



## Leopold, Nathan F. (1904-1971), and Richard A. Loeb (1905-1936)

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Police photographs of Nathan Leopold (top) and Richard Loeb.

Leopold and Loeb gained notoriety when they were arrested for the murder of a fourteen-year-old boy, Bobby Franks, in May 1924. Their trial, in which they were represented by the eminent defense attorney Clarence Darrow, became a media sensation, and was for a long time known as the "trial of the [twentieth] century."

That the two young men were exceptionally bright students at the University of Chicago, and the scions of wealthy families, only added to the interest in their case. The children of privilege, the boys grew up surrounded by all the advantages that money could afford, thus puncturing the presumption that poverty was the handmaiden of crime.

Although they claimed to have been motivated primarily by a desire to commit a "perfect crime" and thereby exemplify the exemption of "Nietzschean supermen" from the moral code that governs ordinary men and women, the two also became known as "thrill killers." Their motivation to kidnap and kill young Bobby Franks was widely believed to be at least in part rooted in their sexuality, or more particularly, their homosexuality.

Leopold and Loeb's crime and trial, which featured a stirring plea by Darrow to spare the young murderers' lives, have continued to attract attention and to influence popular culture. Numerous books, films, plays, and even a musical have been inspired by their story, though only recently have the sexual aspects of their relationship been presented explicitly and accurately and without the kind of hysterical homophobia that marred early accounts.

### **Richard Loeb**

Richard Albert Loeb was born on June 11, 1905, the third of four sons of Albert Loeb, a lawyer who became the Vice President of Sears and Roebuck, and his wife Anna. The Loeb family lived in a mansion in Kenwood, then a predominantly Jewish neighborhood of Chicago. They also owned a country estate in Charlevoix, Michigan.

Richard attended the Laboratory School and, later, University High School, both affiliated with the University of Chicago. A precocious student, tutored by a governess who was a strict disciplinarian, he graduated from University High at the age of 14, and was admitted to the University of Chicago the same year.

Loeb's experience as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago was not a happy one. Despite his reputation for precocity, he earned only mediocre grades. With most of his classmates several years older, he also made few friends despite his natural gregariousness.

At the end of his sophomore year, Loeb transferred to the University of Michigan, where his academic

record was also less than distinguished. He spent most of his time playing cards and reading crime novels, and also drinking heavily and carousing with his fraternity brothers. Nevertheless, he managed to earn a B. A. in 1923, becoming the youngest graduate in the history of the University of Michigan.

In 1924, Loeb was back in Chicago, taking graduate courses in history at the University of Chicago.

### **Nathan Leopold**

Nathan Freudenthal Leopold, Jr. was born on November 19, 1904. His father, a millionaire box manufacturer, and his mother Florence were notably protective and indulgent parents.

Nathan was a sickly but precocious child who was nicknamed "Babe." He began speaking at the age of four months. Early recognized for his unusual academic prowess and genius-level IQ, he excelled in his studies.

Although he lived less than two blocks away from Loeb in the Kenwood neighborhood, Leopold attended different elementary and prep schools, but, like Loeb, he also received private tutoring. He graduated from Chicago's Harvard Preparatory School at the age of 15, and then matriculated at the University of Chicago.

Whereas Loeb was handsome, athletic, and socially assured, Leopold was undersized, nerdy, and socially inept. With somewhat bulging eyes and a sallow complexion, he considered himself unattractive and sexually inadequate.

Perhaps to compensate for these feelings of inferiority, Leopold thrust himself into his studies, easily mastering several languages, classical literature, botany, and ornithology. By the age of 18, he was a nationally recognized authority on birds, having published two papers in the country's leading ornithological journal on Kirtland's warbler, an endangered songbird. As a teenager, he also became obsessed with the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, especially the concept of the superman.

In May 1924, Leopold had recently graduated from the University of Chicago and elected to Phi Beta Kappa; he was planning a family trip to Europe before entering Harvard Law School in the fall.

### **Leopold & Loeb**

Although they had been acquaintances and casual friends since they were boys, Loeb and Leopold did not become close friends until 1920, when Leopold entered the University of Chicago, where Loeb was in his sophomore year.

They soon became involved in an intense and passionate--if somewhat one-sided and tumultuous--affair.

When Loeb transferred to the University of Michigan for the 1921-22 school year, Leopold followed him to Ann Arbor with plans to transfer there himself. They initially shared lodgings, but soon became the subject of rumors that they were homosexual.

Loeb became involved in his fraternity, Zeta Beta Tau, which accepted him on condition that he not associate with Leopold in order to quash the rumors of homosexuality. Feeling rejected by Loeb, who moved into the fraternity house, and mourning the recent death of his mother, Leopold returned to Chicago bereft and angry.

Although both frequently dated girls, Loeb was decidedly more successful in his heterosexual exploits than Leopold, who desired a more reciprocal and monogamous relationship with Loeb.

Indeed, Leopold was hopelessly in love with the handsome Loeb, who seemed so different from himself in his extroverted nature and easy charm.

The young men were engaged in a battle of wills: Leopold desperately sought Loeb's affection, while Loeb withheld his sexual favors in order to manipulate Leopold to do his bidding.

Central to their relationship was delinquency, justified on Leopold's part by the idea that he and Loeb were Nietzschean supermen who were morally entitled to violate the rules and laws that bound lesser mortals. Leopold's superficial reading of Nietzsche dovetailed conveniently with the fantasies Loeb had indulged since adolescence of being a "master criminal."

Perhaps neither man would have committed murder without their intense involvement with each other. Leopold later wrote that his motive "to the extent that I had one, was to please Dick." Loeb seems to have been motivated primarily by a need to realize his romantic fantasy of criminality and to escape the boredom and ennui he felt in his daily life.

Loeb exploited Leopold's sexual attraction to him as a means of enlisting him as his partner in crime. They agreed to a compact in which Loeb conditioned having sex with Leopold on the latter's assistance in his criminal adventures.

During their undergraduate years, the two committed petty thefts, cheated at bridge, set fires, stole cars, vandalized warehouses, smashed store windows, and engaged in other acts of sociopathology.

On one occasion they burglarized Loeb's fraternity house at the University of Michigan, and they may also have made an unsuccessful attempt to murder a fraternity brother whom they suspected of spreading rumors that they were homosexuals. Although some of their petty thefts had been discovered, they were never reported to the authorities or punished.

### **The Murder of Bobby Franks**

By late 1923, Loeb had come to regard the criminal exploits in which he and Leopold had engaged as frustrating because they were such penny-ante crimes that they rarely even made the newspapers. Loeb decided that they needed to commit a more serious crime, one that would command the attention of the entire city of Chicago.

As early as November 1923, Leopold and Loeb began discussing the kind of crime that would garner the attention Loeb craved. They soon decided to kidnap a child and hold him for ransom. They spent hours over several months planning the details of the venture, devising what they thought would be a fool-proof scheme to demand a \$10,000 ransom and retrieve it without being caught.

The murder of their victim was never the centerpiece of their fantasies. Neither Loeb nor Leopold seem to have relished the prospect of killing their kidnap victim, and apparently did not receive any particular "thrill" from the act, but they thought it critical to minimizing their likelihood of being identified as the kidnapers.

The choice of Bobby Franks as their victim was entirely opportunistic. On the afternoon of May 21, 1924, as Leopold drove a rental car around Chicago's South Side, he and Loeb looked for a possible victim. They noticed Loeb's young cousin Bobby Franks walking along Ellis Avenue. The fourteen-year-old Franks was the son of a wealthy businessman who would be able to pay the ransom the kidnapers planned to demand.

It may be that Franks was also deemed a suitable victim because though he lived in Kenwood, his family did not enjoy the social acceptance of the Jewish elite who were their neighbors. His father, Jacob Franks, had earned his fortune from his ownership of a pawnshop rather than in a profession. Moreover, the family had

converted from Judaism to Christian Science.

Loeb enticed the boy into the car with an offer of a ride. Although there has been some dispute as to who actually committed the murder, probably the boy was hit on the head with a chisel and then suffocated by Loeb as Leopold drove the car out of the city.

The conspirators disposed of the body in a culvert in a remote area near Wolf Lake in Hammond, Indiana, where Leopold frequently went birding. To make identification of the body more difficult, they doused it with hydrochloric acid.

After returning to Chicago, Leopold called Franks's mother to tell her that her son had been kidnapped but was unharmed and to expect a ransom note. The conspirators burned their clothes that had been spattered with blood and cleaned bloodstains from the upholstery of the rented car.

The next morning they sent the Franks family a special delivery letter asking that they secure \$10,000 in old, unmarked bills and telling them to expect further instructions that afternoon. At 3:00 p.m. Leopold called Jacob Franks, Bobby's father, to tell him a taxi cab was about to arrive at his home and that he should take it to a specified drugstore in South Chicago.

However, just as Franks was about to board the taxi, he received a call from his brother-in-law relaying news from the police that the body of his son had been found.

### **Apprehending the Criminals**

With the discovery of the body of Bobby Franks by a Polish immigrant on May 22, 1924, the "perfect crime" planned by Leopold and Loeb soon unraveled.

The police found a pair of eyeglasses near the body. The glasses were ordinary horn-rimmed spectacles prescribed for reading, but they had a special hinge mechanism, and only three pairs of glasses with that mechanism had been sold in Chicago. One of them had been purchased by Leopold.

The head of the investigation, State's Attorney Robert E. Crowe, was sensitive to the social prominence and wealth of the Leopold and Loeb families, so on May 29, when the young men were interviewed by the police, the interviews were conducted in separate rooms at the LaSalle Hotel rather than in a police station.

When questioned about the glasses, Leopold claimed that he had lost them while bird watching near where Franks's body was found.

Loeb provided an alibi, telling the police that Leopold was with him the night of the murder. According to their story, the young men had picked up two women in Leopold's car.

The alibi quickly fell apart, however, when two days later the Leopold family chauffeur, in the hopes of proving Leopold innocent, revealed that his car was in the garage that night.

In addition, police found that typewritten notes prepared by Leopold for his study group matched the type from the ransom note.

Under persistent questioning, the young men soon confessed: Loeb first, then Leopold. Although their separate confessions agreed in most details, each blamed the other for the actual murder.

Leopold later pleaded with Loeb to admit that he killed Franks but, according to Leopold, Loeb said, "Mompie feels less terrible than she might, thinking you did it and I'm not going to take that shred of comfort away from her."

According to State's Attorney Crowe, it made no difference which of the two actually killed the boy. He would seek the death penalty for both of them.

### **Aftermath of the Arrests**

In the days after their arrest, Leopold and Loeb were constantly featured in the Chicago newspapers, which emphasized their wealth, intelligence, and "perversion," as well as their lack of remorse for killing a child. The newspapers and the public demanded immediate and retributive justice.

Although there was little obvious anti-Semitism in the newspaper coverage, the arrest of the sons of prominent Jewish families created particular anguish within Chicago's large Jewish community. Meyer Levin, author of *Compulsion*, noted that "there was one gruesome note of relief in this affair. One heard it uttered only amongst ourselves--a relief that the victim too had been Jewish. Though racial aspects were never overtly raised in the case, being perhaps eclipsed by the sensational suggestions of perversion, we were never free of the thought that the murderers were Jews."

Indeed, the newspaper reports on the murder used terms like "abnormal" or "perverted" to describe the suspects, often as sufficient explanation as to why the sons of wealthy families would commit such a heinous crime. However, details of the relationship between Leopold and Loeb were mostly suppressed, undoubtedly because newspapers were reluctant to report on homosexuality in any specifics for a family audience.

While in jail, Leopold and Loeb seemed to revel in their notoriety. They spoke freely to newspaper reporters, providing them with lurid details about the crime (though not about the nature of their relationship). They also freely cooperated with the police, gladly reenacting the crime and helping detectives locate evidence that could be used against them.

In was in this context of sensational newspaper reports and freely talking suspects that Clarence Darrow agreed to accept the case on behalf of the families of Leopold and Loeb. Loeb's uncle begged the famous lawyer, "Get them a life sentence instead of death. That's all we ask." Allegedly offered \$1,000,000 to defend them, Darrow accepted the case not primarily for the fee, but because it offered an opportunity to combat the death penalty, one of his passionate causes.

The first thing Darrow had to do was to convince his young clients to refuse to speak with the press or to the police.

### **The Trial**

The trial, which began on July 21, 1924, was presided over by John R. Caverly, Chief Justice of the Circuit Court of Cook County. Judge Caverly was well known for his solicitude for youthful offenders, a fact that Darrow no doubt factored into his defense strategy.

The trial began with a startling declaration by Darrow. Whereas everyone assumed that he would plead his clients not guilty by reason of insanity, instead he pled them guilty, adding: "We want to state frankly here that no one in this case believes that these defendants should be released or are competent to be. We believe that they should be permanently isolated from society."

Darrow's goal was not to exonerate his clients, which he knew was impossible, but to save their lives. By pleading guilty, Leopold and Loeb could avoid a jury trial, and Darrow believed he had a better chance of convincing a judge to spare their lives than he did of convincing a jury.

The trial opened with the prosecution, led by State's Attorney Crowe, presenting every detail of the crime, emphasizing its cold-bloodedness and cruelty, hoping to convince the Judge that the defendants deserved no mercy. Darrow cross-examined few of the factual witnesses.

The prosecution's most vulnerable theory was that the defendants were motivated by the need to pay gambling debts. While it was not necessary for the prosecution to prove motive in a case in which the defendants had pled guilty, the question was important in terms of mitigation of the sentence, and Darrow was able to debunk the idea that the children of wealthy and indulgent parents needed a \$10,000 ransom in order to pay negligible debts.

The next stage of the trial was in effect a battle of expert "alienists" (as psychiatrists were then known). Although Darrow was not utilizing the insanity defense, he wanted to use the testimony of alienists to help buttress his argument against the death penalty. When, over the strenuous objections of the State's Attorney, the Judge agreed to allow the testimony of the alienists hired by the defense, Darrow felt that he had won an important victory.

The alienists, who were more sympathetic to Leopold than to Loeb, saw the murder as the result of two abnormal personalities working together. Their testimony, which was filled with details of the defendants' sexual histories and fantasies, brought homosexuality to the fore. During this testimony, Judge Caverly barred women from the courtroom, indicating how sensitive the topic of homosexuality was in 1924.

Darrow's summation, on August 21, 1924, lasted for more than two hours. It is regarded as one of the finest pleas in American jurisprudence.

Darrow stressed the youth of the offenders, claiming that "never had there been a case in Chicago, where on a plea of guilty a boy under twenty-one had been sentenced to death." He argued that the murder was "a senseless, useless, purposeless, motiveless act of two boys." He denied that it was a "cold-blooded" murder, pointing out that it was not performed out of malice or hatred.

Darrow attributed the murder to the "immature and diseased" brains of two children involved in a "a weird, almost impossible relationship. Leopold, with his obsession of the superman, had repeatedly said that Loeb was his idea of the superman. He had the attitude toward him that one has to his most devoted friend, or that a man has to a lover. Without the combination of these two, nothing of this sort probably would have happened."

Finally, Darrow made a dramatic and moving plea for his clients' lives. After quoting a stanza from a Housman poem that ends "There's nothing but the night," he argued that sending his clients to the gallows might be merciful for them, but that it would not be right for society or civilization.

He concluded by attacking the death penalty itself and appealing to a more enlightened future.

He first told the Judge, "The easy thing and the popular thing to do is to hang my clients. . . . Men and women who do not think will applaud. The cruel and thoughtless will approve."

However, he continued, "It will be easy today; but in Chicago, and reaching out over the length and breadth of the land, more and more fathers and mothers, the humane, the kind and the hopeful, who are gaining an understanding and asking questions not only about these poor boys, but their own--these will join in no

acclaim at the death of my clients. They would ask that the shedding of blood be stopped, and that the normal feelings of man resume their sway. And as the days and the months and the years go on, they will ask it more and more."

The prosecution presented two days of closing arguments, but with none of the eloquence of Darrow.

On September 19, 1924, Judge Caverly announced his decision. In sparing the lives of Leopold and Loeb, he echoed many of the arguments put forward by Darrow.

Describing the crime as "a singular atrocity," "inhuman," and "repulsive," Caverly remarked that "It would have been the path of least resistance to impose the extreme penalty of the law."

He added that "Life imprisonment may not, at the moment, strike the public imagination as forcibly as would death by hanging; but to the offenders, particularly of the type they are, the prolonged suffering of years of confinement may well be the severer form of retribution and expiation."

In choosing imprisonment instead of death, he said "the court is moved chiefly by the consideration of the age of the defendants."

Judge Caverly sentenced the defendants to life imprisonment for the crime of murder and a term of ninety-nine years for the crime of kidnapping for ransom. He also urged that they never be deemed eligible for parole.

### **Prison Life**

Although authorities at the state prison in Joliet at first intended to keep Loeb and Leopold apart, eventually they relented. However, they saw each other only seldom during their first year of incarceration and then they were separated for seven years when Loeb was transferred to a new prison at Stateville. They were reunited in Joliet in 1931.

Perhaps heeding Darrow's advice, upon incarceration the prisoners avoided the kind of publicity they had seemed to revel in upon their arrest. Moreover, both soon began showing signs of rehabilitation.

By 1932, Leopold and Loeb had established a high school for prisoners. They, along with other educated inmates, taught classes, developed curricula, and administered the school. According to Leopold, during this time he and Loeb "were as close as it is possible for two men to be."

However, this period of constructive collaboration would not last. On January 28, 1936, Loeb's cellmate, James Day, attacked him in the shower with a straight razor, probably as a result of a dispute over the amount of money Loeb had been distributing among the prisoners for candy and cigarettes.

Although Day claimed that he acted in self-defense after a sexual overture on Loeb's part, that is unlikely, particularly since Loeb's throat was slashed from behind. Nevertheless, Day was exonerated in a trial that featured a "homosexual panic" defense, with Day's lawyers conjuring Sodom and Gomorrah.

Leopold mourned the loss of his "best pal." "I felt like half of me was dead," he wrote. He later described Loeb as "a living contradiction," someone who possessed some very fine qualities, including a desire to help others, but who lacked a sense of morality and who never felt remorse for the murder of Bobby Franks.

In contrast, Leopold clearly felt remorse. In seeking expiation for his crime, he devoted himself to good works in prison. He volunteered for medical experiments, reformed the prison library, and worked in the prison hospital. He also continued his obsession with learning, mastering additional languages and studying mathematics, as well as other subjects.

## **Life after Prison**

In 1953, Leopold applied for parole. Not only was his application resolutely rejected, but the parole board ruled against hearing another application for twelve years. However, five years later, in early 1958, the parole board reconsidered Leopold's appeal. In March of 1958, having served more than thirty-three years, Leopold was released from prison.

Later that year, he published an autobiography, *Life Plus 99 Years*, in which he accepted responsibility for his part in the murder of Bobby Franks and vowed to seek expiation for his crime.

To avoid harassment by the press, Leopold moved to Puerto Rico. There he obtained a master's degree from the University of Puerto Rico. He continued studying birds and published a book entitled *The Birds of Puerto Rico*. He also taught mathematics at the University of Puerto Rico, and worked as an x-ray and laboratory technician in a hospital.

Leopold seemed to be attempting to redeem himself by living a life of service to others. As Hal Higdon remarked, in his last years Leopold "wanted to be seen as human."

In 1961, Leopold married Trudi Feldman Garcia de Queveda, a former social worker from Baltimore and widow of a Puerto Rican physician.

On August 29, 1971, Leopold died of heart trouble brought on by diabetes. He left his body to the University of Puerto Rico for medical research.

## **Leopold and Loeb in Popular Culture**

The story of Leopold and Loeb has inspired dozens of works of fiction, theater, and film, as well as numerous nonfiction accounts of their crime and trial. Many of these works sensationalize their subject, presenting Leopold and Loeb as sexual degenerates who killed for the pleasure of it. More recently, however, more sophisticated accounts have offered more accurate and more complex portraits of the criminals and their crime.

Some of the more significant works inspired by the Leopold and Loeb case include Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rope* (1948); Richard Fleischer's film *Compulsion* (1959), based on Meyer Levin's best-selling novel of 1956; John Logan's theatrical re-creation of the trial *Never the Sinner* (1988); Tom Kalin's independent art film *Swoon* (1992); Michael Haneke's Austrian film *Funny Games* (1997); *Barbet Schroeder's film Murder by Numbers* (2002); and Stephen Dolginoff's musical *Thrill Me: The Leopold and Loeb Story* (2003).

Hitchcock's film, based on a 1929 play by Patrick Hamilton, and featuring a screenplay by Arthur Laurents, is only loosely based on the actual events of the Leopold and Loeb case, but its characters, wealthy young men who murder a classmate simply for the experience of it, are clearly modeled on the popular image of Leopold and Loeb.

Because of Hollywood censorship, the film never explicitly identifies Philip and Brandon (as the characters are called) as homosexual, but clearly codes their relationship as that of a gay couple by means of their affluence and mannerisms. Brilliantly acted by young gay actors John Dall and Farley Granger, the couple are depicted as normal young men rather than as grotesque degenerates despite the opening scene in which they strangle their victim. Set in a beautiful New York apartment, the film presents a rare picture of homosexual domesticity in the 1940s.

One reason *Rope* continues to be fascinating is because it avoids the pitfalls of the treatments that sensationalize homosexuality. Tautly suspenseful, the film concentrates on the couple's boldness--and depravity--in hiding the body of their victim in the room in which they host a dinner party for his fiancée and father, and on their half-baked understanding of Nietzsche.

While the homosexuality of Philip and Brandon is obvious, it is not explicitly identified as the motive for the killing. When the murder is discovered by a former teacher of theirs (Jimmy Stewart), he suggests obliquely that their sexuality may have contributed to their decision to commit murder: "There must have been something deep inside you from the very start that let you do this thing . . . you strangled the life out of another human being who could live and love as you never could."

But, unlike many other treatments of the Leopold and Loeb case, the emphasis of *Rope* is not on the murder as a sexual killing but as the attempt to commit a "perfect crime," and the linking of the couple's sexuality to their crime is presented tentatively rather than definitively.

The most famous film version of the Leopold and Loeb story is *Compulsion*. Closely based on the details of the 1924 murder, the film is more of a crime story than an exploration of character, though Bradford Dillman and Dean Stockwell as Arlie Strauss and Judd Steiner are effective in the roles.

Although it is well made, the film suffers from its cold war-era homophobia, particularly in its preoccupation with effeminacy and "degeneracy." The characters based on Leopold and Loeb are basically caricatures: the Leopold character that of a weak-willed pansy, the Loeb character that of a manipulative Svengali. While the film only hints at the details of the sexual relationship between the two men, it explores to some degree their emotional dependence and sadomasochistic dynamic. It seems to view the murder itself as sufficiently explained by the "perversion" of the characters.

The two works that explore the homosexual relationship of Leopold and Loeb in greatest detail and with the most accuracy are Tom Kalin's *Swoon* and Stephen Dolginoff's *Thrill Me*.

Kalin's stylish low-budget but beautiful and poetic black-and-white film focuses on the homosexuality of the murderers, but also equally on the pervasive homophobia of the time, including particularly that of the alienists.

Opening with quotations from Leopold von Masoch, for whom "masochism" is named, the film depicts the Leopold-Loeb relationship as deeply sadomasochistic. But it also humanizes the characters and finds in Leopold's obsessive love of Loeb great beauty. Despite some howling anachronisms, it makes an effort to present the events of the crime accurately, even painstakingly recreating some iconic images of the trial.

Perhaps the most unlikely adaptation of the Leopold and Loeb story is Stephen Dolginoff's musical *Thrill Me*. Originally staged in 2003, it had an off-Broadway run in 2005, and has since been produced across the country in regional theaters and also abroad.

A two-character "chamber opera," *Thrill Me* is set in 1958 in Joliet Prison, where Leopold is appearing before the parole board trying to explain his crime more truthfully than before in the hopes that he might finally be released. In songs reminiscent of Kurt Weill and Stephen Sondheim, Dolginoff economically and insightfully delves into the complex relationship between the lovers.

Perhaps most brilliantly, Dolginoff presents the Leopold character as equally devious and manipulative as the Loeb character. Perhaps most refreshingly, he eschews psychologizing and moralizing, simply allowing the lovers to speak for themselves.

## Conclusion

The case of Leopold and Loeb has had a large influence on American popular culture, including especially the association of homosexuality with crime. Although the murder of Bobby Franks was not motivated by lust and did not involve sexual molestation of any kind, nevertheless the presumption remained for many years that he was killed in order somehow to satisfy the degenerate impulses of his bored, rich, "perverted" murderers. Even today, Leopold and Loeb are considered the exemplars of "thrill killers."

The reputation of Leopold and Loeb as thrill killers is due to the apparent motivelessness of their crime. They certainly did not murder for money or out of hatred or passion, the usual motives from murder. Hence, it is easy to describe their crime as a "thrill killing." But part of their designation as thrill killers stems from the mystery and cultural secrecy attached to homosexuality itself. Precisely because homosexual acts were themselves criminalized and thought to be unspeakable, it was easy to conflate one crime with another.

Only as homosexuality has become more accepted in contemporary society has it become possible to recognize the complexity and the humanity of Leopold and Loeb without in any way minimizing the horror of their crime.

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