

Institution: Nottingham Trent University
Unit of Assessment: D29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Establishing the Gay Canon
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Gregory Woods has located gay literature throughout the mainstream canon, broadened the canon of gay literature, and demonstrated in creative practice the potential depth and complexity of gay literature. His work has exerted a significant impact on gay creative/critical practitioners, on teachers, arts administrators, booksellers, etc., as well as on the general reader, gay or not. Evidence shows that he has both interpreted and created cultural capital that enriches and expands the lives, imaginations and sensibilities of individuals and groups, particularly those disadvantaged or marginalised because of their sexuality. He has also significantly informed and influenced the content of education beyond his host university.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Woods has been at NTU since 1990, Prof of Gay & Lesbian Studies since 1998. The first such appointment in the UK, this is listed in Stonewall's timeline of significant events in gay history. Woods' chairing (2004-13) of the Gender Studies expert panel for the European Science Foundation's <i>European Reference Index for the Humanities</i> extended his work on the enabling and broadening of gay literary studies.</p> <p>The standard late 20th Century critical response to gay literature was that (a) no good author's homosexuality had significant bearing on his work; (b) to read it as having such a bearing was to limit the work's claim on universality; (c) great writers could therefore not be included in a gay canon with their greatness intact; (d) a canon of unambiguously gay writing was, by definition, narrow in scope and low in quality.</p> <p>In the 1990s, Section 28 of the Local Government Act had inhibited public discussion of homosexuality since 1988 and the World Health Organization had only just declassified it as a mental illness (1992); but combination therapies had begun to temper the ravages of AIDS, the cause of consistent levels of homophobia in the media. Working to validate gay culture at a time of extreme social pressure, Woods wrote the first <i>History of Gay Literature</i> to a commission from Yale University Press. Widely regarded as having defined the parameters of the field, it contained the first serious gay-studies examination of black African literature, and the first, outside Germany, of gay Holocaust literature; its final chapter, on poetry and paradox, served as a manifesto for Woods' own verse.</p> <p>The book's main findings were that (a) existing commentaries were deficient in their lack of attention to gay themes, tending to seek them only on the margins, narrow in their mapping of the field, and shallow in the capabilities attributed to gay literature; and (b) gay criticism could identify a much broader range and deeper reach of texts at the centre of the mainstream, of potential significance to all readers.</p> <p>Woods' poetry (five Carcanet collections since 1992) belongs to the same project, researching alternative modes of desire, using varied poetic forms, a key aim being the use of virtuosic technique and thematic nuance to refute the received idea that gay literature consists of narrow special pleading and raw autobiography. The key research method involves mixing classical and modernist forms, invoking in the former a long tradition and developing with the latter fresh expressions of developing sexual identities. This exploration of forms has reinforced the sense of a received gay tradition to which he is contributing. Working towards social inclusion, his creative project brings the homoerotic and homosocial into the centre of social and cultural life, just as his critical writing reads 'gay literature' as being central—and essential—to the canon.</p>
<p>3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Gregory Woods, <i>A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition</i> (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998; 2nd ed., 1999; trans. <i>Historia de la Literatura Gay</i> [Madrid: Akal, 2001]): 9780300072013, 9780300080889, 9788446011965 2) Gregory Woods, <i>May I Say Nothing</i> (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998): 9781857543841

Impact case study (REF3b)

- 3) Gregory Woods, *The District Commissioner's Dreams* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002): 9781857545968
- 4) Gregory Woods, *Quidnunc* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007): 9781857549461
- 5) Gregory Woods, *An Ordinary Dog* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2011): 9781847770783
- 6) Gender Studies, European Reference Index for the Humanities (European Science Foundation, 2007, 2011) <http://www.esf.org/hosting-experts/scientific-review-groups/humanities/erih-european-reference-index-for-the-humanities.html>

REF guidance notes invite evidence of quality. The following paragraphs illustrate qualitative responses to (a) Woods' critical research, and (b) his creative writing as research.

(a) Early responses to ***A History of Gay Literature*** attest to the work's quality and to its immediate impact. In addition to those detailed below, reviews were published in the UK in *Choice*, *Dark Horse*, *The Independent*, and the *Sunday Times*; overseas, reviews appeared in *Pissaro*, *Odisea*, *Lambda Book Report*, *La Repubblica*, and the *Washington Post*.

- It was regarded as a primary/essential point of reference: 'A monument to the progress of gay literary criticism. No one to date has attempted such a grand world-wide history ... It cannot be recommended highly enough'—David Azzolina, *Library Journal* special recommendation (1/4/98); 'a landmark work'—Adam Mars-Jones, *The Observer* (1/2/98); '[It] will swiftly come to be regarded in the academic world as an exemplary piece of work'—Jonathan Bate, *Sunday Telegraph* (22/2/98).
- From the start, it was predicted to be of profound influence: 'he has traced almost all the manifestations of homosexual desire ... Woods has created an alternative tradition'—Peter Ackroyd, *The Times* (12/2/98); 'Dense but rewarding ... Throughout, his point that homoerotic traditions are a literary constant is well-taken and persuasively argued'—*Publishers Weekly* (9/2/98).
- It achieved a major expansion of its field: 'Woods has attempted nothing less than an overview of the literature of the entire world as it relates to male homosexuality. The range of his erudition is daunting'—Graeme Woolaston, *Glasgow Herald* (26/2/98); 'Hugely ambitious, scrupulously documented'—Neil Powell, *Gay Times*; 'Attempts an unprecedented scope and is full of shrewd appreciations'—Alan Sinfield, *Gay Times* books of the year 1998; 'He has performed a superhuman task'—Thom Gunn;

(b) Woods' **poetry** has been praised, especially for its technical flair: 'The poet with the sharpest technique for social verse in Britain today. He lets off fireworks through the official groves of English literature'—Peter Porter; 'There are few poets around who can rival him technically'—Matt Simpson, *Stride* (2/08); 'A quite astonishingly gifted formalist. You feel that there's no kind of verse he couldn't use, adapt, subvert, play games with'—John Lucas, *Staple* (Summer/Autumn 08); 'I'm not sure I had ever written a fan letter before to a poet I had not met, but that's what I did when I read two poems by Gregory Woods ... I admired them especially for their technical virtuosity, in that it was technique completely used, never for the sake of cleverness but as a component of feeling ... What an enviable talent Gregory Woods has'—Thom Gunn; 'I have read Gregory Woods' poems with real excitement'—Sir Stephen Spender; 'The foremost gay poet working in Britain today'—Alan Sinfield, *Gay Times* (12/95); 'Probably, the finest gay poet in the United Kingdom ... a poet of considerable technical ability and intellectual depth'—Sinéad Morrissey.

Woods' critical/creative research has also had impact across genres and art forms. Colm Tóibín said reading Woods' *History* crucially influenced the genesis of his Booker-shortlisted 2004 novel about Henry James, *The Master* (*San Francisco Chronicle* 19/06/04). Tóibín used his *LRB* review of it as the opening chapter of *Love in a Dark Time: Gay Lives from Wilde to Almódovar* (2002); see also Tóibín, *All a Novelist Needs* (2010), p.25. Michael Finnissy included a musical portrait of Woods in 'Seventeen Immortal Homosexual Poets', the core section of his epic piano work *The History of Photography in Sound*, premiered at the Royal Academy of Music (01/01) and published by OUP; released on 5 CDs, performed by Ian Pace, msv77501 (10/2013).

Impact case study (REF3b)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

(a) Reach

Woods' research has achieved impact in the fields of **civil society, cultural life, and public discourse** through a wide range of outputs in 4 main areas: publications, public engagement, education, and the Gender Studies list of the *European Reference Index for the Humanities* project.

Publications:

Sales figures (09/13): *History of Gay Literature* 5,672; *Historia de la literatura gay* 1,028. Typically, sales of poetry are much lower (e.g. *Quidnunc* c200, *An Ordinary Dog* c250), yet impact may prove no less profound and lasting.

Public engagement:

Woods is an exceptional example of writer, academic and community activist who has brought his work directly to **community groups and public services** to address and challenge homophobia, promote mental health and aspiration among marginalized young people and promote HIV/AIDS awareness and HIV prevention (e.g. his famous safer-sex poem 'My Lover Loves' in *May I Say Nothing*). His readings and talks at health service and community group events emphasize key messages about the desirability of challenging prejudice and directly address the health and social needs of his target audience. He has concentrated on **regional events for library services**, the NHS, local authorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender groups, etc. In this REF period he gave 3 **film introductions** (Broadway, Nottingham), one including a post-screening discussion with the director and producer; **poetry readings** in bookshops (Waterstone's, Nottingham; Gay's the Word, London) and at festivals (Lowdham x2, Dulwich, Beeston, Queer Up North Manchester, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans History Month x2 in London, and Ljubljana Gay and Lesbian Film Festival), and the opening public event at Nottingham Contemporary. He participated in **discussions on gay literature** at Leicester's States of Independence independent presses day (x3) and at Nottingham/shire Libraries Readers Day (x2 including an in-conversation with novelist Armistead Maupin) and spoke on gay erotic literature at Parlare, Royal Festival Hall, London. He gave **art gallery talks** at Nottingham Contemporary, Djanogly Gallery, and Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL. He gave **networking addresses** at Ashfield District Council and Nottingham/shire Healthcare Trust Employee Partnership Conference, and was guest of honour and keynote speaker at the annual [Rainbow Heritage Awards](#) evening (02/13), Nottingham Council House. Dr James Moran said of Woods (BBC Radio Nottingham 6/08/13): 'He is a really important local figure ... Lots of people will have seen him talking about his poetry in local libraries, art galleries, theatres and all sorts of places around Nottingham ... He's really adept at swapping between the seminar room and then going out and talking to real people and getting them excited about literature'.

Woods has further developed his **public engagement through online social media**: his [website](#) has had 32,000 visits; his new [blog](#) 1600+ visits; and he has 1400+ followers on [Twitter](#).

Education beyond the UoA:

Woods' critical work is foundational in gay studies worldwide. It is used on courses too numerous and varied to list here, but examples include: "Queering Fictions in the 20th Century" (ENLI10326), U of Edinburgh; MA in Modern Literature, U of Leicester; "African-American Literature" (EN3303), Royal Holloway, London; "Literary Representation and the History of Homosexuality" (ENGL3021), UCL; English PhD course, Solapur U, India; and others at California State U, Birkbeck, Bergamo, Venezia Ca' Foscari. It was used as an organisational model for *The Gay Mormon Literature Project* (2009-) by Gerald Argetsinger, Rochester Institute of Technology. Woods' poetry was used on courses at (e.g.) Durham, Istanbul, and U of the Arts London. (See 5.1.) More broadly, in mainstream literary studies, *A History of Gay Literature* is the standard text, referenced in such textbooks as Pope, *The English Studies Book* (Routledge 2002), Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics* (Routledge 2008), Barry, *Beginning Theory* (MUP 2009).

Woods has facilitated gay academic research in many further ways. A major example from this REF period is his chairing (2004-13) of the Gender Studies expert panel for the *European*

Reference Index for the Humanities. The *European Reference Index for the Humanities* lists have been widely used by research agencies at national and university levels for evaluating research proposals and outputs. The project has now been taken over by the Norwegian Research Council.

(b) Significance

Since there is no established consensus on how to measure the impact of literary criticism or poetry beyond quantification of outputs (as above), NTU commissioned an independent survey, recruited via social media, to provide a snapshot of the significance of Woods' research. (See 5.1.) Unprecedented in the Humanities, this approach provides **direct empirical evidence of impact** which might otherwise be merely speculative. Given that self-completion surveys represent a small sample, usually in the order of 2%, of the eligible population, this survey suggests, through participation alone, evidence of the impact of Woods' work on many thousands of people worldwide. By several measures (countries, professions, etc.) this sample shows far-reaching international impact. 123 people responded from a range of categories, including teachers in HE and schools, arts administrators, writers, critics, booksellers, as well as lay readers, from countries including Brazil, Germany, Hungary, India, Italy, Latvia, Singapore, S.Africa, Spain and USA. The survey also provides both quantitative and qualitative evidence of depth of impact. Over 90% said Woods' work had substantially affected their understanding of gay literature and their sense of its breadth, and over 80% had changed their view of what openly gay poetry can achieve. Nearly 80% said he had changed their view of homophobia in culture.

Respondents attested to a profound and lasting **impact that extends across educational, creative, social, and cultural contexts**: 'I've come back to the [History] again and again over the years, and it continues to offer insight and guidance'. His work 'opened paths for critical thinking' and had 'a liberating intellectual effect'. 'He broke down doors so that a new generation ... could walk through those doors easily'. 'He has made me realise the huge complexity and richness of gay literature and its centrality within Western culture'.

His critical/creative work has had a profound effect on writers: 'He helps me feel less alone in my work'; 'His early studies ... more or less gave me the theme of my first collection'. He 'influenced my thinking and my practice as a writer'. He 'inspired my own work'.

Broader impact was felt by readers in general, empowering their sense of gay identity: he 'helped me in forming my own identity as a gay man'. 'As a gay man, I have found my own life and experience elucidated'. His poetry 'changed my life'. 'His work has been, for me, a way of life and a mode of being'. 'He is the most important poet writing on gay themes outside the USA. He ... corrected many of the stereotypes of gay men in popular culture'. The poetry was said to be 'exemplary ... putting queer theory into practice,' 'an eye-opener ... as to what poetry can be used for politically,' and 'a revelation, giving voice to things so often still not voiced'.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

5.1 Ergo survey summary.

This survey was conducted by a communications, management, performance monitoring, and data analysis consultancy with a specialist focus on public sector, community and voluntary agencies and organizations. It accessed a wide range of audiences/readers from the creative, educational and social sectors, including representatives from participating organizations, willing to provide testimony to the reach and significance of work associated with this case study. An online questionnaire, with a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions, was prepared in Snap software and posted on the Ergo website. Recruitment to the survey was via links and circulation on Facebook, Twitter, and Woods' website and blog. The survey ran for four months from July to October 2013. After data cleansing there were 123 valid responses; no questions were mandatory, so that the number of responses to each question varies. This survey asked respondents to provide feedback on this case study's underpinning research and on the impact activities associated with it, including Woods' poetry readings and talks about gay/queer culture. Of those that date the impact of Woods' research, a substantial majority situate the effects, influence, and consequences of this work within the impact period. Ergo provides an activity-specific summary of the survey results at http://www.ergoclear.com/NTU/Establishing_the_Gay_Canon.pdf.