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 ENGL 7365: Gay and Lesbian Literatures  
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Fight or Flight: Betrayal as a Catalyst for Coming of Age in *Two Boys Kissing*  
 and *Rubyfruit Jungle*

Hardship is an inevitable fact of life, and one of the most difficult hardships to face is that of betrayal. The act of betrayal can lead to simple disappointment to utter destruction.

Additionally, betrayal can take many forms: betrayal by an entity or organization entrusted with one's safety or well-being, betrayal by a lover or close family member, and—perhaps the ultimate betrayal—the betrayal of oneself. While suffering this hardship or series of hardships is a universal, perhaps betrayal is best magnified by examining marginalized groups. Betrayal may come from various sources, including organizational betrayal, betrayal by loved ones, and betrayal to oneself. Through gay and lesbian literature, particularly Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* and David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing*, the theme of betrayal propels the coming-of-age for the characters, pushing them into a “fight or flight” mode, in which the character either matures and grasps his or her independence despite the heartbreak of betrayal, or the character flees into escapism and retreats defeated.

Perhaps one of the most frustrating forms of betrayal comes from an entity that is tasked to support or protect a person or group. While there may be an emotional disconnect from the organization or institution, facing falseness or double-crossing from larger “protective” groups can cause one to suffer a type of heartbreak and discontentment that can scar the spirit and lead to strains in personal relationships. Rita Mae Brown tackles the issue of lesbian groups being less than inclusive when the protagonist of *Rubyfruit Jungle* moves to New York. Molly Bolt arrives in New York after various previous rejections. Finally identifying as a lesbian, Molly was

**Comment [V1]:** Go back and add direct references from the stories and outside sources. Find more sources that will work for *Two Boys Kissing*

**Comment [V2]:** Should I add *The Summer We Got Free* to the discussion?

**Comment [V3]:** Discuss types of betrayal from most distant (outside groups/organizations/govt) to most personal (lovers/family then the self)

optimistic that her move to New York from Florida, from a small town to a large city, would yield to more positive and inclusive experiences as a lesbian. However, once she goes to a lesbian bar, she finds that even within this cityscape, where she imagined total inclusion, there were still limitations. She discovers that women at this particular bar stereotype and seek out potential lovers who are either “femme” (or feminine) or “butch” (or more masculine), depending on their tastes. Molly immediately feels betrayed. She identifies as both femme and butch, depending on the situation or her mood. As a child, she was often criticized for acting like a tomboy, yet she also possesses feminine qualities. If she doesn’t fit within the larger lesbian community, then where can she turn? While this disheartens Molly initially, she does not allow this obstacle get in her way. Molly’s independent streak and her determination help her as she works to achieve her goals, allowing her to become a more mature and knowledgeable young adult focused on goals larger than a relationship or even a betrayal.

Perhaps Molly’s experience was informed by the author’s own experience. Rita Mae Brown was a member of ... and left the organization because ... Like Molly, Brown...

Another betrayal by organization occurs in David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing*. The choral narrators interject throughout the story with glimpses of their past lives. Notably, this collective narrator focuses on the AIDS epidemic and the lack of oversight by government agencies, which are instituted to inform, protect, and serve the entire community, including the gay community. This collective narrator feels invisible, voyeurs of the current gay teen community, both proud and jealous of advancements in equality. They are able to see teens openly in relationships, educated and protected from the scourge of HIV/AIDS. These narrators did not stand a chance and disappeared at the hands of agencies bent on a heteronormative

**Comment [V4]:** Revise and add more specific examples from the text.

**Comment [V5]:** Add specific info from Brown/Rubyfruit article. Weave into previous paragraph? Also use references from novel to show similarities of experiences.

political agenda. While strides have been made, the narrators can see that protective bodies still oftentimes fail gay teens.

**Comment [V6]:** Specific examples from the story. References from 1980s aids epidemic and lack of oversight from Reagan admin.

Overburdened school systems are often at the whims not only of a demanding student body, but also of parents and local political systems. As such, school bullying, particularly bullying of LGBTQ individuals, continues to be a problem in the educational system, sometimes with schools turning a blind eye to the problem. Ryan’s story in *Two Boys Kissing* lightly touches on this failure of the school system to suppress bullying of an openly gay teen. Ryan lived a “normal” life as a young boy, playing Little League and being carpooled by community mothers. However, even as Ryan’s family is supportive of his coming out, peers have not always been so accepting. While Ryan has a strong group of friends to ground him, Skylar, a boy he used to play Little League with, continually bullies Ryan. This happens around the community and, it is assumed, at school to some degree. However, the school and community, places that are supposed to be safe havens for all residents, betray Ryan and those like him by turning a blind eye, allowing abuse to occur, and failing to protect. This betrayal and lack of protection leads to years of physical abuse, causing mental and emotional trauma in its wake, and building Ryan’s frustration. While this bullying often results in school dropouts to runaways and even suicide, Ryan’s support network and the positive influence of his new boyfriend, Avery, push Ryan to reject tendencies toward reciprocated violence, allowing him to mature and come of age. While facing betrayal from impersonal organizations and entities may be, in some cases, a challenge easier to overcome, it often takes a strong support network to leap these hurdles to reach full maturation.

**Comment [V7]:** Add specific excerpts. Add from article about school bullying

Perhaps a more difficult, and more frequent, obstacle to overcome in the LGBTQ community is the issue of betrayal from loved ones, be it a lover or family members. For Molly,

she faced ostracism from her family on several fronts. First, as a child, she faced the feeling of being different as an adopted child. As the “illegitimate” or “bastard” child to her kin, she was automatically cast as an outsider, particularly to her adoptive mother, Carrie. (weave in references to research article about illegitimacy and Brown/Brown’s work) While this let-down as a child certainly caused a rift, for Molly, it allowed her a certain freedom. As she was already an outcast, she was able to grow and discover herself and her own identity in her own way, with little interference. She was already steeled to the rejection of her family, so, when she encounters the rejection again once she reveals she is a lesbian during college, the sting was not as harsh as it would have been had she been truly accepted by Carrie as one of her own. Molly was able to overcome the betrayal of Carrie fully turning her back on her, denying her support to fight her college or money to continue school elsewhere, with resolute determination. The lack of support from her mother, Carrie, as well as the betrayal of her college, prepared Molly for the eventual miscues and mistakes she made as she continued her journey. Since Molly lived a life of disappointments and inherently had a strong personality, it was easier for her to discover her true self and put herself on the path for success.

**Comment [V8]:** Add specific references from novel and continue to weave in outside sources.

The young characters in *Two Boys Kissing* also faced hardships in familial relationships. Neil and Peter, the long-term couple in Levithan’s young adult novel, are comfortable together while also experiencing some minor turmoil in their relationship. While Peter has support from his family regarding his sexuality, Neil keeps his sexuality quiet in his familial household. While his family knows he is gay, his parents do not discuss the issue. Neil’s parents betray him by not being direct and vocal supporters of his identity. However, by gaining strength from Peter and his family, as well as gaining determination and pride in Harry and Craig’s publicized kiss, Neil addresses this betrayal to his family at the breakfast table after hearing talk radio commentators

**Comment [V9]:** Add direct references from story

speak disparagingly of the public kissing couple. Neil's outrage is partly due to his sister being subjected to the vitriolic commentary. In Neil's effort to not betray his sister and to allow her to live in a world of equality and understanding for all, Neil confronts the betrayal he felt from his parents and became a young man by addressing the issue. In Neil's direct vocalization of his identity, he forces his parents, particularly his mother, to speak the words that were never spoken in his household. Neil faces his parental betrayal head-on and is able to take action as an adult to resolve the conflict.

However, in addressing betrayal, the resolution of this conflict does not always end on a positive note. Craig was already let down by his lover, Harry, once Harry broke up with him. Craig tries to convince himself that he is over the relationship, even as his friend, Smita, disagrees. Nonetheless, Craig devises the plan to break the world record for longest kiss, and employs Harry to be his partner in the endeavor. While this act seemingly is a forward-thinking action of a young adult, one questions Craig's intentions. Craig holds onto hope that he can rekindle his relationship with Harry, even though they both attest to being in a platonic relationship. Additionally, Craig's parents and family do not know he is gay, and he has yet to tell them. Similarly to Peter, Harry has support from his family regarding his personal identity, and Craig is left seeking support. However, Craig, rather than maturing and growing up to directly confront his parents about his sexuality, instead allows broadcast media to inform them instead. When Craig's mother comes to the school to see her son, and Craig is unable to speak with her directly, although he has hope that she will be accepting. However, upon his mother's return with Craig's family, it becomes clearer that they, with the exclusion of Craig's brother, will be unable to accept Craig's identity. This betrayal of love and trust hurts Craig, who weeps. Even though he retains his determination to finish the kiss, something bigger than he is, by the

end of the novel the reader does not see the full culmination of Craig's coming-of-age, although the teen is able to clarify some of his own reasons for his actions, as well as his connection with Harry. While family and lovers turning their backs on loved ones is certainly a heart-wrenching betrayal that can cause one to be stunted in development or push one ahead, perhaps the most detrimental form of betrayal is when one betrays him or herself.

Disappointment in oneself is often a scar that is more difficult to emotionally and mentally to overcome. (Develop paragraph about Holly from *Rubyfruit*)

While there is some level of self-betrayal in Holly from *Rubyfruit Jungle*, perhaps a bigger internal struggle resides in Cooper of Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing*. Cooper is resigned and has yet to come out to his family or anyone in his community. He finds pleasure in nothing while trying to find physical pleasure in fleeting encounters. Cooper delves into the world of virtual reality since he cannot live in reality and he cannot face the reality of who he is. (develop point of cooper feeling disappointed/betrayed by himself—stunted since he lives and depends on parents, cant support self, cant have relationship/attraction to Julian, leads to attempt at suicide—relief and disappointment that he can't follow through with this act, as well).

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