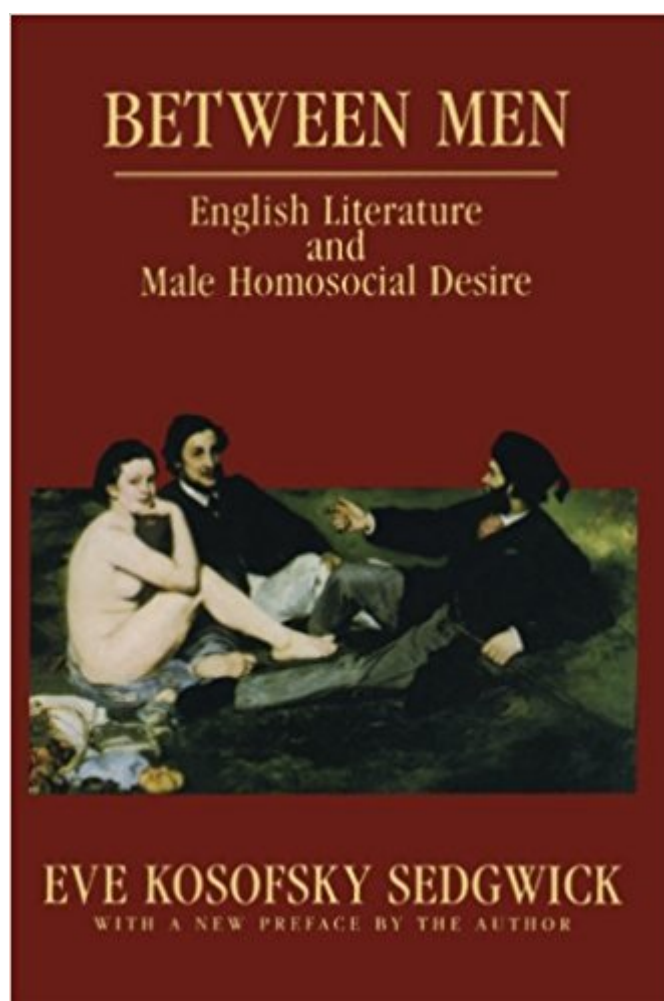


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# Between Men: English Literature And Male Homosocial Desire (Gender And Culture)



## Synopsis

Hailed by the New York Times as "one of the most influential texts in gender studies, men's studies and gay studies," this book uncovers the homosocial desire between men, from Restoration comedies to Tennyson's Princess.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Universally cited as the text that ignited gay studies. (Rolling Stone)"In many ways, the book that turned queer theory from a latent to a manifest discipline." (Voice Literary Supplement)"Astoshingly powerful... Its insights are breathtaking and its careful attention to history, theory, and politics is exemplary." (Gay Community News)"Stunning and original readings." (Raritan)

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is the author of *Tendencies*, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, and *Epistemology of the Closet*.

interesting read

At the time of its first appearance in 1985 *Between Men* was viewed as an important intervention into Feminist as well as Gay and Lesbian studies. It was an important book because it argued that "sexuality" and "desire" were not ahistorical phenomenon but carefully managed social constructs. This insight (that actually originated with Michael Foucault) is often viewed as anti-humanist or post-humanist because it argues that men and women are simply the products of patriarchal power

relations over which they have no control. By mobilizing Foucault's theories of the history of sexuality Sedgwick re-fashions Feminism and Gay and Lesbian Studies to make it seem as though Feminism and Gay and Lesbian studies are ideally situated to continue those interventions into the history of sexuality begun by Foucault. Sedgwick's own concern in this book is homosociality and this book's contribution to that topic is invaluable and still provides an excellent starting point for any foray into that topic. Her views on homosociality were groundbreaking, however, Sedgwick's book is famous mainly for its introduction which critiques current research agendas (including radical feminist agendas) as well as spells out the research agendas that she feels Gay and Lesbian studies should pursue. Its a twenty page introduction that to this day remains the best synopsis of academic feminisms (especially radical feminism) as well as the best articulation to date of the need for a new kind of discipline that can make use of the best part of existing feminisms and continue to evolve Gay and Lesbian Studies in productive directions. In that twenty page introduction Sedgwick lays out an academic template that has retroactively been labeled Queer Studies. For that introduction this book deserves five stars. The rest of the book is dedicated to new readings of classic Eng Lit texts and will only be of interest and of use to students of English literature. Overall the book is appealing because Sedgwick draws a map that is in fact usable. The pitfall of this book is that she uses this map to explain everything. This is of course a charge that can be made against any theorist that believes that their new theory holds the secret to history, to desire, to sexuality, to subjectivity, to relationships of all kinds, to every social situation and to every literary work. Its only later that we begin to see that any theory also has blind spots. Like Foucault Sedgwick treats "masculinity" and "femininity" and "lesbian" and "homosexual" not as natural and stable categories but as historically contingent and shifting categories. This is fine so far as it goes but it also means that in order to challenge these categories and effect structural changes to the way we view gender and sexuality the academic must argue from some privileged position that allows them access to the ways society shapes its subjects and also allows some privileged insight into how historical change occurs. Again this is true of all theory. An academic that suggests that we are all shaped by history must also realize that their own views are shaped by their own historical-academic-personal situatedness and to her credit Sedgwick does just that in her later, and much more interesting because much more self-critical, *Touching Feeling*. In that book Sedgwick evolves what amounts to a relational ethics as well as an ethics of academic life that recognizes that various forms of relationality and knowledges are practices that produce affects. If *Between Men* is a book that makes big claims, *Touching Feeling* is a book that analyzes the affects of such claims. *Touching Feeling* is thus a book that concerns itself less with cracking the sex and gender codes of the past

(although she does some of that in this book as well) than in thoughtfully analyzing how practices, habits, and beliefs affect the quality of our lives. In many ways *Touching Feeling* marks a departure from some of her previous work and a return to a much more traditionally humanist approach (a return that was foreshadowed by Foucault's own return to ethics and humanism in his late work). It would seem that Sedgwick is saying that being fully human means not living in others codes and ideologies (nor dedicating ones life to cracking those codes and/or evolving new ones--which is to perpetually postpone the living of one's own life in the present) but living in critical relation to those codes and ideologies and evolving knowledge practices that are nourishing to one's self, one's students, friends and communities. In *Between Men* it is obvious that Sedgwick is not any ordinary academic. That book was a brilliant beginning and in it we can see the habits and tendencies of mind that make all of her books unique and appealing. *Touching Feeling* is the fully evolved realization of those habits and tendencies of mind and the book that I think she will be remembered for. *Between Men* helped initiate one trend in academic life, Queer Studies; *Touching Feeling* is already shaping another trend in academic thought, and one that I think will remain current for some time to come: the ethics of relationality.

This book is an essential antecedent to contemporary queer theory, arguing that the development of the public sphere depended upon a sublimated yet necessarily erotic "male homosocial desire." Once we have finished encountered that stunning and revolutionary idea, this is a work of literary criticism that will be of little interest to non-scholars. Sedgwick has proven herself more than adequate to the task of adapting her ideas to a larger academic and educated general audience; indeed, she is one of the most provocative cultural critics of our generation. But not here. I suggest some of Sedgwick's later work, especially "The Epistemology of the Closet" and "Tendencies."

Sedgwick brilliantly transformed gay and lesbian studies with this book, a text whose import has not diminished with the transition of gay and lesbian studies from the margins of academia to (at least closer to) the mainstream. While she uses as her framework here English literature, this framework does not bound her theories conceptually. Look, for example, at ch. 1, "Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles". Consider the triangulation of rapist, victim and spectator in representations of rape, such as in Kaplan's film "The Accused" - while she does not explicitly deal with contemporary media and textuality, it can certainly be applied. Certainly, the text could now be updated - there are literally thousands of contemporary examples which could apply, and which could, perhaps make for more accessible reading. However, such a rewriting would not substantially change Sedgwick's

ideas, and the challenge of reading and absorbing Sedgwick is something which I have come to enjoy time and time again.

After establishing a brilliant theoretical framework Sedgwick provides utterly unconvincing and tediously reductive readings of literary works by Shakespeare, Wycherley, Dickens, and others. Read the introduction and then skip the rest.

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