



## Arvin, Newton (1900-1963)

by Claude J. Summers

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2006 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Newton Arvin was one of the most gifted critics of American literature of the mid-twentieth century. Not only did he write penetrating studies of major American writers, including Hawthorne, Whitman, Melville, and Longfellow, but he also helped demonstrate the persistent value of a kind of criticism that incorporates historical, political, and biographical contexts.

Today, however, he is most remembered as a lover and mentor of the young Truman Capote and as the central figure in a 1960 scandal at Smith College that involved pornography, homosexuality, and betrayal.

He was born Frederick Newton Arvin in Valparaiso, Indiana on August 23, 1900, the fourth of six children of a businessman and his long-suffering wife. A precocious boy, he spent a lonely childhood, alienated from his father who considered him effeminate and weak and from his distant, embittered mother.

Until he developed a friendship with a boy his own age, David Lilienthal, who would go on to become a successful lawyer, chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority, and head of the Atomic Energy Commission, Arvin considered himself "uniquely misbegotten." Derided by his classmates for his bookishness and lack of interest in sports, he was happy to escape Valparaiso for Harvard in 1917.

At Harvard, Arvin blossomed. There he compiled a brilliant academic record--graduating both Phi Beta Kappa and *summa cum laude*--and developed his first adult crush on another young man. He also came under the influence of literary critic Van Wyck Brooks, a socialist whose criticism was politically engaged. The idea that literary criticism could also be social criticism inspired Arvin to devote his life to being "a standard-bearer, conscience, and champion of American literature, a neophyte in Brooks's priesthood," as Barry Werth describes his career choice.

After a brief stint teaching in high school and writing for left-wing magazines, at the age of 22, Arvin began teaching at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. He had planned to stay for only a few years, but wound up spending some 37 years on the faculty there.

Although he frequently complained about the constraints of living in Northampton, which was then a stodgy and conservative town, he appreciated the College's liberal traditions, especially as tested during the McCarthy era, when Smith resisted pressure to fire faculty who had been members of the Communist Party or, like Arvin himself, so-called "fellow travelers."

Although Arvin never became a very good classroom teacher, he soon earned a reputation as a distinguished critic and brought luster to Smith's American Studies program, which became one of the best in the country.

By the time he arrived at Smith, Arvin was well aware of his homosexuality. But he regarded his sexuality as something shameful, a "loathsome affliction" as he would describe it in his diary. At various times in his life, he was more or less comfortable with his homosexuality, but the shame with which he regarded it never completely dissipated.

The guilt he felt for his homosexual desires may explain his 1932 marriage to a former student of his at Smith, Mary Garrison. Predictably incompatible, the lively young woman and the reclusive professor who most valued solitude were unable to live together. She eventually suffered a nervous breakdown and divorced him.

Arvin himself was subject to breakdowns throughout most of his life. He frequently sought refuge in private sanitariums and, in several instances, at the state mental hospital in Northampton. He underwent several treatments designed to "cure" his homosexuality, including psychoanalysis, electroconvulsive therapy, and a regimen of confession and prayer.

### **Arvin's Criticism**

Despite his emotional instability, Arvin nevertheless produced three major works of criticism. Oscar Wilde's dictum that literary criticism is the sincerest form of autobiography is especially apt in the case of Arvin, whose criticism evinces an unusual degree of identification with his subjects. His critical biographies of Hawthorne, Whitman, and Melville are extremely revealing of Arvin himself. By looking at these major figures through the prism of his own tortured psyche, he not only exposed previously unrecognized dimensions of their work, but also (inadvertently) laid bare aspects of his own consciousness, including especially his homosexuality.

*Hawthorne* (1929) established Arvin's reputation as a discerning critic who could probe beneath the surfaces of his subjects to discover hitherto unacknowledged depths. In this book, he explores Hawthorne's fraught relationship with Melville, thus anticipating what would become a recurrent subject in American literary scholarship and also in gay studies. He also finds in Hawthorne the same insecurity regarding masculinity that he himself felt.

Most tellingly, Arvin brilliantly (and revealingly) identifies secrecy and concealment as the keys to understanding Hawthorne's life and work, qualities that the critic--and other homosexuals in a homophobic society--knew first hand and all too well. As Werth observes, "In reading Hawthorne, Arvin identified dark strains that perhaps only someone who cloaked unwanted desires could fully detect."

Similarly, Arvin's study of Whitman is also revealing of both author and subject. In 1938, when Arvin's *Whitman* appeared, the poet's reputation had declined as the result of homophobic attacks, such as those of Mark Van Doren, who argued that Whitman's homosexuality undermined the value of his poetry. Reducing Whitman's poetry to "the unwitting expression of his own abnormal sexuality" rather than seeing it as an expression of political and social progressivism, Van Doren found nothing worthwhile in *Leaves of Grass*. In effect, Arvin wrote his book to rebut Van Doren and to answer the question whether "Whitman's whole prophecy as a democratic poet--and especially the poet of 'universal democratic comradeship'--is invalidated by having its psychological basis in a sexual aberration?"

Arvin reaches the conclusion that "splendid fruits may be grown in . . . bitter and unlikely soil." He forthrightly asserts that the "fact of Whitman's homosexuality" cannot be "denied by any informed reader of the 'Calamus' poems." But rather than affirming the poet's sexuality, he contends that "what interests us in Whitman was not that he was homosexual, but that unlike the vast majority of inverts, even of those creatively gifted, he chose to translate and sublimate his strange, anomalous emotional experience into a political, a constructive, a democratic program." At another point, when discussing Whitman's "Calamus" poems, he observes that "There is, so to say, a harmless, wholesome, sane 'homosexuality' that pervades normal humanity as the mostly powerless bacilli of tuberculosis appear in the healthiest of lungs."

Arvin thus defends Whitman's value as a poet on the grounds that he (unlike most other gifted "inverts")

transcended his homosexuality. In so doing, however, Arvin reveals his deep ambivalence about homosexuality (his own as well as Whitman's), likening it to "bitter and unlikely soil" and to tuberculosis bacilli. By making Whitman an exception, he concedes the assumption that their "sexual aberration" renders most homosexuals incapable of socially advanced vision.

While Arvin asserts the possibility that homosexuals are capable of creating splendid fruit from the bitter soil of their affliction and defends at least some versions of homosexuality as harmless and wholesome, he does so in terms that confirm his internalized homophobia. While his comments in effect defend the value not only of Whitman's work, but also his own, despite its also being rooted in the "bitter and unlikely soil" of homosexuality, the defense is less affirmative than negative in regards to his sexuality.

Similarly, in *Melville* (1950) Arvin presents homosexuality as pathology, a "malady" that Melville only dimly understood. "He was conscious enough, no doubt, of the ardor and intensity of his feelings for members of his own sex," Arvin writes, "but the possibility that such emotions might have a sexual undercurrent can only with the utmost rarity, and then fleetingly, have presented itself to his consciousness." In his reading of Melville, Arvin both downplays the possibility of Melville's acting upon his homosexual impulses--though he identifies the search for a friend as the novelist's great theme--and also projects onto his subject his own conflicted feelings regarding homosexuality, attributing to Melville a confusion that may have been his own.

As he had in Hawthorne, Arvin also discovers in Melville a fundamental gender conflict. Although Melville sought a homosocial life upon the high seas, he was, unlike Whitman, unable to "hold the feminine at a safe distance while he organized his emotional life around his male companionships." Rather, he needed to marry in order to seek a balance between the masculine and feminine within him. Before his marriage, however, the clash between Melville's needs "was terribly intense, and emotionally speaking . . . this is the central fact behind his work." Arvin, thus, locates the roots of Melville's art in his sexual and gender confusions and conflicts, and explains his puzzling marriage by recourse to the same confusions.

In some ways, Arvin's books are quite brave. At a time when homosexuality was a subject very difficult to broach even in liberal academic circles, Arvin persuasively demonstrated that same-sex desire was central to the work of major American literary figures. He helped end a tradition of silence and denial in literary discourse. He may, thus, deserve the epithet Leland Person tentatively bestows on him, "the father of gay American Renaissance studies."

At the same time, however, his characterization of homosexuality is--perhaps inescapably--couched in the homophobic terms of medical discourse and reflects the attitudes of mid-twentieth-century society. Arvin's approach to homosexuality is revealing of his ambivalence toward his own sexuality, but it also illustrates the extraordinary difficulty of writing about homosexuality--particularly in positive terms--during his lifetime. So pervasive and generalized was homophobia in the academy and in mainstream criticism that even to mention the subject was to arouse suspicion. Moreover, it was almost impossible to conceive of it outside the terms of medical discourse, especially in intellectual circles.

Arvin's criticism bears some resemblance to that of F. O. Matthiessen, his contemporary who dominated American literary studies from his position at Harvard. Homosexuality was central to both men's work, though Arvin confronted the subject more directly than Matthiessen, whose approach tended to be indirect and subversive. Both men were committed leftists who saw literary criticism as essentially political. They emphasized the social, historical, and biographical contexts of literature. They, thus, opposed the influence of the so-called "New Criticism" that sought to downplay social and biographical elements in favor of textual analysis.

For all their similarities, however, the two men were extremely different in temperament. Moreover, they worked on different scales. Whereas Matthiessen produced magisterial books, especially *American*

*Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), a work that almost single-handedly defined the American literary canon for decades, Arvin produced relatively small, exquisitely written, and intensely personal books. In print Matthiessen enthusiastically praised Arvin's books, but privately considered him too timid to be a major force in American studies.

In 1950, Matthiessen, depressed over the death of Russell Cheney, his life-partner, and fearful of the McCarthy-era witch-hunts then underway, committed suicide. Many expected that Arvin would be asked to assume his position at Harvard, especially after Arvin was awarded the 1951 National Book Award for nonfiction for *Melville*. But Arvin, who had recently suffered one of his nervous collapses, rebuffed the invitation to teach at Harvard for a year, and thereby signaled his inability to leave his life at Northampton, however vexatious it had become.

In 1950, Edmund Wilson described Arvin as one of only two students of American literature "who can themselves be called first-rate writers." Because of the grace and power of his prose, as well as the penetration of his insights, Arvin's books are still readable. Indeed, Robert Martin has described *Whitman* as "one of the most enduring works of socialist criticism in American literature."

### **Arvin and Capote**

From 1939 until his disgrace in 1960, Arvin was a frequent guest at Yaddo, the writers' colony in Saratoga, New York. He served as a trustee for many years. At Yaddo, he did some of his best work, and became friends with a number of fellow writers, including especially Carson McCullers and Truman Capote.

In 1946, Arvin and Capote fell in love when both were guests at Yaddo. The precocious twenty-one-year-old Capote, at Yaddo to work on his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), which would be dedicated to Arvin, and the forty-six-year-old professor may have been an improbable couple, but they were immediately smitten with each other. Capote found Arvin "a charming person, cultivated in every way, with the most wonderfully subtle mind," while Arvin found "Little T." utterly irresistible, describing him as "a little wizard or magician or alchemist of some wonderful Gothic kind . . . only when you kiss me do I come to life."

The two embarked on an intense love affair, which yielded significant consequences for each. Capote helped Arvin become more open and less ashamed of his homosexuality. He introduced his older lover to gay New York and helped give him a broader frame of reference. Capote, in turn, benefited from Arvin's learning, attending his classes at Smith and meeting (and sometimes shocking) his colleagues. The young novelist, who had not attended college, would later say, "Newton was my Harvard."

Although they two men were in love with each other, their styles were probably too different for them to sustain a love affair for long. Arvin was sometimes embarrassed by Capote's flamboyance, and after the publication of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* made its author a celebrity, he found it difficult to play the part of soothing helpmate.

More decisively, Arvin simply needed more solitude than a full-time relationship could afford. He found it impossible to live with someone else. As Capote, who sought a permanent relationship, came to realize, Arvin was a "weekend caller," unable to maintain a long-term relationship with anyone.

Their affair ended in 1948, but the two remained friends for the rest of Arvin's life.

### **The Smith College Scandal**

After he broke off his relationship with Capote, Arvin became more open and aggressive in seeking sexual contacts. He occasionally spent nights of dissipation at the Everard baths in New York and sometimes frequented the cruising areas of Springfield, Massachusetts, not far from Northampton. These outings left

him alternately exhilarated and filled with self-disgust and shame.

Arvin also began collecting soft-core pornography, including magazines such as *Trim* and *Grecian Guild Pictorial*, which he would sometimes share with younger colleagues. As a result of his purchases of magazines that featured nude or semi-nude young men, Arvin came to the attention of postal authorities, who were in the midst of an antipornography campaign.

On September 2, 1960, three Massachusetts state troopers, accompanied by a postal inspector and a local policeman, knocked on the door of Arvin's apartment. He admitted them and gave them permission to search his premises. The police seized "obscene pictures" and twenty diaries in which Arvin had recorded the details of his sex life, as well as letters from Capote and others.

Most puzzlingly, Arvin freely gave the police the names of friends to whom he had shown the pictures.

Arvin was charged with a felony count of possessing obscene material and also with being "a lewd and lascivious person in speech and behavior." In the days following, the police raided the homes and apartments of others, ultimately charging five other people--including two of Arvin's younger colleagues at Smith--with crimes stemming from the investigation.

The news of Arvin's arrest set off a panic among homosexuals in the Northeast. Many individuals destroyed their collections of pornography, as well as other images that might conceivably be considered pornographic.

One of Smith's most illustrious faculty members, architectural historian Henry Russell Hitchcock, was known to have a collection of magazines such as *Tomorrow's Man* and *Strength and Health* and letters from other homosexuals, including the composer Virgil Thomson, recounting their sexual exploits. Hitchcock was in Europe at the time, but his house-sitter, realizing that Hitchcock might be in danger, destroyed pictures, magazines, letters, and other documents.

Young English instructor William Stacey Johnson, who had been a close friend of Arvin and had seen some of his magazines, not only destroyed his own pornography, but discreetly left town.

As it turned out, thanks largely to a District Attorney who sensibly wanted to minimize the misery that the utterly unnecessary scandal would cause, the court proceedings turned out to be less sensational than the news accounts--with their lurid headlines announcing the presence of a vice ring in staid Northampton--promised.

Through a deal made with the attorneys of the men involved, the District Attorney agreed not to ask for prison time for the defendants, who would be subjected to suspended jail terms and fines. He also agreed not to force the defendants to endure a full-scale trial in which their sexual activities would be detailed and dissected. (This last promise was at least partially broken when the most zealous policeman involved in the investigation read a signed confession from one of the defendants admitting that he had committed homosexual acts with Arvin and another defendant over the last two years.)

Arvin was sentenced to a suspended one-year jail term, fined \$1,000 on the obscenity charge, fined an additional \$200 for being a "lewd and lascivious" person, and placed on probation for two years.

Arvin's two young colleagues who were caught up in the affair, Greek scholar Edward "Ned" Spofford and Shakespearean Joel Dorius, were given similar sentences, but, unlike Arvin, they reserved the right to appeal their convictions on constitutional grounds.

Spofford had been one of Arvin's closest friends. He had gently rebuffed the older man's sexual advances, but they had become confidantes. At first he assumed that his home had been raided and he had been arrested as a result of material that the police had discovered in their raid of Arvin's apartment. Only gradually did it dawn on him that Arvin had freely offered up his and Dorius's names.

The question of why Arvin would "name names" is one that continues to haunt those interested in the Smith College scandal. Arvin had followed closely the McCarthyite investigations in which former members of the Communist Party were dragged before congressional committees and pressured to reveal who else had been members of left-wing organizations, so he was not naive. He very well knew both the ethical issues involved in "naming names" and the opprobrium with which members of the Left regarded those who betrayed their friends and colleagues.

The question may never be answered definitively. The only explanation Arvin himself gave was a pregnant comment he made to Spofford on the day of their trial, "I couldn't go through this alone."

Arvin may have been frightened by the thuggish appearance and behavior of the policemen. He may have been so emotionally distraught as not to have been thinking clearly. He may also have been unconsciously motivated by resentment at Spofford's lack of interest in him sexually. Almost certainly, his cooperation with the police was at least partially triggered by the masochistic shame he felt over his homosexuality. In some part of his psyche, he must have regarded his arrest and exposure as a fitting punishment for his "loathsome affliction."

As a result of the scandal, Arvin was forced to retire from Smith College at half-salary.

As the appeals on constitutional grounds of the conviction of Spofford and Dorius made their way through the courts, the question as to their continued employment at Smith came to the fore. Against the recommendation of the faculty and the President, Smith College trustees insisted that their contracts not be renewed. Since the trustees said that the instructors' dubious convictions for possessing pornography had no effect on their decision, they apparently fired the instructors simply for being exposed as homosexual.

After the trustees reaffirmed their decision on Good Friday, 1961, and departed for church, Nellie Mendenhall, the wife of the college President, remarked, "They had just crucified two guys and were going off to celebrate the crucifixion of another one."

The scandal took an enormous toll on all concerned, perhaps especially on Spofford and Dorius. Happily, the appeals of their sentences were successful. Following some key rulings of the United States Supreme Court regarding both the possession of soft-core pornography and search warrants, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court reversed their convictions in 1963.

Despite being branded as convicts and homosexuals and being forced out of the country to find employment abroad, Spofford and Dorius eventually went on to successful academic careers, Spofford at Stanford University, Dorius at San Francisco State University. Both were deeply scarred by the scandal, Spofford later suffering several breakdowns that were delayed reactions to the events of 1960.

After the publication of Barry Werth's excellent account of the scandal in *The Scarlet Professor: Newton Arvin: A Literary Life Shattered by Scandal* (2001) brought it to wide public attention, the Smith College Board of Trustees, while refusing to apologize to Spofford and Dorius, in effect acknowledged the error of its earlier incarnation in failing to support the instructors. In 2002, the trustees voted to establish the \$100,000 Dorius/Spofford Fund for the Study of Civil Liberties and Freedom of Expression and the Newton Arvin Prize in American Studies.

The scandal may be seen as one of the last gasps of McCarthyism and as a telling reminder of the precariousness of homosexuals in a virulently homophobic culture. Even in the relatively liberal precincts of academia, homosexuals in the 1950s and early 1960s were vulnerable to witch-hunts and morality crusades.

Still, as Werth observes, the scandal occurred at almost the last moment it could have, for with the election of a young, new President in 1960, the beginning of the (heterosexual) sexual revolution, and Supreme Court rulings that protected privacy at least to some degree, the country had turned a corner.

## Conclusion

Before and after his sentencing, Arvin sought refuge in the Northampton state mental hospital. He was eventually released and attempted to put his life together. He received a great deal of support from friends across the country, and from some colleagues at Smith, but continued to regard himself as something of a pariah.

Arvin's last years were more productive than one could have predicted. He had just put the finishing touches on *Longfellow: His Life and Work* (1963), agreed to undertake the task of editing an ambitious series of paperbacks on American writers, and had begun an autobiography when he was stricken ill near the end of 1962. He died of pancreatic cancer on March 21, 1963.

It is not clear that Arvin ever acknowledged even to himself any culpability for ensnaring his friends and sexual partners in the Smith College scandal. He thus remains an ambiguous figure. As Caleb Crain describes him, "he was a victim of the closet who cooperated with its enforcers." In so doing, he caused the suffering of others.

After Truman Capote's death in 1984, it was revealed that Capote had left money in his will to establish the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism in Memory of Newton Arvin. The Capote-Arvin award (now given both for lifetime achievement and for a particular work of criticism) is by far the most lucrative acknowledgment of excellence in the field of literary criticism.

## Bibliography

Cain, Caleb. "Search and Destroy." *The New York Times* (August 5, 2001): <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D05E2D7173DF936A3575BC0A9679C8B63&n=Top%2FFeatures%2FBooks%2FBook%20Reviews>

DeMott, Benjamin. "The Sad Tale of Newton Arvin." *The New York Review of Books* 48.19 (November 29, 2001): <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/14863>

Martin, Robert K. "Newton Arvin: Literary Critic and Lewd Person." *American Literary History* 16.2 (2004): 290-317.

Person, Leland. "The Scarlet Reader: Newton Arvin on Hawthorne and Melville." *Hawthorne in Salem Scholars Forum* (2002): <http://hawthorneinsalem.org/ScholarsForum/PersonTheScarletReader.html>

Werth, Barry. *The Scarlet Professor: Newton Arvin: A Literary Life Shattered by Scandal*. New York: Doubleday, 2001.

## About the Author

**Claude J. Summers** is William E. Stirton Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has published widely on seventeenth- and twentieth-century English literature, including book-length studies of E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, as well

as *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall* and *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*. He is General Editor of [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com). In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combatting homophobia.