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**Coming Out of the Closet while Coming-of-Age:  
The Construction of Gay Male Sexuality in Edmund White's  
*A Boy's Own Story***

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**Abstract**

Published in 1982, Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* is a bildungsroman of a young boy remembering his past and sexual initiation. While the novel traces the narrator's experiences of growing into a young man, it also includes glimpses of gay men's experiences in the U.S during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This article attempts to analyze the character's journey of sexual discovery as part of his identity construction and details how this development of sexuality differs from the same-sex sexualities in the *bildungsroman* tradition. During his coming of age and self-growth process, the character's sexual discovery is affected by the presence of the father figure. Due to this figure, the protagonist becomes attracted to his first love, Kevin. In light of the theoretical framework on the bildungsroman, gay sexuality, masculinity, and the oedipal triangle, this article examines the way the main character's discovery of his attraction to Kevin is shaped by his relationship to his father. And this leads to the discovery of both himself and his sexuality during the process of transitioning from boyhood to gay manhood, where his sexuality becomes a part of his identity.

**Keywords:** Edmund White, *bildungsroman*, gender, sexuality, masculinity, queer literature

## Karakter Gelişimi Sürecinde Cinsel Kimliğin Keşfi: Edmund White'in *A Boy's Own Story* Adlı Eserinde Gey Erkek Cinselliğinin İnşası

### Öz

Edmund White'in 1982'de yayımlanan *A Boy's Own Story* (Bir Çocuğun Kendi Hikâyesi) adlı eseri, bir bildungsroman olarak, anonim bir anlatıcının geçmişini ve erkeklerle olan cinsel deneyimlerini hatırladığı, erken yetişkinliğe geçişteki bir çocuğun hikâyesini anlatmaktadır. Roman, anlatıcının genç bir adama dönüşme deneyimini anlatırken, aynı zamanda Amerika'daki eşcinsel erkeklerin yirminci yüzyılın ikinci yarısındaki deneyimlerine dair kısa bakışları da içermektedir. Bu yazının ana odak noktası, karakterin öz kimlik inşasının bir parçası olarak cinsel keşfi ve bu cinsel keşfin nasıl bildungsroman geleneğinden farklı olduğunun analizidir. Yetişkinliğe geçiş ve büyüme evresindeki ana karakterin cinselliğinin keşfi, baba figürünün varlığından etkilenmektedir. Bu figür sayesinde karakter ilk aşkı olan Kevin'a ilgi duymaya başlamaktadır. Bildungsroman, erkek eşcinselliği, erkeklik ve ödipal üçgeni içeren teorik çerçevenin ışığında, bu makale anlatıcının baba figürüyle ilişkili olarak Kevin'a olan arzusunu fark etme sürecini analiz etmektedir. Bu da uzun vadede karakterin çocukluktan erkekliğe geçiş aşamasında, hem kendisini hem de cinselliğini keşfetmesine yol açmaktadır ve karakterin cinselliği kimliğinin bir parçası haline gelmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Edmund White, bildungsroman, toplumsal cinsiyet, cinsellik, erkeklik, kuir edebiyat

*In the Midwest of the 1950s the growing-up of a young gay man is a vulnerable, marginal, barely visible thing, riven by confusion, self-hatred and doubt.*

(Alan Hollinghurst, 2016)

This is how Alan Hollinghurst describes the era in which Edmund White penned his *A Boy's Own Story*, published in 1982 as part of a trilogy that narrates the story of an unnamed protagonist, showcasing the sexual self-discovery he makes during his teenage and adolescent years. White, in *A Boy's Own Story* – classified as a *bildungsroman* or a coming-of-age novel – traces different periods of

the protagonist's /narrator's life, from the period he spends with his mother and sister after the divorce of his parents to the one with his father and stepmother. Through its narration of different time periods, the novel depicts both the emergence and development of a gay sub-culture in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century U.S and of the narrator's personal growth from boyhood to manhood. The major aim of this article is to analyze the construction of homosexuality during this process and how this construction differs from typical same-sex representations in the *bildungsroman* tradition.

Narrated from a first-person point of view of an unnamed narrator, recollecting his adolescence as a grown man, the narrative style of the novel is similar to a memoir. Such memoir-style narration is typical of the coming-of-age novel or *bildungsroman*. Characteristically, depictions of same-sex intimacy in a *bildungsroman* serve a purpose in the protagonist's life and is portrayed only as a temporary phase. Through his memories, White's narrator depicts the arousal of desire in himself, struggles with his sexuality, and his relations with other men. Yet his narration neither provides an account of a temporary period in his life, nor does it consist entirely of self-hatred and misery. Instead, his memories of the past function to reveal the sexual awakening of the narrator during his coming-of-age period, which leads him to embrace his identity, explored even more in depth in the next two sequels of the trilogy. Since he remains unnamed throughout the novel, it could be interpreted as a symbolic individual who possibly represents a young gay boy in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America.

Due to its subject matter and content, the novel is therefore open to queer criticism, "since queer is a positionality rather than identity" (Sullivan 44). Queer, as discussed by Nikki Sullivan, "is not restricted to gays and lesbians, but can be taken up by anyone who feels marginalized as a result of their sexual practices" (Sullivan 44). In other words, queer can be understood as an umbrella term, exceeding the limits of merely gays and lesbians; therefore, its inclusion of all non-normative sexualities allows us to read the novel and its narrator through a wider lens. Since the period of coming-of-age could also be a period of experimentation and exploration, it also hints at a fluid identity quest in one's life. As queer refers to fluidity in sexual expression, its application to the novel and genre allows us to observe fluidity in the generic conventions of *A Boy's Own Story*, which paves the way for analysis of a differently constructed sexuality in the narration.

Given this queer stance, Edmund White breaks with the generic norms of the *bildungsroman* through the narrator's discovery and construction of his sexuality during the process of self-growth. As previously stated, the traditional coming-of-age narratives depict homosexuality as a temporary period in one's life. This way, the potential for homo-erotic desire is prevented both in the novel's characters' lives and in the (heteronormative) reader's engagement into the text. White's coming-of-age narrative, however, portrays a character in the process of discovery, which permanently affects his sexuality as part of his identity. His discovery of sexuality is very much influenced by his relationship with his father, which leads to his attraction to Kevin, his first love. Thanks to his encounters with Kevin, the narrator comes to discover his sexuality that he negotiates and explores throughout the novel to finally accept it. In light of the literature on the *bildungsroman* as a literary form of growth and sexual awakening, this article focuses on how the narrator develops his attraction to Kevin as a result of his relationship with his father and how this sexual discovery affects him and his sexual attraction to boys, which begins before his encounter with Kevin becomes a turning point for the narrator as part of a long-term process. This article will discuss the generic conventions of the *bildungsroman* and sexuality development. Secondly, the narrator's sexuality will be analyzed through the lens of theories on gay masculinities and sexuality. Finally, it will illustrate how the representation of sexuality constructed in White's novel differs from those in the conventional *bildungsroman*.

The *bildungsroman* is one of the most significant literary genres with regard to portraying the construction of same-sex desire during a person's formative years of characters' adulthood. *Bildung*, as the equivalent of "coming of age", refers to the personal growth of the character as it is originally derived from *Bildungstrieb*, "the developmental drive" (Tobin 259). It indicates a time in which one is gradually becoming what s/he is meant to be. This covers two phases: "The concept of *Bildung* . . . has two strands: Blumenbach's more biological notion of development that is predestined by the innate characteristics of a species and Herder's and Goethe's more cultural and social concept of the development that takes place because of one's education, cultivation, and environment" (Tobin, 259). Tobin's argument on *bildung* takes both nature and nurture into account during the growth phase. Here, individuals may be born with innate features, which they eventually develop over time, and this

is coupled with the effects of the cultural environment in which they live on their development. This leads people to construct their sexualities in varied ways.

Similarly, the *bildungsroman* narrates stories of characters in their process of growth in which they discover their nature through nurture:

The *bildungsroman* is classically the story of the development or acculturation of (typically) a young man who discovers who he is and how he fits into society. Because the novel has traditionally focused on love and Eros, the *bildungsroman* made the connection between *Bildung* and sexuality explicit: the protagonist's love life documented his identity and his relationship to society . . . Moreover, quite frequently the protagonists of the *bildungsroman* pass through deep emotional and even erotic relationship with other men. (Tobin 261).

Although the *bildungsroman* is not necessarily a 'queer novel genre,' the reader observes the exploration and construction of sexuality in such novels. In other words, the coming-of-age novel explores how the character creates his, her, or their<sup>1</sup> own spaces in society. Thus, this process of coming of age opens up many different avenues in which different ways of sexual expressions are explored and allows for the visibility of same-sex encounters or representations of gay sexuality, as is observed by Tobin, even in novels set within the context of heteronormative societal dynamics. Additionally, when discussing the relationship between discovery and travel in novels exploring same-sex desire, Ruth Vanita states that "fear cannot stop border crossings, physical, virtual or imaginative. When people cross borders, their identities change. The borders may be between nations, religious communities or linguistic groups. . . Perhaps the most invigorating border crossing is that between past and present" (Vanita 100). Even though her emphasis is on the effects of travel, she also acknowledges the fact that such travels might not necessarily occur on physical levels. The characters are set on a metaphorical journey to find and discover themselves where their identities are shaped over time. Therefore, narrations of homoerotic encounters typically present the process of sexual discovery. Combining this with the act of identity construction presented in these novels, the genre thus becomes an instrumental tool

to observe and analyze the construction of sexual identity as part of self-discovery.

In coming-of-age novels, the erotic or romantic intimacy between two male characters exists only because one of the parties lacks a male figure, typically a father figure that one can look up to. In line with this, the queer potential between the two characters is eventually erased after the father figure is restored when the character proves himself to his father and the other party simply fades away. Claudia Nelson states that queer intimacy between two boys typically occur in three ways:

One common story requires that an adolescent gradually win his father's regard by gaining the respect and love of an intermediary male, or more generally, by proving himself within his peer group. In the second, the protagonist frees himself from the clutches of a predatory 'false father' (there is usually no biological tie) and turns to the healthier love of a boy his own age. And the third shows the boy transferring his loyalties from one adult male to another (Nelson 17).

In the light of this observation, Nelson provides examples of *bildung* stories from British magazines such as *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, "Cameron's Last Chance!", and others published in *Boy's Journal* (Nelson, 18-19). Although homo-social and homo-affectionate/romantic dynamics remain, the protagonist only becomes the best heteronormative version of himself due to the romantic intimacy he has with the other boy.

Moreover, this tradition in coming-of-age novels seems to be preserved in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction as well: "Homoerotic or homoaffectional friendships continued to be the main expression of the same-sex desire in children's and young adult literature through the mid-twentieth century" (Tribunella 701). Since the portrayal of same-sex desire between two young men is explained as homoerotic and/or homo-affectional, it could be concluded that, rather than represented as open identity constructions, such experiences are limited within the space of friendships, where explicit sexual attractions are not predominantly visible. Additionally, gay male sexuality is also portrayed as a problem in the lives of people who are engaged in it: "The gay experience for adolescents is depicted as a struggle, usually

reflecting reality for many young people but also reinforcing the notion of being gay as difficult and painful” (Tribunella 705). Consequently, gay male sexuality in coming-of-age novels typically falls into a stereotypical portrayal, which designs a type of intimacy as far as the friendship between the characters goes or a life of misery and suffering particularly because of being gay as seen in novels like *Rainbow Kids* by Alex Sanchez and *Geography Club* by Bret Hartinger (Tribunella 705). Lies Xhonneux claims that

[a] coming out story contributes to the social and discursive construction of identities in at least two ways: it provides people who are discovering their sexualities with a vocabulary to talk about their emerging feelings (for example, the very term ‘the closet’), and it depicts queer lifestyles on which readers can model their own experiences. (96)

Considering the relation between coming of age and coming out, such narratives portray same-sex desire not only as a phase to become who the character is but also a part of one’s identity. As the character discovers himself, he also explores his sexuality and comes to terms with it, which allows the readers to associate themselves with the narrative as acknowledged by White himself (Xhonneux 96).

This is where Edmund White’s narrative in *A Boy's Own Story* differs. While previously mentioned narratives on adolescent sexualities have such stereotypes, the 20<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed the emergence of coming-of-age novels that offer more. Xhonneux claims that “*A Boy's Own Story* helps to demonstrate in other ways that coming out novels are by no means necessarily working towards the establishment of a ‘true’ gay identity... Moreover, throughout the novel, the narrative shows that the boy is almost never entirely ‘true’ to a fixed self, but is perennially given to playing roles” (107). Even though Xhonneux suggests that the function of the coming-out narrative in the novel might be irrelevant to the construction of an identity, it is also acknowledged that the narrator is in a constant process of change. As he is keen to playing roles assigned to him without a fixed identity of who he is, this approach indicates that the narrator as a young gay man is portrayed to be constructing himself and his identity, including his sexuality. This leads White’s narrator to embrace his homosexuality as a part of his identity, instead of a set of brief encounters.



When we consider White's works on young gay men in particular, his works are representations of how gay men situate themselves as opposed to the heteronormative culture. "Far from being mere aesthetic products, these novels about gay life both confirm and interrogate their historical milieu and its construction of sexual orientation as gender difference" (Radel 176). White's narration depicts gay men trying to manage their sexual identities within the cultural atmosphere they live in. Painful as it might be, White's main focus is sexual identity construction, instead of depicting the life of a gay man who constantly suffers as 'the marginalized other'. "White's narrator enacts the central tension of the entire book in the world his father represents, the world of sexual privilege and power" (Radel 181). White's narrator feels marginalized as a gay boy in a heterosexually structured society. Yet, as the quote explains, while the novel centers on his struggle with his sexuality, he also tries to navigate and construct it.

Furthermore, it may be argued that the desire the protagonist develops for Kevin in his early adolescent years helps him construct his own sexuality, which will be further discussed. Hugh Stevens explains the representation of gay and lesbian sexualities in fiction in English as follows:

Marriage, in English fiction, is critiqued as much as it is celebrated, and . . . queer characters, no less than the characters of George Eliot or D. H. Lawrence, have to negotiate a world whose guidelines may be inadequate and whose forms may need to be re-created. A gay or lesbian identity is something both given and questioned, fixed and provisional, and so it is both different from and similar to a straight identity. (Stevens 87)

Accordingly, the portrayal of a non-heterosexual identity in fiction becomes an identity that the characters have to negotiate, have to "handle" or deal with in their life. As Stevens indicates, social norms of gender affect both heterosexual and non-heterosexual characters alike. Furthermore, the social norms, in which the characters are subject to, do not usually provide them with the directions to cultivate themselves as sexual identity is constructed as a part of the self in such narrations. Correspondingly, White continues this literary tradition of such novels, for it could be argued that his narrator might be going through a similar



construction; his sexuality, problematic as it is, turns into something that he negotiates and thus changes him in return.

When it comes to the construction of the narrator's sexuality in the novel, it could be argued that his desire for men and inevitably his homosexuality are heavily influenced by the traditionally coded masculinity roles associated with manhood. Regarding traditionally coded masculinity and its relation to gay male sexuality, it is suggested that "[g]ay men's sexualities are done in the context of socially and culturally produced masculinity expectations" (Mutchler 17). Mutchler clarifies that the sexually idealized gay man image is one that could conform to the codes of masculinity. Traditional masculinity makes a man – or a boy in our narrator's case – an object of desire for other gay men. Tim Edwards observes a similar pattern in the development and construction of gay male sexuality: "Gay men often sought to reaffirm their self-worth and masculinity through the development of specific masculine identities, codes and meanings, and the adopting of a positive, alternative and highly sexualized lifestyle" (Edwards 3). Thus, it is not uncommon for gay men to adopt and perform hyper-masculinized identities and lifestyles. Besides, the way that gay men fashion themselves includes sexually adventurous manhood, which connects both heterosexual and gay masculinities and sexually aggressive behaviors. As a result of such behaviors and gender performances, an object of desire for a gay man is a man who will meet the requirements that society demands from a man with a singular exception and he should also be sexually attracted to men while performing his socially approved masculine identity.

Upon examining the novel, I argue that the effects of such masculinity codes embedded in the presence of the father figure are heavily inscribed on the narrator's attraction to other boys. The unnamed narrator is an isolated young gay boy, and after his parents get divorced, the influence of his father on his self-identification is heavily presented. As the narrator remembers and recalls his memories, whenever he reveals something about himself, his accounts of his father or mother and sister follow. More significantly, in the parts where the narrator describes his encounters with Kevin, it is his father whom he constantly brings forward. It could be supposed that this is a deliberate ploy by Edmund White, which indicates the impact of the father's image on the protagonist.

Kevin was the sort of son who would have pleased my father more than I did. He was captain of his Little League baseball team. On the surface he had good manners, but they were born of training, not timidity. No irony, no superior smirks, no fits of longing or flights of fancy removed him from the present. He hadn't invented another life; this one seemed good enough. Although he was only twelve, he already throbbed with the pressure to contend, to be noticed, to be right, to win, to make others bend to his will. I found him rather frightening, certainly sexy (the two qualities seemed linked). Because I was three years older, I guessed he expected me to be ahead of him in most ways, and that first night in the boat I was silent in order not to disillusion him. I wanted him to like me (White 9-10).

White's narrative here illustrates the influence of the father's image in the narrator's life. Through the vivid and detailed portrayal of Kevin, the narrator somehow included his father in his account. In other words, the father's impact is always present and as the word "please" suggests, the very first reason the protagonist is attracted to Kevin is his father. Calling himself "sissy" (9) previously, the narrator defines Kevin as his opposite. While being "captain" indicates a sense of masculinity, the words, and phrases such as "contend", "to be noticed", "to be right", "to win" and "make others bend to his will" all draw an image of a boy, who embraces and performs the traditional codes of masculinity, which is a common feature of attraction in gay masculinities.

Along with the appreciation of the narrator's father, these codes of masculinity contribute to the narrator's attraction for Kevin. Unlike the narrator, Kevin has the potential to suit such an image. That is why Kevin, as a boy who satisfies such cultural and social expectations of masculinity, becomes the object of desire for the narrator. Meanwhile, this state of being the object of desire is not fostered only because Kevin is traditionally masculine. In his description of Kevin, the narrator does not forget to mention that he is the type of son that his father would approve of. Then, he goes on to explain that he finds him both "frightening" and "sexy". This indicates that the narrator desires him because Kevin has what the narrator lacks. Kevin is approved and appreciated unlike the narrator.

The influence of the father, on the way of whom the protagonist constructs his desires, could be observed elsewhere, as well: "I never showered with my dad, I never saw him naked, not once, but we did immerse ourselves, side by side, in those passionate streams every night. As he worked at his desk and I sat on his couch, reading or daydreaming, we bathed in music" (White 22). Although the protagonist underlines that he has never seen his father naked, he implies physical intimacy by the choice of words, which metaphorically create an atmosphere of erotic intimacy. To do so, he uses words such as "immerse," "passionate," and "bathe", which creates the feeling of romanticism and intimacy. Whereas this does not necessarily mean that the narrator has erotic and romantic desires for his father. Upon recollection, he realizes there was always an attachment he felt for him, even if it was one-sided, and this seems to affect his taste in boys as his affair with Kevin demonstrates.

Rene Girard's idea of triangular desire is instrumental in defining this encounter. Identifying a subject, an object of desire, and a mediator in a triangle, Girard argues that "[j]ealousy and envy imply a third presence: object, subject, and a third person toward whom the jealousy or envy is directed" (12). According to Girard, the desire that the subject feels for the object is triggered by a mediator that stimulates a rivalry. This triangle is used to explain love triangles among characters. Even though such a love triangle between the narrator, his father, and Kevin in a traditional sense is not observed, this triangle could still be applied to them. Eve Sedgwick discusses this triangle by saying that "Girard traced a calculus of power that was structured by the relation of rivalry between the two active members of an erotic triangle...the bonds 'rivalry' and 'love', differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent" (22). Sedgwick indicates that rivalry and love are equally strong feelings that the subject feels because of the mediator's simultaneous desire for the object. In the triangle presented by White, it could be argued that the only certain position is that of the narrator, who is the subject. Kevin and the father are interchangeably the mediator and the object of desire. The intimacy the narrator feels suggests his desire to be the boy his father would approve of. Meanwhile, his father's approval of Kevin creates the idea of rivalry and jealousy.

Consequently, the narrator, who is deemed "too sissy" to be his father's idealized son, develops an attraction to Kevin, who is

simultaneously both what he wants to be and what his father would want him to be. When Kevin responds to this desire, the narrator has a sexual affair with Kevin, who is at that time twelve years old, whereas the narrator is fifteen years old. The father's role in this triangle is observed when the narrator remembers the moment "when I was Kevin's age, I'd wanted my father to love me and take me away" (White 27). Drawing on Girard and Freud, Sedgwick also discusses this situation as an

Oedipal triangle, the situation of the young child that is attempting to situate itself with respect to a powerful father and a beloved mother. Freud's discussions of the etiology of 'homosexuality' ... suggest homo- and heterosexual outcomes in adults to be the result of a complicated play of desire for and identification with the parent of each gender: the child routes its desire/identification through the mother to arrive at a role like the father's, or vice versa. (23)

Children go through a process of desire and identification in a triangle consisting of themselves and their parents and end up identifying with one of the parents while developing a desire for the other. Typically, the child is expected to identify with the same-sex parent and desire the opposite-sex parent. However, the outcome of this triangle might not always be the case. The child, supposedly a boy, might develop an erotic or sexual desire for the father figure through his desire for identification, which gives way to the development of homosexuality. Even though such an Oedipal triangle is not immediately imminent in the case presented by White, the impact of such a desire and identification could be observed on the narrator. Kevin's presence, combined with the desire for identification, completes the erotic triangle. Therefore, he desires the affection and appreciation of Kevin, and their subsequent affairs set him on a journey of sexual discovery.

As the narrator describes the different stages of his life, he is struggling with his gay male sexuality: "I see now that what I wanted was to be loved by men and to love them back but not to be a homosexual. For I was possessed with a yearning for the company of men, for their look, touch and smell, and nothing transfixed me more than the sight of a man shaving and dressing, sumptuous rites" (White 169). After his sessions with his therapist, he admits his same-sex desire for men as "love" and "being loved" by men are what he truly desires despite not

wanting to be identified as a “homosexual”. Yet, with this confession, he also points out what he likes in men, including all their physical features, which suggest bodily and erotic attachments and thus confirm his homosexuality. The narrator still hesitates to embrace his identity as a whole, yet as previously discussed he is still in a process. At that very moment, he comes to terms with what he sexually desires and admits it to himself, which puts him one step closer to fully embracing his sexuality.

In addition to seeing a therapist about his sexuality, the narrator tries many other ways to “deal with” his attraction to men, such as trying to date a girl, blaming his mother and sister for it, turning to religious practices like Buddhism, and entering into an “all-male world” by enrolling in a boarding school (White 142). All in all, these practices are undertaken to help the narrator perform heterosexual manhood. Considering the performative side of gender, the narrator first tries to act like a heterosexual man to deal with his homosexuality. “Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 519). Thus, gender is something that individuals can learn through practice and imitation as exemplified by the narrator trying to enter into male-dominated spheres so that he could learn how to be a heterosexual man like them.

As a part of performativity of his sexual and gender identity, the narrator is not in constant denial of his homosexuality, despite all his efforts. On the contrary, he keeps demonstrating it as he says at some point during his time in the boarding school: “Yes, I spent my days thinking about male bodies” (White 155). In time, his sexuality leads him to believe he is somewhat of an outcast thus it becomes something he constructs as a part of his identity. His choice of people to be surrounded by is marked by his sense of being marginal or other. Even in his school, he hangs out with boys who are smokers and not well-received by others. Furthermore, this feeling becomes most evident when the narrator and his outcast friends attempt to have sex with prostitutes: While other boys prefer to have sex with the white woman, the narrator chooses the black prostitute: “After all this was Saturday night, and yet she didn’t have any customers. Somehow, I equated her fatness, her blackness, her unpopularity with my own outcast status. She’d show me sympathy, which would magically awaken my virility”

(White 182). His realization of the similarity between them marks his acceptance of himself, as well. Both are outcasts somehow and, as “virility” indicates, this helps him in the process of self-acceptance.

As he keeps experiencing his sexuality one way or another, he has sex with his teacher and his wife and the Scotts family, and he discovers the fluidity of sexuality as a result of his experiences: “Sex now seemed a strange thing to me, a social rite that registered, even brought about shifts in the balance of power. . . a simple emission of fluid that somehow generated religious, social and economic consequences” (White 198). Accordingly, now the narrator sees sexuality as a set of socially constructed practices, therefore it does not have to be fixed and the same with everyone, which helps him recognize and accept his non-normative sexuality and his queerness further. With this awakening, he echoes how Sedgwick defines queerness: “[t]he open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (8). The narrator sees himself as an overlap or gap situated heteronormative discourse, and is henceforth able to see himself differently now. His deviant sexuality is no longer a source of struggle, but a source for performative identity.

Among all his experiences before and after, his affair with Kevin becomes a turning point for the narrator. That is because his journey for self-discovery could be argued to begin after this affair. After Kevin has gone, the narrator also wants to leave his father’s house for a big city where he could explore himself: “‘I’m here because I want to run away from my father’s house,’ I said. ‘I thought I might find someone to go with me.’ ‘What are you planning to run to?’ ‘New York’” (White 52). It could be implied that the desire to leave his father’s house symbolically indicates his desire to find out who he is. What White seems to attempt is to create an identity for this unnamed gay narrator as he “contends that before gay men were considered ‘sick’, they were judged to be ‘criminal’ or ‘degenerate’. White’s attention to the discourses of sexuality in America is important in the ongoing evaluation of his and others’ constructions of gay and American subjectivity” (Purvis 306). What is underlined here is the social and political atmosphere for gay men living in the United States in which he produced his works. Accordingly, White, as a young man, lived through an era that categorized gay male sexuality as something unacceptable in all legal, medical and cultural ways. Inevitably, White creates a character that is sexually “deviant”. However, the experiences

of this character are not limited to the problems or miseries caused by his deviant sexual identity. As is noticed by Purvis, the sexual experiences of White's narrator become a means to construct his sexual and self-identity as a young American man. He comes to realize his sexuality and its uniqueness. His relations with Kevin do not help him become the person that his father would approve of. On the contrary, it aids him into realizing that he can never be like Kevin. He comes to terms with it as well as his attraction to boys. Consequently, he wishes to go out into the unknown to find out who he is. Therefore, the queer affair he has with Kevin does not have a temporary effect; it permanently influences the narrator to explore and construct his sexual identity.

Even though it is a long and painful process to come to terms with this fact, the narrator is observed trying to manage and negotiate his gayness, and construct his sexual identity. The same-sex experiences he has with other boys and men do not ultimately end up in a miserable and painful life for the narrator, despite all the agonies he experiences along the way. Even though he suffers from those experiences initially owing to his struggles to acknowledge himself, he eventually explores it, which in turn shapes his identity construction. This could be understood from the narrator's accounts towards the end of his story. Narrating his sexual experiences with men, he says that he dislikes the idea of being a "homosexual":

Sometimes I think I liked bringing pleasure to a heterosexual man (for after all I'd dreamed of being my father's lover) at the same time I was able to punish him for not loving me . . . I who had so little power – whose triumphs had all been the minor victories of children and women, that is, merely verbal victories of irony and attitude – I had at last drunk deep from the adult fountain of sex. I wiped my mouth with the back of an adult hand, smiled and walked up the dining hall humming a little tune. (White, 218)

The account given by the narrator actually provides a sketch of the experiences he has in the entire narration. His attraction to heterosexual men is implied by his dream of being "my father's lover", and shows how his same-sex attraction towards Kevin has started. Moreover, as the word "sometimes" indicates, his sexual experiences with men were not always the same; they were changing and constantly evolving during the construction of his sexuality. In addition, the syntax the narrator uses in this quotation has a significant meaning. While "at last" suggests a type



of growth, “the adult fountain of sex” is a very certain declaration of the path from childhood to adulthood. Additionally, the urge for revenge, suggested by “punish”, shows that he is not in denial of his attraction to men; he seems ready to accept it. Thus, his revenge is not about being a homosexual, it is a challenge against those who would not acknowledge him. All those sexual encounters, which he sometimes condemns, lead him dive into the “deep” of those experiences, from which he emerges “smiling”. “Back of an adult hand” implies that he does not feel like a boy anymore; “the dining hall” metaphorically suggests that he is ready to be an adult man among other adult people now. The narrator evidently feels marginalized and even channels a kind of self-hatred against himself and other gay men.

What is significant is how White’s conclusion shows the state of mind of the narrator. The experiences he has about his homosexuality in *A Boy’s Own Story* are instrumental in preparing the narrator to accept himself. While he occasionally feels unhappy or depressed because of his sexuality, the narrator still explores this side of who he truly is. As a result of those experiences, he finally makes peace with his homosexuality and continues to construct it as a part of his identity. Observing the character development in the first novel of the trilogy, Purvis states

The three novels of the trilogy, for example, demonstrate that no fixed lexicon of America or sexuality lays bare the truth of these identities. In *A Boy’s Own Story*, White’s mid-twentieth-century teenage narrator sees himself and all homosexuals as sinful, deviant, and anti-American... The “homosexual” narrator who begins the trilogy is, in *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, learning how to be “gay,” eagerly casting off his *homosexual* pathology and Cincinnati childhood, and celebrating the opportunities he associates with gay, urban America. (Purvis 306)

Consequently, what was once painful – apparently his homosexuality— no longer seems to be a source of misery for him. Because he is “smiling” at the end, it could be deduced that he is ready to accept his homosexuality he has explored thus far. Instead of becoming an outcast who hates himself for who he is, he turns into someone who is capable of accepting himself and his gay identity, for which David M. Halperin’s idea about *How to Be Gay* might be instrumental to understand. He argues that “[i]t is not enough for a man to be homosexual to be gay. Same-sex desire alone does not equal gayness. To be gay,

a man has to learn to relate to the world around him in a distinctive way... On this account, 'gay' refers not just to something you *are*, but also something you *do*' (Halperin 13). According to Halperin, the same-sex desire a man feels does not automatically make him "gay". A boy learns how to be gay over time from other people, possibly other gay men. Thus, gay boys learn how to be gay as they interact with other fellow gay men and have experiences with them, which makes the gay male sexuality something socially practiced and established, instead of the autonomous, historical and innate part of men who claim themselves to be gay. While this possibly causes self-loathing and hatred towards other fellow gay men, this might also bring gay men together in order to resist collectively, which in turn allows them to learn how to be gay from one another, as is suggested by Halperin.

Additionally, his final act of revenge on Mr. Beattie, and the heteronormative discourse that marginalizes him, shows that he eventually accepts himself. Mr. Beattie is one of the teachers in his boarding school, who is also an outcast like him as he hangs out with the narrator's friends and he uses marijuana. Additionally, he reminds the narrator of one of his previous same-sex encounters: "He reminded me of that hustler I'd met two summers ago" (208). He plans to seduce Mr. Beattie, who is seemingly heterosexual yet obviously gives the narrator the impression that he might be homosexual, to have sex with him in order to have him dismissed from the school and states that: "I who concealed sexual longings most Etonians would have condemned far sooner than dope peddling, I... slept with a master and his wife, I who had once bought a hustler ten years older than I and last summer had slept with a boy three years younger, I who'd serviced Ralph, the special camper" (210). He remembers all the sexual activities he has encountered so far, and instead of despising himself, he is quite satisfied with what he has done. With his betrayal of Mr. Beattie, he avenges himself for all the times he has tried to conceal his desires. In this incident, Mr. Beattie represents the heterosexual world that he has unsuccessfully tried to fit in and his act of betrayal is a way for him to accept and demonstrate his gayness. Thus, he is not a powerless gay boy that the heterosexual world would condemn any longer. He could defend himself against it in the final stage of his construction of identity as a gay man.

In conclusion, Edmund White subverts the generic conventions of the *bildungsroman* by both problematizing the experiences of what it means to be gay and leading those experiences to self-acceptance and

identity construction in *A Boy's Own Story*. Even though the conventional *bildungsroman* uses (homo)sexuality as an instrumental phase in the formation of one's identity, sexual identity in White's novel is performed and successfully acknowledged by the protagonist towards the end of the novel, which is also the beginning of the trilogy. White creates a coming-of-age narrative in which a 15-year-old unnamed protagonist goes through a journey in which he discovers himself and his sexuality as a gay boy. Coming-of-age novels usually tend to narrate stories in which same-sex encounters happen only to serve a purpose in fulfilling the character becoming an acceptable and heterosexual version of himself. However, in White's narrative, the sexual encounters the protagonist has are not merely temporary experiences in his life, but the initial steps taken in his journey of discovery. The narrator both aspires to be someone his father would love and a person who has a romantic attachment to his father, with whom, in fact, he has a difficult relationship. These feelings have a strong impact on him. His father's influence intensifies this desire, which leads the narrator to construct his self-identity as a gay man. With this construction of his sexuality, he goes through a process in which he struggles, but manages to handle and shape his identity during his process of development. Considering that this novel is a part of a trilogy which cover the later stages of the protagonist's life, the way he constructs his sexuality in this first volume becomes functional for him to learn how to be a gay man. Therefore, the character might suffer from the usual pain and conflicts owing to his sexual identity, but this affliction does not last forever. Over time his sexuality and his sexual experiences become a part of who he is. In narrating both his discovery of his sexuality and formation of his sexual identity, the character provides a model for other adolescents, who possibly feel marginalized because of their sexual identities and can help them overcome their own struggles on their own paths of self-discovery.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> "They" is added here to include non-binary gender identities.

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