

where both partners are forceful, outgoing, and aggressive, there is more anal sex."

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Stephen O. Murray

CORVO, BARON
See Rolfe, Frederick.

COWARD, NOEL, SIR
(1899-1973)

British playwright, songwriter, and entertainer. Born at Teddington near London in 1899, Noel Coward made his debut on the stage as Prince Mussel in Lila Field's *The Goldfish* in January 1911. For several years a highly popular boy actor, he began his own career with his first comedy, *I'll Leave It to You* (1920). His succeeding plays were marked by a frivolity and a gift for exploiting the moment to the fullest that catered to the disenchantment, the

lack of concern with meanings and essences, of the interwar generation. *Fallen Angels* and *Easy Virtue* (1925) exploited the public's fascination with sex, scandal, and pseudo-sophistication. His reputation as a playwright rests on *Hay Fever* (1925), *Private Lives* (1930), *Design for Living* (1933), *Hands Across the Sea* (1936), *Blithe Spirit* (1941), and *Present Laughter* (1943). In all these comedies the characters are adults living in the male adolescent's fantasy world where there is no family life to speak of, no children to care for, no commitment except to pleasure. The characters do no real work; and money—in a decade of depression, hunger marches, and then war—is simply taken for granted. Incarnations of vanity and selfishness, they appeal to the audience because their frivolity has a kind of stoic dignity. Written in a few days each, his best plays exhibit the aggressive edge of a performer on the stage of life who as a homosexual had mastered the disguise crucial for survival.

Two less remembered plays, *Cavalcade* (1931) and *This Happy Breed* (1942), appealed to the political chauvinism of the day and were even considered serious patriotic statements about England and her fighting spirit. Many of his plays were subsequently filmed, from *The Queen Was in the Parlour* (1927) to *Tonight at 8:30* (1952).

When, in the 1950s, his plays had lost public favor, he took his message of frivolity to the audience in person as a cabaret performer, mocking the conventions of the theatre with such impish songs as "Why must the show go on?" and "There are bad times just around the corner." Once, when asked how he would be remembered by future generations, Coward shrewdly replied "By my charm."

Coward was homosexual, but his private life was unsensational. Rebecca West wrote of him: "There was impeccable dignity in his sexual life, which was reticent but untainted by pretence." He enjoyed sex as much as anyone, and made no secret of the fact, but a list of his sexual

partners would be uninteresting. When he fell in love, he was in the state of agitation which the ancient Greeks had called *aphrosyne*, a total loss of self-control that left him unable to write, obsessively jealous, and driven to verbal cruelty at the expense of the loved one.

Noel Coward is the classic example of the British "man of the theatre" of the twentieth century. His plays do not make pleasurable reading: they need to be seen and heard. Rich in wit and feeling, they reveal the author's talent above all in the design of the scenes and the scintillating dialogue. They are always more entertaining than profound, appealing to the element in the Anglo-Saxon character that rejects anything intellectual and wants only to spend an evening in the theatre to be relieved of the cares of the day. Unlike such authors as Wilde and Firbank, he rarely attempted the epigram or toyed directly with ideas in his plays. He shared the homosexual sense of living for the moment and not for the posterity that would never be. His comedies are masterful less for the situations in which the characters find themselves than for the dialogue by which they extricate themselves from them. But however wanting in ideas his comedies may have been, they captivated audiences for a generation, and made the author a phenomenon, a beloved theatrical personality. While Coward could not openly reveal his homosexuality to an Anglo-American public that had not reached the level of sophistication needed to accept it, his sexuality tinted the image of life that his plays projected onto the stage and screen.

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Warren Johansson

CRANE, HART (1899–1932)

American poet. Born in Ohio, Crane lived mainly with the family of his mother after his parents' separation when he was three. From his mother's Christian Science beliefs (which he formally abandoned) he distilled a kind of "home-brew" neo-Platonism in which true reality was remote, and when glimpsed, evanescent. His poetry tends to recall epiphanic moments of ecstasy, which have occurred fleetingly in the past or can be hoped for, rather than exhibit the fruits of any steady vision. Because of syntactic and other uncertainties, the poems are often hard to interpret. Undoubtedly these difficulties of resolution were linked to his double sense of alienation as a homosexual and an artist coming to maturity in an America that prized "normalcy."

After failing to find satisfactory employment in his father's businesses, Crane moved to New York City where he worked as a copy writer in an advertising agency. The intensity of life in the metropolis was both a creative goad and an intolerable strain. In 1923 he fell in love with the heterosexual Slater Brown, since Brown only wanted friendship, Crane sought sexual satisfaction in the speakeasies and with sailors, who then ranked as major homosexual icons. For most of his life Crane was troubled by the fact that his intellectual friends did not sympathize with his sexual nature. In 1924, however, Crane fell in love with a Danish publisher, Emil Opffer, and his feelings were reciprocated. The wonder of this event gave him the energy to envision his ambitious cycle *The Bridge*, which he was never able to carry out as he had intended.

Crane's poetry was influenced by the Elizabethan writers and the French symbolists, as well as living modernists, such as T. S. Eliot. By the time he began *The Bridge*, however, Whitman had emerged as the dominant influence; the older Brooklyn poet was important to Crane both for his sense that America itself was