



# The Man Who Would Marry Susan Sontag

*And Other  
Intimate  
Portraits  
of the  
Bohemian  
Era*

**Edward Field**

The Man  
Who Would Marry  
Susan Sontag

*And Other Intimate Literary Portraits  
of the Bohemian Era*

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# Preface

*Once, at a family wedding, a cousin of mine said to the young people we were sitting with, "Before there were hippies, there were beatniks, and before there were beatniks, there were bohemians, and that's what she was." Pointing at me.*

Theodora ("Teddie") Blum McKee

The bohemian era of the literary world I knew has vanished, and it may be necessary to define it for the current generation, which is very different from mine and which seems to see the arts as a power struggle as well as a pathway to celebrity and money. We called that "selling out," but nowadays who can afford not to sell out—you have to do anything that allows you to pay the rent and, if possible, go on with your creative work.

Looking back, it seems a quirk of my generation, so different from today's, that we believed a true artist should flee the blandishments of the world in order to create his work. If you became famous it must only happen in spite of your rejecting fame, and preferably after death, when you could no longer "sell out." Nobody I knew ever admitted he wanted to be famous. If we secretly wanted popular success, we weren't prepared to compromise in any way for it.

It should be stressed from the beginning that bohemian life was not about celebrities. There were a few big successes, of course, like Edna St. Vincent Millay and Allen Ginsberg, and scandalous figures like the now-forgotten poet Maxwell Bodenheim, whose sexual

exploits and tawdry death were headline events, but mostly we were all sharing the adventure of the arts and sexual freedom together. If fame came, it was usually a by-product of personal exploration and development, though it's true that Ginsberg was a natural promoter of himself and his circle of friends. That was really beside the point, or maybe was the point, for bohemian life was about unconventionality and ideals, and the Beats famously combined both. And if you just wanted to enjoy living in the Village, you could always say you were a poet. In fact, "poet" was the generic term for any bohemian without talent or ambition.

When I arrived in Greenwich Village in 1946 after World War II as an NYU student on the GI Bill, I was immediately captivated by what seemed to me the glamour of the bohemian world with its legends of artists and writers, and even more, by its acceptance of homosexuals. From then on, I had no interest in an academic career, as almost any neophyte writer might today, or any conventional path, even if this meant abandoning the possibility of a secure income—poetry would certainly never bring me one. Being gay, of course, I was not going to have the responsibility of supporting a family. Not that Villagers worried about that much—women were considered able to take care of themselves. A symbol of the bohemian disdain for money was Joe Gould, the scion of the wealthy clan, who had rejected everything his family stood for and slept in Village doorways clutching a paper shopping bag, supposedly with his great poetic opus in it. That was what my commercial artist father worried about when he saw me drawn into Village life—that I would become a homeless bum, standing in the snow in Washington Square without a coat.

But the Village was the first taste of relaxing and just being myself that I had ever known—the need to hide being gay unnecessary—and it was exhilarating. For the bohemian world's first principle was Sexual Freedom, which welcomed all the rejects and refugees from a Puritan America that never allowed much dissent in any area, especially out in the provinces. In the Village it was the opposite, and whatever you were was acceptable. If we were social outcasts, we were proudly, defiantly so. But back then, we were a pitifully small

band in exile—homosexuals, blacks, sluts, psychotics, drag queens, radicals of all varieties, artists, ne'er-do-wells. Nowadays, when you can live your alternate lifestyle in almost any part of the country (even if the Matthew Shepherds are still murdered sometimes), it is probably hard to imagine how small a community we were.

The bohemian world was also in the vanguard of political thinking, in reaction to the racism and economic inequality of the country, with its hypocritical cant about democracy. And it was in the Village that the artists unanimously opposed our entry into World War I to the point of declaring, from the top of the Washington Square arch, the Village an independent republic. Greenwich Village, admittedly with limitations, was freer than the rest of the country about black-white socializing. Except behind the barn, which has always been integrated, even in the Deep South, Greenwich Village was the only place in segregated America where one could see mixed-race couples in the open. I had never known blacks before, but now I walked the Village streets, sometimes hand in hand, with black friends. But even here, there were thugs, and some restaurants and businesses didn't like serving mixed-groups. But in the arts/bohemian community integration was an established fact. To find a freer atmosphere than the Village, blacks had to go to Paris, which at the time was pretty much a haven from prejudice.

Oddly, along with left-wing politics and rejection of religion, bohemians at the same time were equally devotees of mystical practices like ouija boards, astrology, and palm reading. Not to speak of the writings of Kahlil Gibran. And Gurdjieff. And Madame Blavatsky. Well before all the gurus set up shop in the sixties. Vegetarianism often went along with all that.

Modern art was our real religion, our Movement. The "moderns" were part of an arts generation that rejected popular culture and took pride in being difficult—obscurity was practically a requirement for avant-garde poetry. At the same time, modern poetry broke with the Victorian conventions of florid expression, though the struggle between a literary language and colloquial usage continues. Looked at another way, modern art was always about demonstrating its



superiority over the common herd, setting oneself apart from the “philistines” out in the provinces of America who demanded simplicities and banalities, who stifled creativity and your sexuality. In short, we were out to sound different from the daily papers, from advertising culture, from anything conventional. What’s more, the goal was even to sound different from each other. For instance, each of the poets who are in the canon of modern poetry has a unique voice. There were always imitators to be sure, but it is telling that none of the poets in this book learned their craft in workshops, as almost all do today, which produces such a uniformity of style. In my youth, if you wanted to be a writer, you didn’t take a course or enter an MFA program. Alma Routson, Fritz Peters, Frank O’Hara, Robert Friend, May Swenson, Arthur Gregor, Richard Howard, and Ralph Pomeroy learned their craft by doing it, on their own. Robert Friend was the only academic among them, but he too never attended a “workshop.” It distresses me that the universities as an establishment now have such a lock on poetry. It’s a kind of pre-censorship that controls where poetry can go.

One of the main factors that ended the bohemian era, the necessity for a bohemian “movement,” was the Supreme Court decision in the late 1950s to allow Grove Press to publish Henry Miller’s previously banned *Tropic of Cancer* and the notorious *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* by D. H. Lawrence. The censorship of books before then—with the sneaking in of forbidden books like James Joyce’s *Ulysses* past Customs and the U.S. Post Office—which resulted from a government that functioned as a moral arbiter over literature, has largely disappeared, though censorship in the mass media is increasing. Those publishing barriers falling resulted in the whole country loosening up, and spread many of the ideas of bohemianism around the country. So the freedom to read was one of the main forces that has liberalized the United States, led it to grow up, and in some sense made the Village and its little band of bohemians outmoded.

It was Andy Warhol who declared the end of bohemianism with his camp emphasis on celebrity. Suddenly, becoming successful and famous became the goal of creative artists, and the bohemian ideal

was finished. Among my “portraits,” Susan Sontag is a good case in point. She came out of the academic world, was an academic, but in her desire to be a writer, initially took the arch-bohemian Alfred Chester as her role model. However her ambitions were entirely different from his starving-artist-in-a-garret mentality, for she was unwavering in her quest for fame. She only belonged to the bohemian world because she was a lesbian, but she networked relentlessly. Frank O’Hara bridged the old world and the new. He cared little for personal fame, but didn’t sneer at the rich, and, indeed, cultivated them as intimates and art patrons—he saw the future. James Baldwin also became famous, but it was never his goal. Historical necessity, which he could not refuse, chose him as a spokesman for his people at a moment when his voice could make a difference. Thus, each of my subjects could be defined in a different historical relationship to bohemianism.



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*The Man Who Would Marry Susan Sontag*



# 1

I discovered poetry as a soldier during World War II. In 1943, my unit, having finished Basic Training in Miami Beach, was boarding a troop train for a slow journey of several days across the country to an unknown destination, when a Red Cross worker handed each of us a bag of necessities for the trip, toothbrush, comb, candy bar—and a paperback. My book was, fatefully, a Louis Untermeyer anthology of great poems of the English language, which I devoured on the train. Three days later when I got off that train I knew what I wanted to be—a poet—in spite of, at the age of eighteen, never having written a line.

That anthology was essentially my total knowledge of poetry until two years later, when, as a newly minted navigator, I guided a B-17, one of the famous Flying Fortresses, across the North Atlantic to an airbase in England. My best buddy in another plane in the convoy was a prematurely bald fellow navigator, whom I was secretly in love with. Dave had gone to Cornell and was cynical about everything. When I confessed to him that Rupert Brooke was my favorite poet, he laughed scornfully and said that the greatest modern poet

was T. S. Eliot. I'd never heard of him. He showed me "Prufrock" and "The Waste Land" and I was mystified. I didn't have a clue what they were about!

My real introduction to modern poetry came on an airbase in the Midlands, two hours north of London, from which I was flying bombing missions over Germany. After an exhausting daylong flight I would go to the Officers' Club on the base and drink whiskey sours to unwind, and it was there that I met my first real poet ever. Coman Leavenworth, a gnomelike young man with a crooked, one might say dirty, smile and a beak of a nose that seemed to reflect his aristocratic Anglo-Saxon origins, had already published poems in literary magazines like *Poetry* (Chicago). As a ground officer with a less demanding job than us fly-boys, Coman got down to London regularly, and over drinks in the Officers' Club I would drink in his reports about the poets he met at the Gargoyle Club, a hangout for writers—among them, the English poets George Barker and Stephen Spender, and the Americans, now largely forgotten, Harry Brown and Dunstan Thompson—most of whom seemed to be gay, or if married, gay friendly. How the English poets stayed out of the services I don't know, but the Americans, in and out of uniform, were all working either for *Stars & Stripes*, the newspaper of the U.S. Army, or for the Office of War Information. After the war, Harry Brown's best-selling war novel *A Walk in the Sun* was made into a movie and he became a successful screenwriter.

Under Coman's influence I bought George Barker's *Noctambules*, a now-forgotten poem that began, thrillingly, with the unforgettable words, in that era of persecution of homosexuals and near-blackout of gay writing, "The gay paraders of the esplanade, the wanderers in time's shade . . ."—I already knew what he was talking about there, for most of my sexual experiences had been, necessarily, pickups in the dark—and a little book of Dylan Thomas with its bracing lines, "my wine you drink, my bread you snap." But it was Dunstan Thompson's poems that really knocked me for a loop. "The red-haired robber in the ravished bed. . . ." and "The boy who brought me beauty brought me death. . . ." and "Waiting for the telephone to



ring / Watching for a letter in the box. . . .” I was hooked for life. I’m still dazzled.

In December 1945, a year after my arrival in England with the Army Air Corps, and with the war over, I returned to America on an aircraft carrier whose flight deck crumpled under battering North Atlantic gales. One of the first things I did after getting home was to contact Dunstan Thompson, whom I had heard so much about from Coman Leavenworth, and who, a civilian again, was also now back in the States. Still wearing my Air Force uniform with silver wings and battle ribbons on my Eisenhower jacket—a new addition to the uniform that hugged the body fetchingly and led Coman to say with his dirty grin that the top brass must have been horrified when they realized they’d allowed such a revealing innovation—I met Dunstan Thompson for drinks at the I-2-3 Club on New York’s Upper East Side, where a cocktail pianist tinkled away in the background to the subdued conversation at the tables. It was a new world for me, a world of sophistication. The perfect aesthete, Thompson had a wonderful dome of a head with bulging eyes and a minimal chin, and he waved his long delicate fingers expressively—a dead ringer for a drawing of Keats in the National Portrait Gallery in London. I was in awe. His poetry did nothing to disguise the fact that he was homosexual—in fact, his high aesthetic pose more than justified it. He used the word “gay” with abandon in his poems, though it was still not in general use—“like that” and “queer” were more common. Dunstan had been to Harvard and was at a stage of cultural development I could never hope to reach, though I would make lists in my notebook of all the subjects I needed to master, the books I should read. I had barely begun writing poetry myself, but I already knew I didn’t belong in that elegant Upper East Side setting he fit into so easily—I’d never be Dunstan Thompson’s kind of poet or intellectual.

I guess if I’d gone to bed with him, as he wanted, our relationship would have developed and I might have learned more about him. As it turned out, this was to be our only contact. But he continued to be my favorite poet for years, and I still read with pleasure

those flagrantly open paeans and elegies to his affairs with doomed sailors and soldiers and airmen.

Shortly after our meeting Dunstan left the States to live in England and would never return. It was a great mystery when he disappeared from the literary world, and I was not to learn his extraordinary story for many years. Coman Leavenworth also dropped out of my life, though later on, when I sent him an announcement of my first book, he replied with a condescending note that, from a high aesthetic position, referred distastefully to the book as a commercial proposition. Protected by his family's money from the "commercial" world of poetry with its uglinesses, he seems to have kept his purity by retreating behind the protecting walls of his Park Avenue apartment.

That February 1946, I re-enrolled at New York University, which I had attended briefly before the war, and quickly discovered the literary set in the cafeteria. Learning about Existentialism and orgone boxes and socialism became far more exciting than anything in my classes, so my attendance was spotty. Though I proclaimed myself a poet, my efforts to write didn't amount to much, and what I did was either instinctive outpourings of a juvenile nature or textbook exercises in poetry forms I read about in Harvard scholar Robert Hillier's poetry manual, recommended to me by Dunstan Thompson. At NYU, I think I was accepted by the undemanding cafeteria crowd more for my good looks than my knowledge.

At the cafeteria I also met a person who was later to figure significantly in my life, someone who lived his life as a complete bohemian.

## 2

Even before his death in 1971, Alfred Chester was almost completely forgotten. By the late sixties, his life had degenerated into madness, and with his irrational behavior he had alienated as many people as he could, even breaking off with his closest friends. During the years after he disappeared from the literary scene and attempted to silence with drugs and alcohol the voices in his head that were involved in his creative powers, his work went out of print, and it was too painful to think much about him. Yet, for years, he had been a brilliant presence in the literary world, his writing had been widely admired, he was an important influence on the literary development of such writers as Cynthia Ozick and Susan Sontag . . . and my best friend.

It seems strange to say about someone who would become such a rich presence in my life, but Alfred Chester was only this odd-looking guy in the NYU cafeteria where I hung out with the bohemian/literary crowd. I knew he wrote for the college literary magazines, but I arrogantly dismissed those as amateur publications, and