



Boston Marriages

by Teresa Theophano

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Novelist Sarah Orne Jewett.

Boston marriages--romantic unions between women that were usually monogamous but not necessarily sexual--flourished in the late nineteenth century. The term was coined in New England, around the time that numerous women's colleges such as Vassar, Smith, and Wellesley emerged.

The concept of love between women was, of course, not new; "Boston marriage" and the very similar, earlier nineteenth-century term "romantic friendship" connote a type of relationship that dates back to at least the Renaissance in the West, and possibly further in the non-Western world.

Boston marriages signified a new phenomenon, however, in that the women involved in them tended to be college-educated, feminist, financially independent, and career-minded--hardly the social norm among females of the day. These characteristics distinguish women bound together in Boston marriages from participants in the earlier romantic friendships.

The novelist Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) is a prime example of a woman involved in a Boston marriage. A writer who described the dynamics of the Boston marriage in her 1877 novel *Deephaven*, Jewett maintained a same-sex relationship of her own for decades. She and her partner, Annie Fields (1834-1915), belonged to a support group of couples in Boston marriages.

Another couple involved in a Boston marriage were Alice James (1849-1892) and Katharine Loring (1849-1943). Their relationship may have inspired Alice James's brother Henry to write *The Bostonians* (1885) as an exploration of Boston marriages.

Boston marriages were long-term and committed, and resembled traditional marriages in many ways. But remaining unattached to men gave women a chance to attain significant decision-making power over their own lives, power they would have forfeited to their husbands in a conventional marriage.

The social acceptance of the Boston marriage was predicated upon the common assumption that the women involved did not practice any form of genital sexuality with each other. At the time, sexologists had not begun the regular use of pejorative terms such as "sexual inversion" and "perversion" to decry homosexuality, and the term "lesbian" was not yet in popular usage.

Since nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women were often considered not to have strong sex drives--sex for them was supposedly a duty, and intended for procreation only--nothing was deemed wrong with women's public displays of affection. Neither were their sharing households and even beds considered suspicious.

Whether women in these romantic relationships did indeed refrain from sexual contact with each other is difficult to determine, but it is very likely that some, if not all, of Boston marriage couples were physically as well as emotionally involved. Their love letters to each other often indicate a passion that could hardly be considered platonic, and modern lesbian historians and writers have speculated that if members of

Boston marriages were alive today, they would openly identify as lesbian.

Although the phrase "Boston marriage" went out of vogue when "lesbian" became part of the American vocabulary, and the phenomenon is often viewed as obsolete today, such unions are not exclusively a thing of the past. The stereotype of "lesbian bed death"--the tendency of long-term lesbian couples to cease sexual activity--aside, numerous gay women do identify themselves as participants in Boston marriages today.

Because fulfillment through non-sexual intimacy with a female partner is possible for many modern-day lesbians, some continue sexless relationships with each other, asserting that romantic involvements are not always predicated upon sexual activity.

Non-sexual romantic relationships are not, of course, an exclusively lesbian or even female phenomenon. Other people--including male homosexual couples--also participate in very close, loving, non-sexual relationships that transcend the boundaries of friendship. But interestingly, no term analogous to "Boston marriage" has been employed to describe such relationships among gay men or heterosexuals.

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