

Katharine Lee Bates and Katharine Coman: **Sex, Love, and Yellow Clover**

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Today Katharine Lee Bates is revered as one of America's greatest female poets, known for her poem "America the Beautiful". When you open the cover of her biography, or read the information posted by the Katharine Lee Bates shrine in her home town of Falmouth there is no mention that Bates chose a woman as her life partner. There is no whispered hint that she might have been a lesbian. However Katherine Lee Bates was in a romantic and loving relationship with Katharine Coman, a fellow Wellesley professor, for twenty-five years. Bates lived at the end of the Victorian period, during which female sexuality was so suppressed and expressions of that sexuality were so limited and obscure that current twenty-first century sexual divisions (such as lesbian and gay, or even homosexual and heterosexual) are incompatible with the nineteenth century definition of the relationship and the love shared by Bates and Coman. So how do we define their relationship? Can we call them lesbians? Can we state with confidence that they were both heterosexual? Can we say anything at all about the love between Katharine Lee Bates and Katharine Coman?

In the twenty-first century it is impossible to turn on the television, the radio, or open a newspaper or magazine without being confronted with sexuality. For many of us today it is hard to imagine a time when sex appeal was not the driving force in social society. Sexual energy and dynamic are fundamental to a contemporary understanding of relationships. The emergence of a sexualized society changed the face of romance

irreversibly. Today our sexual orientation is determined by the object of our desire- whether one is attracted to men, or women, or both. Lesbianism is defined as the sexual or erotic desire of one woman for another. This definition of lesbianism is a product of a sexualized culture and cannot be applied to women who lived before the mid-twentieth century, because such a sexualized interpretation of romance is incompatible with Victorian society. During the nineteenth century there was a growing “social purity movement”¹ which discouraged all forms of immoral, meaning non-marital, sexuality. Women’s suffragists at the time encouraged women to avoid marriage all together if they had the possibility of being sexually unhealthy relationships.² The Victorian period was littered with social reform movements and the motion to purify sexuality.

In that context, women of the nineteenth century lived lives of total sexual repression. They were raised to be moral creatures, pure and chaste. It would have been inconceivable for young women to discuss sex, much less for them to be educated about it. Sex was not discussed at all and anything that was considered sexual activity between young men and women was immediately ended; in fact any interaction between the sexes was discouraged.³ Sexuality was explicitly forbidden to the female sex; it was so taboo that when young women married they might be repulsed by the thought of sex even with their husbands.⁴ Women were reduced to living out their lives within a childlike state of innocence that rendered them unable to recognize or understand sexual feeling. In a society where sexuality was so repressed and coded that it is almost impossible to

¹ D’Emilio, John and Estell B. Freedman. *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. New York: Haper and Row Publishers, 1988. pg 158

² D’Emilio

³ DeBare, Ilana. *Where Girls Come First: The Rise, Fall, and Surprising Revival of Girls’ Schools*. New York: Penguin Group, 2004.

⁴ Goodson, Eric. *Curtius’ Kiss*. UMASS Boston; American Studies Department. 2003.

identify, sexual normalcy was determined not by desire but by gender roles and conformity to those roles, including the standard of suppression of desire in women.

The gender division of the nineteenth century boils down into a simple dichotomy; masculine is dominant and feminine is submissive. For men, these roles manifested sexually as well as socially. Unlike women, men experienced less sexual repression. In the strongly patriarchal society of the time this allowed men to create a sexual subculture in which they could engage in same-sex acts without breaking from the required gender conformity. George Chauncey illuminates this male subculture brilliantly in *Gay New York*. He describes the abnormality of men who engaged in same-sex activity as being determined not by their relations with other men but by their femininity.

The abnormality (or “queerness”) of the “fairy,” that is, was defined as much by his “woman-like” character or “effeminacy” as his solicitations of male sexual partners; the “man” who responded to his solicitations – no matter how often – was not considered abnormal, a “homosexual,” so long as he abided by masculine gender conventions.⁵

In essence a man could engage in sexual activity with whomever he wanted and still be considered socially acceptable as long as he maintained his dominance and masculinity. Initially terms like gay, queer, and even homosexual were used to define only those effeminate men who did not maintain their gender roles, not men engaging in what we would consider homosexual activity. What Chauncey’s writing realizes is that, during the nineteenth century in the world of men sexuality was defined by gender and not desire

⁵ Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890 – 1940*. New York: Basic Books, 1994. pg 13

Women were separated from men in all spheres of life until marriage, especially in the realm of education. However these all-female communities gave women an environment where they could play at gender roles, as young girls today will often play house together mirroring a traditional heterosexual relationship without regard to their own gender. Ilana DeBare looks at the impact of these all-female institutions. DeBare dedicates a chapter of her book, *Where Girls Come First*, to the romantic play between students. These play relationships had a variety of different names, the most common of which were “crushes, smashes, mashes, or raves.”⁶ These romantic relationships were no less intense than what we would consider a high school crush today, and they involved much of the same behavior “Girls flirted with each other, idealized each other, felt jealous rages, sent each other flowers and candy, and wrote schmaltzy but heartfelt love poetry to each other. They hugged and kissed. They took long, intimate walks together. Sometimes they snuggled together in bed.”⁷ Such behavior today at an all-girls school would be immediately put down for fear of lesbianism and the impact of such a reputation for the school, but at the time, these relationships were more than tolerated by the schools and parents of students. These smashes were so widely accepted because they did not violate the expected gender roles of the time. Young women would court each other yet always within the boundaries of what was considered feminine, therefore maintaining their normalcy as described by Chauncey. Smashes were very common and even encouraged as healthy experience for later in life; in fact they were often preferred to relationships with young men, because sexuality was not considered an imminent

⁶ DeBare 131

⁷ DeBare 131

threat as it was between opposite sexes. The concept that these relationships could be physical or serious romances was entirely foreign even to the students involved.

Victorian culture assumed that women were pure, delicate creatures who were too moral and high-minded to feel lust the way that men did. And nineteenth century was brimming with intense relationships among women – mothers and daughter, cousins and friends... Women’s most intimate relationships, even after marriage, were frequently with other women.⁸

In such an atmosphere, lesbianism was not even a possibility, it did not even exist.

All-women schools not only allowed a different kind of social structure for the young students, they facilitated the development of intense companionate relationships among faculty; these relationships are most frequently called “Wellesley”⁹ or “Boston”¹⁰ marriages. Just as smashes among students were socially accepted, so too were these marriages. Palmieri’s *In Adamless Eden* is an extensive look at the community of female faculty at Wellesley College between 1875 and 1930. In the 1880’s virtually all of the female faculty at Wellesley College were divided into these partnerships, Katharine Lee Bates included. In fact many of these women chose to reject marriage proposals from male suitors, preferring the intimacy and economic independence of their female partnerships. Bates and two of her close friends and colleagues, Vida Scudder and Emily Balch, were among those who chose to forgo heterosexual marriages in favor of their same sex unions.¹¹ The feeling at many women’s colleges was unanimous “the ideal marriage was a rare phenomenon and that the professional woman could not entertain a relationship that would impede her career.”¹² The Eastman sisters, who founded Dana

⁸ DeBare 132

⁹ Palmieri, Patricia Ann. *In Adamless Eden: The Community of Women Faculty at Wellesley College*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

¹⁰ Fraisse, Genevieve and Michelle Perrot, ed. *A History of Women in the West: Emerging IV. Feminism from Revolution to World War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. pg 395

¹¹ Palmieri

¹² Palmieri 99

Hall School for girls, exemplify a companionate, in this case familial, relationship between two women that was necessary to have enough economic stability and independence to succeed in their careers. The Eastman's had struggled with poverty since childhood, having to take turns getting an education so that they would have enough income to care for their home.¹³ Since childhood the two sisters had been in the kind of economic partnership that would later be called a Wellesley marriage. This combined with their extensive education (unusual for women of the day) made them ideal candidates to found the all-women's school, Dana Hall.

Wellesley marriages, like smashes, were sexually ambiguous. Although there was obvious intimacy, emotional connection, and deep love between these women, many of whom formed lifelong partnership, there is no historical evidence that these were lesbian relationships, sexual relationships, as we would consider them today. There were companionate relationships, like that of the Eastman sisters, that were clearly loving and also clearly platonic, but it is almost impossible to identify the nature of the vast majority of these partnerships. If there was any sexual intimacy between these women, it went on behind closed doors, and was not written down or spoken of. So historically how do we characterize the relationship between Bates and Coman? Given that some omit and mention of it, and others anachronistically, and inaccurately, call it "lesbian", what was it exactly?

When we examine the relationship between Katharine Lee Bates and Katharine Coman in this historical context it is obvious that they were deeply loving life partners, but it is no more clear how we should define that relationship. Bates and Coman met at

¹³ Post, Winifred. "*Purpose and Personality*": *The Story of Dana Hall*. Wellesley; Dana Hall. 1978. pg 4

Wellesley College in 1887, when they were both in their late twenties; Bates was an English professor and Coman was the new professor of history and political economy. Bates placed the beginning of their life together in 1890. In 1891 on sabbatical in Oxford, England, Bates wrote nostalgically of their time together. Reminiscing about a trip to Princeton she wrote,

Do you remember the sunset sky that Sunday evening, when we strayed home from the Rock and there were two hands in one pocket? We'll go to Princeton again sometime. For I am coming back to you, my Dearest, whether I come back to Wellesley or not. You are always in my heart and in my longings.¹⁴

Bates did return to Wellesley and to Coman at the end of her sabbatical, calling herself a “reluctant captive”¹⁵ of the place, but confessing that there were too many “love anchors”¹⁶ there for her to leave. In 1894 Bates and Coman traveled to England together for the summer and upon their return to Wellesley they moved in together. In 1907 they had saved enough money to build a large house of their own. In 1912 Coman had an operation to try and remove a growing tumor in her left breast. Bates did all that she could for Coman (who after a second operation was so weakened that she was forced to retire, with regret, from Wellesley) including installing a crude elevator in their home so that Coman could eat dinner with the rest of the household and enjoy evening discussion in the living room.¹⁷

Bates and Coman continued to travel until the winter of 1914, only months before Coman's death. In her last letter to Bates, Coman wrote

I have no fear, Dear Heart, for life and death are one, and God is All in All. My only real concern to remain in this body is to spare you pain and grief and

¹⁴ Schwarz, Judith. “*Yellow Clover: Katharine Lee Bates and Katharine Coman.*” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*. Spring 1979: IV: 59 – 67 pg 63

¹⁵ Palmieri 92

¹⁶ Palmieri 93

¹⁷ Schwarz 65-66

loneliness. But I should not leave you comfortless, I would come to you as my mother comes to me in my best moments when my heart is open to her.¹⁸ She died the next morning, January 11, 1915. Bates continued to live in the home that she and Coman had shared, only now without her “Joy-of-life.”¹⁹ which had been her loving pet name for Coman. After her retirement from Wellesley in 1920 Bates published a book of memorial poems to Katharine Coman called *Yellow Clover*. It was her last true literary work. Years later Bates wrote to a friend of Coman’s death saying, “So much of me died with Katharine Coman that I’m sometimes not quite sure whether I’m alive or not.”²⁰ Bates died three years later.

Aside from a few letters, the book, *Yellow Clover*, is the only true writing on the relationship between Bates and Coman. There was nothing hidden about the love that the two women shared. Their loving relationship was remarked upon at Coman’s memorial service at Wellesley College by Emily Balch, who said, “It is hard to imagine a more beautiful [friendship].”²¹ (Coman Memorial) Later, after Bates’ death, Dorothea Lawrence Mann wrote on *Yellow Clover*, comparing Bates’ poetry to other love poetry

Beneath all the beauty of thought and felicity of utterance they lack the consuming tenderness which breathes through every line of [Bates’] poems. It makes them a precious and tender heritage for all lovers of poetry and for all human lovers. Seldom has love been so beautifully and loftily celebrated.²²

Yellow Clover is the expression of a rare kind of love, and beneath those words lies a deep physical desire within that love that was not expressed anywhere else. In the first poem of the book, Bates writes, “Our hearts might reach / And touch within the

¹⁸ Palmieri 139

¹⁹ Palmieri 137

²⁰ Palmieri 139

²¹ “*In Memoriam: Katharine Coman.*” *The Wellesley College News*. April 1915: Volume XXIII.

²² Mann, Dorothea Lawrence. *Katharine Lee Bates: Poet and Professor*. 1931.

yellow clover.”²³ Later she writes, “we cling / One soul together.”²⁴ Bates’ strongest reference to physical romance is in the poem “If You Could Come.” the last stanza reads

One touch of you were worth a thousand creeds.
My wound is numb
Through toil-pressed day, but all night long it bleeds
In aching dreams, and still you cannot come.²⁵

While these words cannot tell us if Coman and Bates were lovers, Bates was undeniably expressing a physical desire for her partner.

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a social shift; science and psychology thrust homosexuality into the light and labeled it as sexual deviance, or “inversion.” Havelock Ellis published *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* in 1897 and later *Sexual Inversions* in which he claimed that there were two types of lesbians, those who were born lesbians and those who could be “cured.”²⁶ He specifically stated that girlhood crushes were a sign of the “congenital lesbian.”²⁷ Scientists like Ellis started what Chauncey would call “The heterosexual counter revolution.”²⁸ The all-female schools and colleges that had been havens for unconventional women were immediate targets. By the 1920’s the work of Sigmund Freud had become popular. His philosophy that sexual motives are the driving force of every relationship ripped away the perceived innocence surrounding the smashes. Girls who continued to participate in smashes were often expelled.²⁹ At this same time as this paranoia was sweeping through all-female institutions, the Victorian culture of sexual repression (especially in the lives of women)

²³ Bates, Katharine Lee. *Yellow Clover: a book of Remembrance*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1922. pg 6

²⁴ Bates 15

²⁵ Bates 39

²⁶ Fraisse 396-397

²⁷ Fraisse 396-397

²⁸ Chauncey

²⁹ DeBare

was crumbling and being swept under the carpet by the Flappers of the '20s, allowing for increased sexual freedom. By the 1930's crushes had disappeared. The same thing happened to the Wellesley marriages; they fragmented. Without their previous respectability many of these friends parted, a number of women found husbands and even began to warn other women against the perversion of romantic friendships.

This explosive creation of homosexuality and lesbianism had a mixed impact. It destroyed the intense female bonds that previous generations had cherished. But it also gave a name to a sentiment that women had previously not understood. It opened up a doorway for a new kind of sexual expression that had not previously existed and validated the emotions that some of these women had been feeling. Unfortunately while it did allow these women the ability to understand an identity that they may not have grasped before, it also labeled them as abnormal and deviant. So while they could have personal acceptance of their identity, public acceptance was out of the question, although some would share their stories years later.

The story of Katharine Lee Bates is one that we wish could be told. The relationship between Bates and Coman was lifelong and full of a richness we are only beginning to grasp. Yet many scholars have inserted Coman as a footnote, if placing her at all, in Bates' life. This blatant erasure of the relationship between Bates and Coman is the legacy of scientists like Ellis. Today, while homosexuality is acknowledged and discussed it is far from being widely accepted and most Americans are not ready to accept that one of their icons may have been a sexual deviant, a lesbian.

The controversy around the sexual identities of historical figures, like Bates, has increased as scholars studying Queer issues, or groups agitating for gay rights, have

labeled them as homosexual. For example, in an article entitled “Yellow Clover” Judith Schwarz says of Bates and Coman that “[They] were a devoted lesbian couple.”³⁰ Schwarz states this definitive thesis and then spends the rest of the essay undermining it. Her final word on the subject of lesbianism is this; “There are infinite degrees and levels of affection and commitment between any two people.”³¹ And of women in female partnerships she says it is most important to “analyze how these women lived their lives outside of the standard comforts and socially approved protection of a male-female relationship.”³² Schwarz realized after the fact that there is no way of proving that Bates and Coman were lesbians. To make any assumptions about Bates’ sexuality is naïve when seen in light of the historical context. Historians and scholars may struggle to prove their identities to suit their own bias. Bates and Coman were together in a loving, devoted and clearly romantic relationship, but any projected statement about the sexuality of these two women is entirely anachronistic. Bates and Coman were two women who deeply loved each other; we can prove nothing more than that.

³⁰ Schwarz 59

³¹ Schwarz 60

³² Schwarz 60

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