Although lesbianism is only very broadly hinted at in the opening lines, this unconventionally tragic depiction of motherhood speaks from the perspective of an especially anguished outsider.<sup>44</sup>

The treatment of the topics of infanticide, lesbianism, and racism in this short story need to be significantly expanded in future research.

#### E. Euthanasia Novels

Except for medical articles where assisted suicide or direct euthanasia are intimated as possible “cures” for AIDS patients,<sup>45</sup> what is striking by its

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<sup>43</sup> Lorna Raven Wheeler, “The Queer Collaboration: Angelina Weld Grimké and the Birth Control Movement” in *Critical Insights: LGBTQ Literature*, ed. Robert C. Evans (Ipswich MA: Salem Press, Grey House Publishing, 2015), p. 187 (internal citation omitted; italics in original).

<sup>44</sup> *Black Like Us*, p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> A general internet query (“Is assisted suicide or euthanasia ever suggested for AIDS patients in gay and lesbian literature?”) yielded these results: Madelyn Hsiao-Rei Hicks, “Physician-Assisted Suicide: A Review of the Literature Concerning Practical

absence within this literature is the topic of assisted suicide, physician-assisted suicide (or its more accurate form, physician-assisted death), euthanasia, or any variant. It might be presumed, therefore, that gay and lesbian fiction neither endorses nor suggests euthanasia as a solution for persons suffering from AIDS.<sup>46</sup> But gay and lesbian fiction in fact illustrates compassion for persons with same-sex attraction affected by AIDS and hope that that the time remaining for them would be maximized, so that the partners would enjoy each other's company for as long as possible.

One scene in Tim Murphy's *Christodora* (2016) illustrates these generalizations well. In the following passage, Hector expresses his anger at his lover Ricky for not seeking treatment:

"The thing with you, Ricky," he continued to himself, mumbling parts aloud, "you just didn't want to live. That's why I say fuck you, as harsh as that sounds. Because you didn't even care that there were two people involved, not just you. You put me through that for, unh, what would that have been, from about 1989 when I first knew until '92. You wouldn't get tested, you wouldn't go on meds until they forced you on meds in the hospital and it was too late...and then I had to watch you die, like I didn't have better things to do that year."<sup>47</sup>

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and Clinical Implications for UK Doctors," *BMC Family Practice* 7 (2006): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2296-7-39>; Brian L. Mishara, "Suicide, Euthanasia and AIDS," *Crisis* 19 (1998): 87-96, <https://doi.org/10.1027/0227-5910.19.2.87>; Lee R. Slome, Thomas F. Mitchell, Edwin Charlebois, Jeffrey Moulton Benevedes, and Donald I. Abrams, "Physician-Assisted Suicide and Patients with Human Immunodeficiency Virus Disease," *New England Journal of Medicine*, 336 (1997): 417-21, doi:10.1056/NEJM199702063360606.

<sup>46</sup> Of course, following the idea that there is always an exception to the rule, one fictional work does suggest that assisted suicide is a solution to one AIDS sufferer's pain. "The Gift of Death," one of the stories in Rebecca Brown's 1994 novel *The Gifts of the Body* (which is organized as a collection of eleven short stories involving several AIDS patients and their caregiver) includes the case of Marty, who affirms that his friend Carlos wanted his doctors to "give him something to help him go" (p. 97). After a significant hesitation with the AIDS caregiver, Marty affirms that "I helped him.... I was merciful. I gave him the gift of death" (p. 98). Earlier, Marty, who suffers great pain himself, wondered whether his fellow apartment dwellers would want to die if given the choice (p. 97). This brief account may indicate not so much support for assisted suicide as it does Marty's disturbed mind, projecting his own desire to eliminate pain by killing himself. Thus, Marty needs help for his suicidal tendency more than acceptance of his belief that killing AIDS patients is appropriate.

<sup>47</sup> Tim Murphy, *Christodora* (New York NY: Grove Press, 2016), p. 239.

Three inferences need to be highlighted to appreciate this passage's life-affirming philosophy. That Hector witnessed Ricky's illness for three years testifies to his compassion for his lover. Second, one would think that seeing a loved one in pain over that three-year span would encourage Hector, a character ostensibly well-versed in the medical terminology and practices of the day, to suggest that Ricky could end his life easily instead of enduring the indignity and suffering caused by AIDS.<sup>48</sup>

Third, even though his novel is fiction and set mainly in the eighties and nineties, Murphy could have altered the plot to include controversial issues like euthanasia or assisted suicide to reflect what was being discussed at the time of the book's publication. Adding this element to the plot would have been easy for Murphy, the language, characterizations, and various references in the novel being liberal and obviously biased against Catholics, Republicans, and those who are usual targets of the gay and lesbian political movement. That he did not add this contemporary issue testifies to the claim that euthanasia, even for a terminally ill person suffering from devastating AIDS, was not particularly seen as a choice entertained by the gay and lesbian community. This is consistent with Murphy's statement in the Acknowledgments that the novel "is a work of fiction obviously inspired by the history of AIDS activism in America, particularly New York" and that the novel is the result of "my efforts to cleave to the bones, if not the fine points, of what really happened."<sup>49</sup>

That gay and lesbian literature rejects euthanasia can be supported by the plots of many other novels, to be discussed here in chronological order to show the consistency of the claim that euthanasia was never entertained throughout the era of AIDS activism and beyond. Harlan Coben's *Miracle Cure* (1991) contains two passages in which the pain and suffering of AIDS patients could provide opportunities for the author to suggest assisted suicide or euthanasia as a means to end such suffering.<sup>50</sup> No such suggestion is made for the patient who is in "so much pain he wouldn't let anyone see him."<sup>51</sup> Later in the novel, when the pain and suffering from AIDS is described again over a span of two

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<sup>48</sup> The entire six-page chapter nineteen, devoted to the final moments of Ysabel, a heterosexual woman who contracted AIDS from an infected man, similarly never mentions any effort to terminate her life by euthanasia.

<sup>49</sup> Murphy, p. 429.

<sup>50</sup> Harlan Coban, *Miracle Cure* (New York NY: Signet, 1991).

<sup>51</sup> Coben, p. 182.

pages, no suggestion of assisted suicide or euthanasia is made.<sup>52</sup> When the killer in this murder mystery states that he did not want to murder various AIDS patients but merely wanted to “speed up the inevitable,” his utilitarian motive (“I wanted their deaths to mean something, to benefit the AIDS movement”) is countered with the life-affirming retort “You took away their last precious moments of life.”<sup>53</sup>

Dale Peck’s *Martin and John* (1993) illustrates Martin’s death from AIDS over a span of five pages. The narrator reflects on his lover’s death throughout the novel and on these pages specifically with compassion.<sup>54</sup> One instance of suicide occurs in Rita Ciresi’s *Pink Slip* (1999) when the major character’s cousin, who is HIV positive, commits suicide, but it is obvious that his death is mourned. Besides that, never is assisted suicide or euthanasia suggested as a solution to prevent the debilitating effects of being HIV positive.<sup>55</sup> Mary Gaitskill’s *Veronica* (2005) does not mention euthanasia as a solution to the pain and suffering of any character who has AIDS.<sup>56</sup> It even ventures reasons for living with AIDS, albeit these are stammeringly proffered by the narrator, who is irreligious. Alison, the narrator, encourages her friend Veronica, who contracted AIDS from a bisexual lover, to live as long as she can “to really find out who you are and care for yourself and...and forgive yourself – I mean – I don’t mean –”<sup>57</sup>

As a final example, *The Angel of History* (2016) by the Lebanese-American Rabih Alameddine covers the death of a lover from AIDS after eighteen months of suffering. This particular lover’s death is followed by a litany of other men who died from AIDS.<sup>58</sup> Nowhere does euthanasia surface as a solution to these men’s sufferings. In fact, the scornful attitude with which the narrator treats AIDS as the cause of his lovers’ deaths becomes comedic:

After Pinto had his first bout with pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, the death sentence, he began to joke about wanting to be buried ass up, offering the world the choice part

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<sup>52</sup> Coben, pp. 331-32.

<sup>53</sup> Coben, p. 472.

<sup>54</sup> Dale Peck, *Martin and John* (New York NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), pp. 163-67.

<sup>55</sup> Rita Ciresi, *Pink Slip* (New York NY: Delacorte Press, 1999).

<sup>56</sup> Mary Gaitskill, *Veronica* (New York NY: Vintage Contemporaries, 2005).

<sup>57</sup> Gaitskill, p. 206 (ellipsis and dashes in original).

<sup>58</sup> Rabih Alameddine, *The Angel of History* (New York NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2016), pp. 175-76.

of his anatomy[;] he wanted an open-casket funeral so the men who had spent weeks and days and hours and hours worshipping his ass could pay it final tribute. He was joking, of course, but I believe he also meant it.<sup>59</sup>

The narrator's scorn for the disease is consistent with pro-life philosophy, which argues that problems, not the people, should be attacked.

Throughout recent American abortion history, anti-lifers have argued that abortion was necessary either to empower women or to protect their health. Pro-lifers, in contrast, argued that legalizing abortion was wrongheaded because, since one does not kill the patient to cure the illness, eliminating poverty and addressing women's health problems were the just and effective solutions, not killing the unborn children, harming the mothers, and alienating the fathers. If active killing of AIDS patients was never promoted in gay and lesbian fiction, then there already exists some common ground between the gay and lesbian and pro-life movements: both believe in attacking the problems behind abortion and euthanasia instead of the people.<sup>60</sup>

#### 4. Application of the Five Questions of Right-to-Life Literary Theory

As the result of nearly thirty years of individual research on specific novels, poems, short stories, and video works that concern one or more of the life issues, I believe that right-to-life literary theory offers five questions that

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<sup>59</sup> Alameddine, pp. 200-01.

<sup>60</sup> The absence of euthanasia as a solution to the AIDS pandemic or to, in one of the cases below, cancer can be further supported by commentary in two genres beyond the scope of this study, autobiography and drama. In their 2008 compilation of gay and lesbian literature, *Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Literature: A Genre Guide* (Westport CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2008), Ellen Bosman and John P. Bradford describe Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum's autobiographical *Cancer in Two Voices* (1996) in terms that preclude any suggestion of euthanasia: "Cancer-stricken Barbara and her partner, Sandra, alternate narration on the physical and emotional pain associated with terminal illness. The mutual suffering and grief of patient and caregiver contrasts [sic] with their separate experiences as Jews, and ultimately celebrates living joyfully in the face of mortality" (Bosman, p. 143). Similarly, they summarize gay and lesbian drama on AIDS thus: "Beginning with Larry Kramer's groundbreaking *The Normal Heart* in 1985, the next two decades saw the appearance of stage works addressing relationships upset by AIDS and depicting how relationships could survive with dignity and humor. Common threads in these dramas are love as a long-term duty, willingly chosen, and diverse angers at the government, medicine, and one's fellow man" (Bosman, p. 315). That the editors do not identify euthanasia or any variant of the practice as a common theme in the literature is most telling.

can be applied to any work of literature, especially those that address the three life issues. These questions are:

- (1) Does the literary work support the perspective that human life is, in the philosophical sense, a good, some “thing” that is priceless?
- (2) Does the literary work respect the individual as a being with inherent rights, the paramount one being the right to life?
- (3) If the literary work covers the actions of a family, does it do so respecting heterosexual normativity and the integrity of the family?
- (4) Does the literary work comport with the view that unborn, newborn, and mature human life has an inherent right to exist?
- (5) When they are faced with their mortality, do the characters come to a realization that there is a divine presence in the world that justifies a life-affirming perspective?

While some questions or portions thereof may not seem applicable to certain literary works (for example, smaller works like haiku that may not at first yield an intensive explication or literary works that may not appear to be concerned with the three life issues discussed here), all five questions have relevance for gay and lesbian literary works. What remains is the application of these five questions so that this study can conclude with appropriate generalizations for future research.

On the first question (the pricelessness of human life), gay and lesbian literature does not deny this generalized philosophical principle. Many narratives support this principle existentially; otherwise, the literature would offer numerous accounts of the degradation and killing of human beings. The anti-life philosophy of killing humans to resolve problems instead of resolving the problems facing humans is the basis for Mason Quinndell, the protagonist in David Martin’s *Bring Me Children* (1992), who delights in torturing homeless persons and committing infanticide by placing handicapped newborns in subterranean caves.<sup>61</sup> It is not, however, the means of solving problems of human beings who have AIDS in gay and lesbian literature. Perhaps the love for life evinced by gay and lesbian characters can be accounted for by an inherent appreciation of human life per se. That the majority of gay and lesbian characters are persons who do not practice any religion and thus act on what they think are purely secular values or natural law

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<sup>61</sup> David Martin, *Bring Me Children* (New York NY: Random House, 1992).

principles inherent in every human being (which religious persons would attribute to God) simply reinforces the pricelessness of human life. If gay and lesbian characters are irreligious, then they believe that earthly existence is all that they have; if life with their loved ones is that precious, then they would want to experience life as much as possible.

On the second question (the recognition that the individual is a being with inherent rights, the paramount one being the right to life), most gay and lesbian literature acknowledges the importance of the individual and his or her right to exist. Rarely does gay and lesbian literature speak in generalities about love for humanity; rather, it is affection, friendship, or love (whether erotic or one of the other categories) of a particular person. For example, in Proulx's short story, Ennis loves not just another cowboy but Jack; in Johnson's novel, Angela loves not just any heterosexual male but Ryan, and after him, not just any lesbian lover but Beatriz; David B. Feinberg loves not just one more man picked up at a gay bar but Roger (see below). It is rare to find a gay or lesbian literary work where the character is either depersonalized or unnamed.

Answering the third question of right-to-life literary theory is clearly more ambiguous since heterosexual normativity is challenged by gay and lesbian philosophy. As demonstrated here, however, even the staunchest lesbian character must acknowledge that heterosexual normativity, having been the genetic code for humans for millions of years, cannot be easily discarded. Johnson's novel, for example, ends with a scene that mimics a heterosexual family.<sup>62</sup> Lucia, Angela's daughter, has her need to see her biological father satisfied; Ryan, similarly, is satisfied that his daughter acknowledges him. It is even telling that Beatriz, Angela's lover, feels misplaced when the structure of the heterosexual family of mother, father, and child are reunited, if only for the purpose of providing the reader with a satisfactory denouement.

The fourth question of right-to-life literary theory (whether the literary work comports with the view that unborn, newborn, and mature human life has an inherent right to exist) can only be temporarily answered in the affirmative here. Since this is an area of new research, more material needs to be investigated to determine if the corpus of gay and lesbian literature answers this

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<sup>62</sup> Oddly, since they are on opposite ends of the gender ideological spectrum, Johnson supports in fiction what Jordan B. Peterson states in his nonfiction commentary that the concepts "parent" and "child" are 200 million years old and that "all family forms are [not] equally viable." Jordan B. Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Toronto ON: Random House Canada, 2018), pp. 39, 142.

question sufficiently.

Finally, the fifth question of right-to-life literary theory (when they are faced with their mortality, do the characters come to a realization that there is a divine presence in the world which justifies a life-affirming perspective?) collates several ideas that often face characters, like the real human beings for whom they are created, towards the ends of their own or others' lives. Excepting holocaust literature, nowhere are the various items in this question as important as in gay and lesbian literature, where persons dying of AIDS must not only face their mortality but do so often under their own pain and the emotional pain of those who love them.

Unlike saccharine fiction where characters may have a "come to Jesus" moment after living lives filled with sinful action, characters in gay and lesbian literature are often unable to reconcile their sexual practices with the renounced religion of their childhood or youth. Their worldviews are so centered on their sexual activity that they cannot recognize any more notable or noble event in life. For example, a character in Andrew Holleran's novel *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) rejects another character's claim that spending time on Fire Island, a notoriously gay locale, would be a waste of time. "Waste? ... Who can waste a summer on the Island? Why, it's the only antidote to death we have."<sup>63</sup> Later in this same novel, the theme of waste is repeated when the narrator wonders, "Can one waste a life? Especially now? 'Well,' Malone would say when some conceited beauty refused to even meet his eyes, 'we're all part of the nitrogen cycle'."<sup>64</sup> If the first character could see nothing beyond death, then this second character compounds the hopelessness by equating himself and all his lovers with nonhuman molecules. A final assertion from this novel reinforces the purely sexual identity and purpose of a gay character's life:

"We live, after all, in perilous times," Sutherland went on, lighting another cigar, "of complete philosophic sterility, we live in a rude and dangerous time in which there are no values to speak to and one can cling to only concrete things – such as cock," he sighed, tapping his ashes into a bowl of faded marigolds.<sup>65</sup>

The astute reader would notice immediately the irony and double entendre of a penis being identified as a permanent, eternal entity, a flaccid substitution for

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<sup>63</sup> Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance* in *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature*, p. 753.

<sup>64</sup> Holleran, p. 756.

<sup>65</sup> Holleran, p. 759.

the concept of God.

Some gay and lesbian literature, however, especially that involving the death of a lover or a general reflection on AIDS as affecting the entire gay community, often illustrates characters who desire not merely genital activity but authentic love. This search is a common trope in the literature. Excerpts from David B. Feinberg's *Breaking Up with Roger* illustrate this point well. The main character in the short story describes himself as "a proabortion [sic] atheistic knee-jerk pink faggot,"<sup>66</sup> and the following declaration of facts prefaces the emotional background on which he and his lover Roger discuss authentic love:

I was afraid of dying.  
 Roger was afraid of getting sick.  
 He said he didn't mind dying; it was just the getting sick that he hated.  
 I said, "Are you crazy? Nobody wants to die."<sup>67</sup>

On this background the following more elaborate semi-comical discussion occurs. It has enormous impact for the men involved and didactic value for the reader:

"And suppose I had a two-inch penis," asked Roger during one of our twenty-three-minute post-breakup phone calls. "If after you looked into my big brown eyes and boyishly sat next to me on the couch and then seduced me with your lips and took me over to the bed, leading me like the blind leading the blind, and then as we tussled on the bed and you caressed my legs, my thighs, my loins, feeling around, very casually, for some hardened *tool*, and then licking my bountiful chest, suppose after you had finally undressed me, taken off my shirt, my pants, then my underwear, you found that I had a two-inch penis. Would you have still loved me the same?"

"I probably would have pressed the bed-eject mechanism and sent you out flying through the window onto the hard sidewalk."

"You wouldn't have loved me for my charm, my wit, my sweet, loving kindness?"

"Of course not."

"I can't believe how shallow you are. You never loved me for what I am, just for a *thing*."

"What about me? What about if I had a two-inch penis?"

"That's beside the point," responded Roger, in the sullen voice of a child refused. He paused for dramatic effect, long enough to let the dark and heavy cloud of guilt

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<sup>66</sup> David B. Feinberg, *Breaking Up with Roger* (New York NY: Viking, 1991), p. 93.

<sup>67</sup> Feinberg, p. 104.

envelop me. “I was just playing with you,” said Roger. “I was just teasing. You can tell, can’t you?”

“How long is it anyway?” I asked, wanting to quantify my lust once and for all.

“I never actually measured it. I think maybe eight and a half or nine inches. The last time I measured was when I was twelve. I don’t know. It may have grown since then.”<sup>68</sup>

A more desperate and vulgar treatment of the same search for authentic love, written only two years before the previous passage, occurs in Randy Shilts’s *And the Band Played On*<sup>69</sup> (1987):

When the book’s protagonist, a Jewish screenwriter-movie producer not unlike Larry Kramer himself, sees his own hopes for love fade, he delivers a tirade that raised many troubling questions.

“Why do faggots have to fuck so fucking much?” Larry had written. “It’s as if we don’t have anything else to do... All we do is live in our Ghetto and dance and drug and fuck.... I’m tired of being a New York City-Fire Island faggot, I’m tired of using my body as a faceless thing to lure another faceless thing, I want to love a Person! I want to go out and live in a world with that Person, a Person who loves me, we shouldn’t *have* to be faithful!, we should *want* to be faithful! ... No relationship in the world could survive the shit we lay on it.”

It all needs to change, Larry’s protagonist told an unfaithful lover at the book’s climax, “before you fuck yourself to death.”<sup>70</sup>

For characters like these, there is no moment of redemption whereby the genital activity that the men experienced is converted to platonic friendship or the satisfaction of erotic love in a heterosexually normative relationship. It is as though they are stuck in their sorrow, unable to move beyond the trauma that they feel to a greater good beyond that sorrow. The search for authentic love usually ends with the death of their lovers.

As compelling as gay and lesbian literature may appear to be in some academic circles, the genre may have reached its peak. This assertion is based

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<sup>68</sup> Feinberg, *Breaking up with Roger* in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Companion*, p. 179 (italics in original).

<sup>69</sup> Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On* (New York NY: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1987). Although catalogued as nonfiction, Shilts’s work not only has standing in the gay and lesbian literary canon, but also contains fictionalized accounts of real events to merit inclusion here.

<sup>70</sup> Randy Shilts, *And the Band the Band Played On* in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Companion* (Detroit MI: Visible Ink, 1995), p. 463-64 (ellipses and italics in original).

not only on the legal successes of the political agenda of the gay and lesbian movement but also on the reassertion of Judeo-Christian sexual values in response to an aggressive gay and lesbian political movement that would rather force people into adopting gay and lesbian ideas instead of persuade them of the merits of those positions. Kenneth W. Warren wrote in *What Was African American Literature?* (2011) that this literature effectively ended because it was a response “to conditions that, by and large, no longer obtain.” The victory of civil rights legislation and the election of Barack Obama suggest to him that the African-American literary movement accomplished its goals.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, gay and lesbian literature may have already reached its apex and may be falling into decline. After one reads a standard coming-out story, or a gay or lesbian passage documenting genital activity, or a fictional account of a perceived act of discrimination, or any variant of the preceding, what more can be said? The plot lines are becoming tedious. Fortunately, applying a right-to-life perspective to the literature could invigorate the genre for a new generation of scholars, a generation that may not necessarily agree with the political tenets of the gay and lesbian movement, but one that, being pro-life, could dig deeper into the literature to determine why it remains life-affirming.

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<sup>71</sup> Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011), p. 9.