The history of the modern subcultures of homosexuality offers a number of spectacular partnerships between cities and their gay inhabitants. Just to mention 1910s Harlem, 1920s Paris, 1930s Berlin, and 1950s New York in this context is to highlight a major presence of lesbian and gay artists in the development of modern culture. One can add more specific locations (Bloomsbury, Greenwich Village) and cultural movements: the Generation of ‘27 in Seville, the San Francisco Renaissance and its associations with the Beat generation, the New York School of Poets and its associations with Abstract Expressionism, and so on. One could trace the city’s accommodation of same-sex desire back, through history and myth, from Haroun al-Raschid’s Baghdad, through Renaissance Florence, to Martial’s Rome and Socrates’ Athens. One could even invoke the fate of the Cities of the Plain. But “the homosexual” as a type with a stable, lasting identity is a late nineteenth-century construction. Someone similar had been seen in the Whitmanian loafer and the Baudelairean flâneur, but the new type was largely based on subcultural behavior observed in European cities of the fin de siècle.

The city means abundance – of servicemen in Marcel Proust’s wartime Paris, of black men in Federico García Lorca’s New York, of sailors in Jean Genet’s Brest, of proletarian youths in the Rome of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Sandro Penna. So many men, so little time... Specific locations, by virtue of the opportunities they offer for meeting, or even for actual sexual encounters, often acquire not only an erotic character but also one of high risk, since those who go there to meet each other may be laying themselves open to the dangers of arrest or homophobic attack. Parks, public lavatories, shopping arcades or markets with a particular reputation and, of course, gay bars and nightclubs repeatedly crop up in gay fiction as sites of significance, where important plot-driving events take place. Some such spaces are shared with the general populace or are predominantly gay only at night.
The initial anonymity of city life can have alienating effects; but for many lesbians and gay men, it provides some of the reassurance and protection of the closet. Indeed, anonymity may be the main attraction. It allows for the conditions of self-reinvention, whereby one escapes the prohibitions and inhibitions of family life.

The city novel in general and the gay novel in particular tends to start with an arrival – that of the wide-eyed, young provincial eager for new experiences but nervous of risk. Mikhail Kuzmin’s novel *Wings* (1906) opens with a rail journey into St. Petersburg. His mother having died, Vanya Smurov is being transferred there by his uncle. The city begins to invade the train and Vanya’s consciousness, first in the form of commuting travelers, and then in the view from the window: not the glamorous palaces Vanya has been expecting, but suburban kitchen gardens and cemeteries, which duly give way to a polluted cityscape of six-story tenements and wooden shacks. The bourgeois social environment of school and extended family that the youth enters is not as unprepossessing as this, but it is still a disappointment. However, the aesthete Larion Dmitriyevich Stroop, who befriends Vanya, sees a particular virtue in these apparently confining circumstances. He says to the youth, “You’re in bad surroundings; but that may be for the best, as you’re divested of the prejudices of any kind of traditional life, and you could become a perfectly modern man if you wanted.”

In his allegiances to art and beauty, Stroop is pretty modern himself, and, knowing there is something odd about him, Vanya feels he should conceal from his uncle their chance meeting in the Summer Garden.

Where Mikhail Kuzmin invents an exotic, orientalist Alexandria in his verse cycle *Alexandrian Songs* (1906), Constantine Cavafy sees superimposed layers of cultures of homosexual desire, with the modern city of shopping, manual labor, bureaucracy, and cruising at the top. In his poems of modern Alexandrian life, strangers meet in cafés and go on meeting in the same or similar places; they become lovers in the private rooms above such places, presumably rented by the hour. Their hands meet across the merchandise in a shop; their eyes meet, in reflection, in the window of another shop. The plain are stopped in their tracks by the beautiful. Those with money rent the bodies of those without. For all the brevity of their physical collisions, and the sordidness of many of the locations in which they seize these clandestine moments together, their encounters often generate lasting beauty when transformed by those of them who are writers or artists, although it may not happen until many years later, when memories are fixed in the eternity of art. All of it is the product of the conditions of city life.

By the time Mark Doty comes to write his poem “Chanteuse,” paying homage to Cavafy and using one of its phrases as the title of the collection in
which it appears, *My Alexandria* (1993), the great Egyptian city has become a calm – one might almost say remote – state of mind. Doty’s Alexandria is a cultural palimpsest whose most recent layer, the city of the present day, is of no interest to him. Doty’s Cavafy’s Alexandria can be taken anywhere, eternally present in the past. This context is also conjured up in Marilyn Hacker’s love poem “Cities,” in which the speaker says, from an obvious geographical distance, “The tree in the yard is heavy with snow, / the house is as still as a boat in morning, / and I taste Alexandria on your tongue.”

The title character of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) leads the respectable, upper-class side of his life in West London, but when he yearns to experience the riskier, racier pleasures, he heads for the docklands of the East. It is here that he visits brothels and opium dens. To be sure, there are equivocal moments in the West End – for instance, a fruit seller in Covent Garden gives him cherries and refuses to take payment for them – and his intense friendships with Lord Henry Wotton and the artist Basil Hallward develop within the acceptable homosocial conventions of society clubs and residences. However, his implied secret life, which takes place at night and of which we see only brief glimpses – such as when he is observed brawling with foreign sailors in Whitechapel – takes place among the working-class and the transient, cosmopolitan underclasses of the great imperial port.

By stepping outside his class, the well-born homosexual encounters the physical heft of proletarian masculinity. He establishes multiple, transient contacts with such men without thereby subverting with misplaced loyalty the demands of family and dynasty. But, however easy his commercial transactions with them, he is always haunted by the possible power-reversal of blackmail or violence. The working-class man and his part of town are both a promise and a threat. In Proust, the Parisian *beau monde* is never hermetically sealed off from the rest of humanity. Its lower reaches are always permeable to upstarts; its great houses are staffed by the lower orders; and any aristocrat – or any male one, at least – may adopt a virtual cloak of invisibility, stepping out into the streets at night, incognito, and making his way to some discreet establishment like Jupien’s brothel to purchase the splendors of working-class flesh. During the war, soldiers supplement their incomes by working in Jupien’s place, whether in or out of uniform.

Of course, many novels about lesbian women are set in cities, too, and many about gay men are set in suburbs, small towns, villages, and the open countryside. But if we generalize about the male and female constructions of homosexual/gay identities that have come to prevail in western societies in the past century, and about the recognizable types and stereotypes that have most been used to represent them, we must acknowledge that
gay male identity is more closely associated than its lesbian equivalent with cities and city life. Colette’s Claudine learns a thing or two about lesbian courtship while she is attending her provincial school in *Claudine at School* (1900); but it is not until her father moves his family to Paris that she meets her first homosexual men, her beautiful cousin Marcel and his more experienced lover Charlie in *Claudine in Paris* (1901). Although Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) is so much a London novel, its main lesbian episode – Clarissa’s memories of a period in her teens when she loved Sally Seton – takes place in the grounds and interior of a country house. In *Nightwood* (1936), Djuna Barnes tends to associate Matthew O’Connor, the cross-dressing, homosexual, fake gynecologist, with city life, but her lesbian characters, Nora and Robin, less so. (Conversely, in *Maurice* [begun in 1913, posthumously published in 1971], E. M. Forster could find no suitable happy ending for two male lovers in London, having to settle instead for sending them off into the implausible greenwood together.)

When Stephen Gordon, the central character of Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) goes to Paris, she finds – horror of horrors – a subculture of male and female inverts who seek comfort in each other’s company. Her own origins are in the landed gentry: she grows up on a rural estate, following the country pursuits that might have been enjoyed by her father’s son, if he had had one. Were she a man, she would simply carve out a life for herself following the example of her father and his. It is the Great War that takes her to France – as an ambulance driver – and the end of the war that takes her to Paris. For all her discomfort among the city’s inverts, she reluctantly has to accept that her future lies in their subculture.

There is a similar ambivalence about the queer city in García Lorca’s *Poet in New York* (1940). García Lorca had visited New York in 1927 and was bowled over by the glamorous modernity of Manhattan, a place throbbing with both creative and destructive energy. It gave him a distinctly erotic thrill. Like Walt Whitman, for whom the city was a hive of promiscuous comradeship, he was enthralled by the abundance of working men he saw there, and especially by so many black men. But he was evidently disturbed by the visibility of a specifically homosexual subculture. No enemy of camp in his own mannerisms and sense of humor, he seems to have found the commitment of stereotypically queer men to an openly defiant lifestyle perverse. As a consequence, in his “Ode to Walt Whitman” we are faced with a man-loving man sympathetic to a range of stigmatized sexualities nevertheless firing off a volley of homophobic epithets at camp men whose willed flamboyance tells him too much about himself.

In “The Tunnel,” the infernal seventh section of his epic *The Bridge* (1930), Hart Crane descends into the underworld of the New York subway system
and finds there, in a men’s room, that love has been reduced to “A burnt match skating in a urinal.” (The image is of casual sex in public spaces.)

Regard it as you will – temple of desire, cesspit of vice – the public lavatory became a key symbolic feature of urban infrastructure in gay male literature, the space in which the anonymity enforced by social disapproval proved most beneficial – in the pleasurable opportunities it afforded – even in morally compromising circumstances associated with squalor and filth. Later in the century, Angus Wilson chose such a place for the moment of moral crisis at the heart of his first novel, *Hemlock and After* (1952). The liberalism of the book’s central character, Bernard Sands, is severely tested and found wanting when he witnesses the arrest of a fellow homosexual for importuning in the men’s lavatories in Leicester Square. Instead of seizing an opportunity to intervene, Bernard feels a surge of excitement at the look of terror in the other man’s eyes. Wilson thereby associates Bernard with what he refers to as “the wielders of the knout and the rubber truncheon.”

A wonderful short story by Alfred Chester, “In Praise of Vespasian,” published in his collection *Behold Goliath* (1964), follows Joaquin’s quest for love from Spain to France, England, the United States, and back to France. The search involves his trailing an Algerian from pissoir to pissoir (or *vespasienne*) across Paris; passing notes between cubicles in an English cottage; through a realization, in a tearoom in New York (here called Sodom), that an affectation of indifference is probably the best expression of lust – until, on the verge of death by bowel cancer, he experiences a eucharistic moment of revelation at the feet of a gigantic laborer in another Parisian pissoir. Denis Belloc writes an autobiographical novel, *Neons* (1987) telling of a life of prostitution and petty crime in and around the public lavatories of Paris. Mutsuo Takahashi’s long poem “Ode” (1971, revised 1980) stretches what might have been a narrowly realist representation of a sad individual pursuing a monotonously sordid lifestyle to a point at which, as a portrayal of desire whose satisfaction and disappointment desperation renders uncannily similar, the poem seems to have built up to a general relevance. Its public lavatories are no less recognizably universal than are the disembodied genitalia that haunt them.

By contrast with Crane’s response to New York, the great Portuguese Modernist poet Fernando Pessoa, writing under his Whitman-influenced heteronym Alvaro de Campos, finds much to celebrate in the prolific sexual perversion of city life. In his “Triumphal Ode,” when he mentions “The falsely feminine grace of sauntering homosexuals” he does so with self-evident approval. “(Ah, how I’d love to be the pander of all this!),” he adds, just three lines later. As the poem develops, the whole of the modern city is subsumed into an erotic vision united by the speaker’s roving eye: “Ah, gazing is for me a sexual perversion!”
The Berlin of Christopher Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) provides something of the same perverse satisfaction for a narrator who sees all but participates in very little. Not until his post-Stonewall memoir *Christopher and His Kind* (1976) did Isherwood reveal not only his motive for having gone to Berlin in the first place, but also the atmospherics of his whole sojourn, in a single, striking sentence: “To Christopher, Berlin meant Boys.” John Henry Mackay’s novel *The Hustler* (1926) had already given a much clearer picture of the lives of young male prostitutes operating from the Passage, a shopping arcade off Unter den Linden; but it was Isherwood’s Berlin stories and their later manifestations – the Broadway plays *I Am a Camera* and *Cabaret* – that caught the imagination of non-Germans as having distilled the essence of interwar Berlin’s “decadence,” but without the potential offence of explicit detail.

In its reference to the myth of the city of Sodom (where Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back at the city they were fleeing and witnessed its destruction), the title of Gore Vidal’s novel *The City and the Pillar* (1948) refers to none of its specific urban locations (which include New York, Seattle, Los Angeles, and New Orleans). In Jim Willard’s memory, all of them are Sodom by contrast with the pastoral glade in which he first made love with another boy; but so is male-male sex itself when experienced in anything less than innocent circumstances. In a similar mood, the opening page of John Rechy’s *City of Night* (1963) proposes mapping out the whole of “America as one vast City of Night stretching gaudily from Times Square to Hollywood Boulevard … America at night fusing its dark cities into the unmistakable shape of loneliness.”

New York took over from interwar Berlin as the world’s most representative city of homosexuality. W. H. Auden’s poem “September 1, 1939” was written in Dizzy’s Club, a gay bar on West 52nd Street in New York, soon after his emigration to the United States just before the outbreak of the Second World War. It was here that Auden famously referred back to the decade in which he had made his name as “a low dishonest decade.” He used the New York bar scene again as his significant urban location for the broader discussion of human relations in his “Baroque eclogue,” *The Age of Anxiety* (1948), which is initially set in a New York bar; its four main characters, Malin, Rosetta, Quant, and Emble, drift off into a pastoral dreamscape to work through the detailed implications of their desire for Emble (he being no less narcissistically enamored of himself than the others are).

New York’s specific reputation, whether as a thriving haven for social and sexual diversity or as a sink of iniquity, tends to be centered on the traditional bohemianism of Greenwich Village. For the lesbian pulp novelist Ann Bannon, the women’s bars of the Village are places that introduce...
woman-loving women to their identities as lesbians. Audre Lorde is more ambivalent about the lesbian scene in the Village in the 1950s in her memoir *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), regarding it as both capable of providing something of the supportive atmosphere of an alternative family and yet, for non-white women like herself, as prone to racism as the broader society. The Greenwich Village of James Baldwin’s *Another Country* (1963) is a much more complex place in which, for all its much-touted bohemianism, it is still difficult for a white man and a black woman to walk down the street together without attracting glances that range from the curious to the hostile. Yet it is also a place in which it is possible to begin to construct the many possibilities arising when people of different genders, ethnicities, backgrounds, and sexualities are brought together. But no matter how benevolent an environment the Village affords lovers of many types, nothing it offers can compare with the pastoral idyll Yves and Eric have been enjoying on a French beach. When Eric returns to New York and, in the novel’s closing pages, Yves follows him there, the tone in which Baldwin presents their impending reunion is distinctly ominous.

When Molly Bolt, the central character of Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) arrives in New York – her roots are in rural Pennsylvania – she comes armed with the knowledge, found in “some trashy book,” that Washington Square is the hub of Greenwich Village and the Village is the hub of the city’s homosexual life. But she is disappointed to find that the Square is not teeming with the visibly homosexual people she has been hoping for. She spends her first night in a wrecked car with Calvin, a homeless man who just happens to be gay himself. He then shows her around the Village and takes her to her first lesbian bar, where she receives her first lesson in the fashion for the butch/femme division of gender roles among lesbian women. (The book is critical, as she is, of this supposed aping of heterosexual mores.) Calvin soon leaves to seek his fortune in San Francisco, but Molly decides to stay in what she calls “this ugly city.”

Novels of the gay liberation period – that is, between the Stonewall Riots of 1968 and the onset of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s – depict a Manhattan in the grip of a sexual frenzy that is both celebrated and deplored. The title of Michael Rumaker’s novel *A Day and a Night at the Baths* (1979) accurately delineates its contents. Dedicated to the nine gay men who died in a fire at the Everard Baths on West 28th Street, Manhattan, on May 25, 1977, the novel overlays a dream of sexual freedom with an ominous nightmare of death by suicide, accident, or disease. Rumaker finds it difficult to celebrate the pleasures of the sexual carnival without acknowledging the skull beneath the skin. So immersed in New York’s club scene are the central characters of Andrew Holleran’s novel *Dancer from the Dance*
Woods (1978) – over which looms a similarly ominous cloud – and so detached from its social context is their lifestyle, with its apparently limitless cycle of repetitive pleasures (sex and drugs and disco dancing), that when one of them uncharacteristically finds himself in a massive gay rights demonstration, marching to Central Park in “a sea of humanity,” he is amazed to recognize virtually nobody from his own extensive social circle. Indeed, he concludes “there were tons of men in that city who weren’t on the circuit, who didn’t dance, [and who] didn’t cruise.”

Larry Kramer’s notorious novel Faggots (1978) opens with a sequence of invented statistics that are either merely plausible or startling, depending on the individual reader’s point of view. “There are 2,556,596 faggots in the New York City area,” the novel begins. The use of the insulting epithet here and as the book’s title sets the tone for a narrative heavily critical of, yet luridly indulgent in, lifestyles of purely quantitative sexual pleasure rather than qualitative affectional connection. The opening passage continues: “The largest number, 983,919, live in Manhattan. 186,991 live in Queens, or just across the river. 181,236 live in Brooklyn and 180,009 live in the Bronx. 2,469 live on Staten Island.”

The next occasion on which Kramer would grab the reader’s attention with an arresting statistic would be March 7, 1983, when the New York Native would carry his article “1,112 and Counting” (referring to the number of deaths in the AIDS epidemic by that date) on its front page. Kramer’s play The Normal Heart (1985), an angry, autobiographical account of setting up Gay Men’s Health Crisis in the face of the indifference and active obstruction of Mayor Ed Koch and the city authorities, was soon performed internationally on the apparent understanding that the specifics of the New York experience had not only emotional resonance but also direct political relevance elsewhere.

The extremes of the gay liberation period’s sexual carnival in New York City – on the deserted and derelict wharves, in the Meatpacking District, in the bath houses, and the more notorious of the night clubs – and the beginnings of the epidemic – the soaring death statistics, the struggle to keep gay venues from being closed down, the violent antipathy of press and politicians – were so much written about that New York’s exceptionality came to seem representative. Ever since, the localism of the Stonewall riots has been celebrated in cities around the world on Gay Pride Day.

As a genre, the celebratory narrative of sexual excess within a newly confident and burgeoning subculture metamorphoses into the AIDS novel of collective tragedies within the decline, fall, and rebirth of that same subculture. Quantity is significant in both: numbers of sexual contexts, numbers of deaths. Explicitly or not, the politics of one (the struggle for gay liberation) become those of the other (the allied struggles for humane treatment,
for research funding, for accelerated drug approvals, for social acceptance, and against death itself). Like all tragedy, this later incarnation of the genre, when contrasted with the earlier, whether intertextually or within a single novel, is heavily freighted with dramatic irony. Edmund White’s trilogy of autobiographical novels might be taken as representative of the arc of these social developments: from a provincial boyhood (*A Boy’s Own Story*, 1982), through student life trying out both homosexuality and heterosexuality before a move to New York City and unequivocal homosexuality, even being present at the Stonewall riots (*The Beautiful Room is Empty*, 1988); then from the period of gay liberation to the gradual onset and remorseless denouement of the epidemic (*The Farewell Symphony*, 1997). Of course, it was not only gay New Yorkers for whom the epidemic was like a war zone. The Lebanese novelist Rabih Alameddine’s *Koolaid: The Art of War* (1998) draws parallels between the civil war in Beirut in the 1980s and, in the subsequent decade, a San Francisco ravaged by AIDS.

At its best, the post-gay-liberationist city provides a communitarian spirit that British-born poet Thom Gunn and Armistead Maupin (whose *Tales of the City* series of novels began in 1978) find in San Francisco, and Sara Schulman discovers in New York. And yet, although the city is so often represented as a place where there is safety in numbers as well as choice, its streets and lots can be very dangerous places, even by day. In Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), when Will Beckwith ventures into East London, unlike Dorian Gray who encountered exotic and illicit pleasures, he is queer-bashed by skinheads and his first edition of a Ronald Firbank novel is ruined. London life in Neil Bartlett’s *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (1990) is ruptured by regular outbreaks of homophobic violence, against which only the solidarity of the bar-based subculture is proof. Exploiting all the vulnerabilities of gay communities as well as all of their hard-won freedoms, a new subgenre of lesbian and gay crime fiction grew out of the post-Stonewall urban environment, usually with detectives who were themselves gay. Los Angeles alone hosts the detectives of Joseph Hansen (whose openly gay Dave Brandstetter solves crimes in twelve novels, starting with *Fadeout* in 1970), Katherine V. Forrest (whose lesbian detective Kate Delafield appears in eight novels, starting with *Amateur City* in 1984), and Michael Nava (whose Henry Rios first appears in *The Little Death* in 1986).

As European imperialism went into retreat, so too – if slowly – did the erotic Orientalism of western literatures, giving way to the fresh realism of native writers when their national cultures allowed them to speak of such scandalous matters. For several decades after the Second World War, for homosexual men the archetypal city of the Orient had been Tangier,
notwithstanding the fact that it lies further to the west than all of the great European cities bar Lisbon. Apart from any other consideration, it was easy to get to, with minimal inconvenient travel beyond the bounds of Europe – a mere ferry crossing from Gibraltar. Versions of this compromised paradise for the seekers of sexual and narcotic freedoms appear in the fiction of such writers as Paul Bowles, William S. Burroughs, and Robin Maugham. Many years later, Tahar Ben Jelloun’s novel *Leaving Tangier* (2006) reverses the pattern. Ben Jelloun objected to Bowles’s habit of speaking on behalf, and in the voices, of illiterate Moroccan youths such as Ahmed Yacoubi, Larbi Layachi, and Mohammed Mrabet. His own work constitutes a major contribution in the speaking-back to the cultures of sexual colonialism.

In an effort to depict the reality and plurality of life in Cairo, Naguib Mahfouz daringly added homosexuality to the social mix, thereby stirring up a hostile response to his fiction from the beginning of his career. In *Midaq Alley* (1947), the café owner Kirsha uses his relative wealth to seduce a youth who works in a shop. In *Sugar Street* (1957), part three of the *Cairo Trilogy*, the intense friendship of Ridwan and Hilmi seems unexceptional until they solicit the influence of Abdurahim Pasha Isa, who is known to be homosexual. This association turns a private matter into something nameable and therefore at risk. But the main point, as far as concerns these novels, is to identify the variations of same-sex desire as contributing to the diverse living arrangements of the great metropolis.

Perhaps not surprisingly, cities around the world have comparable infrastructure to be taken advantage of by gay men subject to varying degrees of social anathema and legal sanction. The public park and the protective gay bar are recurrent in fiction. For Yuichi, the central character of Yukio Mishima’s *Forbidden Colors* (1951), the open spaces of Tokyo offer up the most fruitful erotic possibilities. He meets the waiter Eichan in a park to whose sexual usefulness he has been alerted by an overheard conversation between two homosexual men, and he later meets seventeen-year-old Minoru at the zoo in Ueno Park. The two main locations of Pai Hsien-yung’s novel *Crystal Boys* (1983), both in Taipei, are the New Park on Guanqian Street and the Cozy Nest, a gay bar on the bustling Lane 125 of Nanking East Road. The park is the stamping ground of a vibrant subculture – a loose, extended family – of rent boys, many of them banished from their families of origin and homeless.

As depicted in R. Raj Rao’s novel *The Boyfriend* (2003), Bombay shows signs of the effects of globalization in its gay subcultures. The book’s gay bar has the evocative name Testosterone; and the collective response of a group of camp gay men to the machinations of a blackmailing cop is given the name Operation Stonewall. For the reader, too, there is much that is
cross-culturally identifiable. For instance, the book begins with a pickup in the men’s lavatories at Bombay’s Churchgate railway station. In Manil Suri’s The City of Devi (2013), Jaz first meets Karun in a park near the Oval grounds in Bombay/Mumbai (both names are used). Karun is sitting on a bench between the children’s slides and swings, oblivious of all the families around him, reading a book. When he looks up and notices Jaz’s predatory gaze, he flees like a startled deer. Thus begins a long pursuit around the obstacles of Karun’s internalized homophobia and through the increasingly apocalyptic landscape of a city devastated by pollution, religious strife, international terrorism, and war with Pakistan.

Benefiting from much historical scholarship in queer studies, recent writers have often followed a trend of associating their own present lives with those of lesbians and gay men in the past. Perhaps the most adventurous of these reimaginings has been the theatrical and fictional work of Neil Bartlett. In his book about Oscar Wilde, Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde (1988), he is unable after living in London for many years to see the detail of the late-1980s city without imagining, beneath or behind them, the matching details of the same locations in the London of the 1890s. Typically, at one point, he asks himself, “How did the boys wear their hair in Soho a hundred years ago?” Following much the same principle, Jonathan Kemp’s London Triptych (2010) interleaves gay life stories set in the title city in the 1890s, the 1950s, and the 1990s. Across their various novels, Maureen Duffy and Sarah Waters have similarly mapped out and compared separate periods of lesbian life in London.

Meanwhile, city-based authors continue, like Theocritus in Alexandria, to turn from city to countryside when the pressures of urban living seem to overwhelm the possibilities of simple romance. This habit, whether nostalgic (a projection of adolescent memories) or idealistic (dreaming of rural escape) both undermines and strengthens the image of the city as an apt location for homosexual lives. This ambivalence is not unique to gay literature. Cities have often been thought of as better places in which to seek love than to settle down with it, places suited better to desire than to its fulfillment.

NOTES