Reshaping Womanhood: Lesbian Realities in *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall

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Abstract

The Well of Loneliness (1928) by Radclyffe Hall changed British perceptions of gender identity and performance in its plea for the respect of lesbian identities. While previous studies have centered on the protagonist's nonconformity and lesbianism, this paper will also examine how the novel's controversy and the author's personal ties to the subject ultimately brought more fame to what is now considered the original lesbian book. This essay will not only analyse evolving historic views on homosexuality and cross-dressing, but also assess how homophobia shaped the author's work. By considering this *Bildungsroman*'s fluctuating concepts of gender identity and gender roles, its contributions to the limited corpus of 20th century lesbian literature, and its protagonist's development and relationships, this essay will highlight the significance of Hall's work both for her era and for contemporary queer studies.

Keywords

Radclyffe Hall, queer theory, *The Well of Loneliness*, lesbianism, lesbian literature, *Bildungsroman*

Résumé

The Well of Loneliness (1928) de Radclyffe Hall a changé les perceptions britanniques de l'identité de genre et de la performance du genre dans son appel pour le respect des identités lesbiennes. Alors que les études précédentes se sont concentrées sur la non-conformité et le lesbianisme du protagoniste, cet article examinera également comment la controverse du roman et les liens personnels de l'auteur avec le sujet ont finalement apporté plus de renommée à ce qui est maintenant considéré comme le livre lesbien original. Cet essai analysera non seulement l'évolution des points de vue historiques sur l'homosexualité et le travestissement, mais évaluera aussi comment l'homophobie a façonné le travail de l'auteur. En considérant les concepts d'identité de genre et les rôles féminins et masculins de ce *Bildungsroman*, ses contributions au corpus limité de la littérature lesbienne du XXe siècle et le développement et les relations de son protagoniste, cet essai mettra en évidence l'importance du travail de Hall à la fois pour les droits de la communauté LGBTQ de son époque et pour les études queer contemporaines.

Mots-clés

Radclyffe Hall, théorie queer, *The Well of Loneliness*, lesbianisme, littérature lesbienne, *Bildungsroman*

After the First World War, Europeans and North Americans alike rejoiced in the economic growth and euphoria of the Roaring Twenties, a golden age that gave birth to the rebellious flappers and boomed with jazz, radio, new art styles, and cinema. By 1928, British women over 21 had the right to vote, fashion reflected females' newfound zest for life, and conceptions of family started to change. In fact, these English women challenged the very definition of femininity in their actions, beliefs, and writings. By the time the Second World War erupted, women's roles in both the home and the community had evolved to include factory work, nursing on the war front, engineering, and participation in the Armed Forces ("The Women of the Second World War"). The turbulence of the early 20th century not only allowed women to actively contribute to the war efforts but also to revitalize their position in the British social order, therein changing their responsibilities and their identities.

Famous British author and lesbian Marguerite Radclyffe-Hall (1880-1943), better known as Radclyffe Hall, gained fame and later notoriety for her 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness* (hereafter *The Well*), which explores notions of gender identity and sexual orientation by following Stephen Gordon, a cross-dressing English aristocrat who develops a same-sex relationship with an older married woman, leading to her exile from her family estate and a decade-long search for love and acceptance. Although the novel was temporarily banned for encouraging lesbian practices, Hall's *Buildungsroman* brought visibility to homosexual women's plight in conservative British society and ultimately contributed to the limited corpus of 20th century lesbian literature.

This paper will examine fluctuating concepts of gender identity and gender roles in early 1900s Britain, highlighting Stephen's evident nonconformity through her appearance, her behaviour, her thoughts, and her sexual orientation. While 21st century queer theory might consider this unusual protagonist in different terms, this paper will first focus on young Stephen navigating an identity crisis, due in large part to the mixed reactions this *chica rara* provokes in those around her.[32] Then, it will assess how both her interest in women and her phallophobia are realized by way of her relationships, from her childhood to her adult years. Finally, this paper will consider *The Well*'s controversial effect on British society from a contemporary queer studies perspective.

First and foremost, Stephen's narrative can be read as a lesbian or a transgender novel, or perhaps a mixture of both. The protagonist's "inability to identify as a woman or pass as a man" leaves her in distress (Taylor 295), unable to live an authentic life without sacrificing her home, certain friendships, and overall the respect someone of her socioeconomic status would have enjoyed if not for her *inversion*.[33] Melanie A. Taylor proposes that "the sexual desire of the character … has been read as lesbian" (287) while her masculinity simply represents "a physical expression of that sexuality," making Stephen an example of the Mannish Lesbian trope (288). In this case, Stephen's rejection of femininity is "straightforward identification with the dominant beliefs of a society that favours the male" (290). For Stephen to love women freely in her conservative European setting, she would have to be a man—then, she could provide the affection and security her lovers deserve without fear of persecution. It can therefore be argued that her masculine identity is a rightful rebuttal of the strict feminine codes of conduct that would keep Stephen from experiencing lesbian relationships rather than an example of a transgender

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[32] Carmen Martí Gaite's *chica rara* [weird girl] is an unconventional woman who defies traditional societal order. This concept will be explored in detail further in the essay.

[33] Hall frequently uses the now derogatory term "invert" to designate the homosexual characters in *The Well*. According to 1920s Europe, "The term 'invert' reflects the belief that same-sex desire is in fact an inversion of the sexual instincts, since the *natural* direction of sexual attraction within a heterosexual paradigm can only ever be towards a person of the 'opposite sex'" (Taylor 288, original emphasis). Melanie A. Taylor explains that gender roles, attributes, and behaviours were considered inherent to biological sex, meaning that a woman attracted to women would be conceptualized and characterized as male (288). Therein lies the convergence of transgender and lesbian identities in early 1900s literature, a time during which even the medical field associated cross-dressing and sexual inversion (Newton 558).

British aristocrat.[34] This mannish lesbian, a term defined by Esther Newton as “a figure who is defined as lesbian because her behavior or dress (and usually both) manifest elements designated as exclusively masculine” (560), is therein a controversial character—and Stephen Gordon is the prime example. Right from birth, Stephen does not conform to her parents’ or her society’s expectations. Her father was so sure his wife would bear him a son that he picked out Stephen’s name before the birth, then insisted on using it for his daughter, Stephen Mary Olivia Gertrude Gordon (Hall 6); the added female names serve only to mollify the priest who baptized the “narrow-hipped and wide shouldered” baby (13) and ensure that Stephen not stray from traditional female roles. Newton underlines that “Though her father gives her his looks, his intelligence, his money, and a boy’s name, tragically, she cannot be his true heir” because she is female (569). In spite of Stephen’s efforts to escape the limits of womanhood, her biology betrays her again and again.

The novel’s protagonist demonstrates a dislike for pretty dresses and long hair, developing instead a fondness for elaborate tailored suits and fencing outfits. As a child, Stephen often threatens to cut off her hair and complains about her clothes (“‘I hate this white dress and I’m going to burn it—it makes me feel idiotic’” [Hall 27]). She even dresses up as and pretends to be a boy, admitting that she feels exactly like one at the tender age of seven (11); nevertheless, she must always change back into the “soft dresses and sashes, and ribbons, and small coral beads, and openwork stockings” she so despises (12). Her dissatisfaction with her appearance, her face, and her hair inundates her childhood and continues as she ages, though less as she adopts a more masculine style. The men’s jackets, trousers, and monocles worn by 1920s women including Radclyffe Hall reflect a traditionally nonconformist lesbian aesthetic. Laura Doan, however, critically explores women's fashions in the early 20th century and proves that before *The Well* stood trial for its controversial treatment of lesbian identities, Hall's style was more in line with modernity than homosexuality ("Passing Fashions" 122). In fact, the fashionable androgynous look of the modern 1920s woman was neither outlawed nor associated with homosexual desire as a general rule. Alison Oram and Annmarie Turnbull explain that women who passed as men "exploited all possible symbols of masculinity; posture and mannerisms, voice, aggression and domestic violence, male pastimes like drinking and, of course, male attire" without necessarily experiencing same-sex attraction ("Cross-Dressing Women" 12). These scholars clarify that economic necessity and the search for personal freedom often encouraged women to don men's clothing, adding that "Women also cross-dressed to gain physical freedom, particularly the freedom to travel and seek adventure, to go to sea or to war" ("Cross-Dressing Women" 12). Why, then, is masculine clothing so directly linked to lesbianism?

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[34] For a detailed transgender reading of Stephen’s narrative, see “‘The Masculine Soul Heaving in the Female Bosom’: Theories of Inversion and *The Well of Loneliness*” by Melanie A. Taylor.

While Radclyffe Hall appeared in newspaper photographs with "short hair, bow tie, cigarette protruding from her mouth … and hand tucked nonchalantly into a jacket pocket" ("Passing Fashions" 99), her melancholic protagonist looks "wrong in the clothes she [is] wearing, as though she and they [have] no right to each other" (Hall 18) and eventually adopts her author's masculine fashion. Although 19th century sexologists often posited a connexion between cross-dressing and lesbians, *The Well*'s well-publicized trial was the first major indicator of homosexual desire based on clothing choices; Doan notes that after "the trial and the numerous photographs of Hall that circulated in the context of the trial, sexual inversion became endowed with a human face" ("Passing Fashions" 122).[35] Both Hall and her partner, Una

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[35] Doan highlights the theories of sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing who, in 1886, wrote that cross-dressing, short hair, masculine features, and traditionally male activities connected to lesbianism ("Passing Fashions" 100). The following year, Havelock Ellis rejected some of his predecessor's ideas but nonetheless called "traits of masculine simplicity" and "taste for smoking cigarettes" indicators of same-sex attraction in women (101).

Troubridge, encouraged the correlation between lesbianism and masculine style and habits that "would become the distinctive marks of a lesbian sub-culture" (122). Not all lesbians and cross-dressers appreciated this newfound visibility, however. Some were ousted by this revelation (122) and the secret "visual code by which middle- and upper-class lesbians … could recognize each other" became common knowledge (117). In Hall's novel, Stephen's clothing showcases her marginalization and her alienation from her family, her society, and her own body—especially when she meets the first of her real lovers, Angela Crossby. From birth, Stephen is dissatisfied with her sort in life, often giving into outburst of anger that scare her mother. After meeting Angela, she becomes "much more anxious about her appearance" (Hall 112) and decides to revamp her style, ordering new tailor-made suits and fixing her hair. Her new masculine clothes make her feel more authentic and comfortable with her looks, and once her writing career helps elevate her status, she is considered odd, but only as a reclusive artistic type with an unusual style. Marjorie Garber reminds the reader that "Cross-dressing is about gender confusion. … Cross-dressing is about the power of women. Cross-dressing is about the emergence of gay identity. Cross-dressing is about the anxiety of economic or cultural dislocation, the anticipation or recognition of 'otherness' as loss" (qtd. in "Passing Fashions" 97). Stephen's growing confidence in her identity coincides with her exile from her home estate—a difficult cross for Stephen to bear but a necessary one once her mother discovers her same-sex attraction for a neighbouring aristocrat—and increases as she travels Europe and finds new lovers.

In fact, from her passion for sports, like hunting and fencing, to the spaces she occupies once free from her mother, Stephen fits perfectly into the post-trial conception of lesbian identity. Heather Love describes the unique position lesbians occupy, where "even the most private domains of desire and sexuality are marked by the traumas of public identification. Hall establishes this connection in *The Well of Loneliness*, as the utopian and romantic spaces she describes are repeatedly shut down by the realities of a homophobic society" (123). In Hall's personal life as much as in her character's plight, "the public discourse of inversion" and the "private experience of desire and sexuality" are inseparable, bringing "'the whole hostile world' into the most private of spaces" (125). Stephen's relationships, both romantic and friendly, are marred by the social implications of interacting with a known *invert*, a condition condemned by a large segment of the British population. From Stephen's first kiss with a woman (Hall 10) to her eventual parting from the love of her life (373), from her mother's repulsion to her friends' unfriendly letter once they find out Stephen is a lesbian, Hall proves again and again that even the most personal of relationships cannot escape the burden of homophobia.

Furthermore, the interference of others' politics in individual matters greatly affects how Stephen sees herself. Wherever she goes, she attracts unwanted attention and curious reactions. Angela's husband thinks "She's appalling; never saw such a girl in my life" (Hall 126); the hotel porter calls her a "queer-looking girl … mannish" (135); when Stephen is ring shopping for Angela, "People stared at the masculine-looking girl who seemed so intent upon feminine adornments. And someone, a man, laughed and nudged his companion: 'Look at that! What is it?'" (139). Even her friend's mother, "the Comptesse de Mirac saw in Stephen the type that she most mistrusted" (354). These examples highlight the micro-aggressions and outright persecution Stephen faces from a young age due to her nonconformity. Luckily, she has allies in her father, her governess Puddle, and her friend Martin. With Martin, who had studied current theories on inversion and accepted Stephen for who she is, Hall's protagonist is "far more at ease … and at times far less conscious of her own inversion" (356). Puddle, meanwhile, supports

Stephen and wants to encourage her, preparing what she will say if Stephen comes forward and admits her lesbianism: "'You're neither unnatural, nor abominable, nor mad … Have courage … be honourable" (129). Unfortunately, Puddle never has a chance to tell Stephen how she feels, and Stephen's father dies in a tragic accident before he can explain to his young daughter what she is.[36] Unfortunately, Stephen's constant marginalization and her obvious nonconformity lead to a terrible identity crisis that lasts her whole life. Although she is sometimes confident in her looks, often believes in her literary talent, and loves her female partners fiercely, Stephen cannot help but internalize her community's homophobia. She suffers greatly and agonizes over the uncertainties of her identity:

> She would think with a kind of despair: 'What am I, in God's name—some kind of abomination?' And this thought would fill her with a very great anguish, because, loving much, her love seemed to her sacred … Her mind would recoil while her sprit grew faint. A great darkness would seem to descend on her spirit—there would be no light wherewith to lighten that darkness. (Hall 127)

Poor Stephen is frequently plagued with thoughts of guilt, shame, and isolation that stem from the bigotry she faces almost daily. In spite of her marginalization, Stephen's goal is to "climb to success in a world that [is] trying its best to get her under" (Hall 215). She is branded as different from the very beginning due to her appearance and activities, making her an example of Carmen Martín Gaite's *chica rara*, or weird girl. This *chica rara* is defined as "a type of woman alien to the conventional schemes of order and disorder that presided over feminine education at the time" (111, my translation).[37] Like the *chica rara*, Stephen leaves the traditional domestic female spaces not looking for adventure but for liberation and personal growth (113).[38,39] Puddle wishes she could tell Stephen to make it her life goal to bring acceptance to people like her (Hall 129), therein challenging sexologists' theories on homosexuality as a problem.[40] Love states that "Hall's appropriation of this discourse [by sexologists about inverts] allowed her to represent in Stephen a sexual, self-identifying lesbian character arguing for her right to existence" (120). According to Newton, Stephen "is a double symbol, standing for the New Woman's painful position between traditional political and social categories, and for the lesbian struggle to define and assert an identity" (568). Indeed, *The Well* seems like a plea for visibility and acceptance not only for Stephen Gordon, but for lesbians like Hall herself.

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[36] Stephen's father is crushed to death by a falling tree branch before he can explain to Stephen that he has researched her *symptoms* and concluded that she is an *invert*. When Stephen prepares for her exile, she chances upon her father's books filled with notes about her identity, namely *Psychopathia Sexuali* by Richard von Krafft-Ebing. According to Taylor, the family estate, Morton, "has been interpreted as Edenic with Stephen's expulsion as punishment for 'sin', the sin in question being 'homosexuality'" (293). Once Stephen discovers her true identity, she hurriedly accepts it but does not celebrate it—it signifies the loss of her beloved home. Love proposes that "Stephen's embrace of the medical discourse of inversion offers a textbook example of Michel Foucault's concept of 'reverse discourse,' which he describes as the process by which a marginalized group begins to speak on its own behalf in the same terms by which it has been rendered marginal" (120-121).

Another part of Stephen's difficulties with her identity can be attributed to the widespread pathologization of female homosexuality after Krafft-Ebing's studies influenced the general perception of cross-dressing women. Newton describes how "sexual desire was not considered inherent in women, [meaning] the lesbian was thought to have a trapped male soul that phallicized her and endowed her with active lust" (566). This falls into the image of the inverted woman whose internal desires did not match her physical biology. According to Krafft-Ebing, "lesbianism is a congenital form of lust caused by and manifested in gender reversal" (qtd. in Newton 566). The use of the word 'congenital' points to the abnormal, a medical condition present from birth.[41] Indeed, Stephen's friends and family, once aware of her lesbianism, never expect her to change or seek treatment—she is what she is, and each character reacts differently. As much as Stephen tries to change her clothes, her hair, and her body (through weight training), "she will always be read as a woman who looks, dresses and behaves like a man" (Taylor 293). Although her gender identity remains uncertain, her attraction to women is undeniable and marks her as different regardless of her outward appearance.

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[37] In the original Spanish, "un tipo de mujer ajeno a los esquemas convencionales de orden y desorden que presidian la educación femenina de la época" (Martín Gaite 111).

[38] Although Martín Gaite's work focuses on Spanish female writers of the mid-20th century, her concept of the weird girl can easily be applied to gender nonconforming women across history. Many of the postwar female authors who wrote about the *chica rara* had been identified as such themselves when European society did not have the words to understand and express fluctuating notions of gender and sexual orientation.

[39] For more on female spaces and the importance of space for creative outlets, see Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

[40] Hall hints that the governess is homosexual as well, meaning that Puddle's internal discourse encouraging Stephen to live freely also works to reassure Puddle herself that she is neither broken nor ill.

According to Newton, the 19th century saw sex as purely phallic, signifying that "sex could only occur in the presence of an imperial and imperious penis" (561). A relationship between two women could therefore not be sexual. Social status also influenced the degree to which a person could enjoy sexual activity; while males of any class were accepted as lustful beings, only "déclassé" women, working women, and women of colour were considered sexual—upper-class women were protected from sexual impurity (561). The 'New Woman' of Hall's era who came of age at the turn of the 20th century challenges some of these traditional notions. In fact, the female protagonists of Hall's *The Unlit Lamp* (1924) and *The Well* have a "masculinized body and a strong, active mind to symbolize women's rejection of traditional gender divisions and bourgeois values" (Newton 563). Stephen's very existence defies the conventional order, and by acting on her lesbian desires, Stephen once again confronts the limits of womanhood and creates a space to live her identity authentically. During *The Well*, Stephen falls in love with three women. The first is a housemaid who goes by Collins. She is much more mature than seven year old Stephen but still humours her when she pretends to be a boy (Hall

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[41] Newton explores the types of lesbians Krafft-Ebing differentiates in his studies. First, there are the lesbians who do not appear inverted, but respond favourably to masculine lesbians. Then come the lesbians who dress like men followed by those who act like men. Finally, the "fourth stage" of lesbianism, "the extreme grade of degenerative homosexuality" was attributed to women who were only women in their biology. (566) This concept of homosexuality as congenital is explained by the early 20th century understanding of human sexuality that, according to Doan, "positioned the sexual subject within a regime of normal and abnormal" ("A Peculiarly Obscure Subject" 101).

11). Even as a child, Stephen is attracted to this Collins, often describing her “pretty blue eyes and … funny alluring smile” (10); when she discovers Collins with a footman, her little heart breaks and she throws a pot at the man’s head (19). Both employees are soon fired. But Collins is not blameless in regards to Stephen’s adoration. When Stephen is upset at Collins for lying, the latter kisses little Stephen: “Stephen stood speechless from a sheer sense of joy … At that moment she knew nothing but beauty and Collins, and the two were as one, and the one was Stephen—and yet not Stephen either, but something more vast, that the mind of seven years found no name for” (10). This is the protagonist’s first plunge into physical lesbianism but, being so young and living in a society that does not flaunt same-sex attraction, she does not understand the significance of this desire. Stephen is ultimately slighted by her first love, who is soon forced to leave the estate.

Often alone, Stephen yearns for companionship and eventually finds a wonderful friendship in a boy named Martin. Together, they discuss all sorts of regular topics like trees and God and birds (78). In fact, this male-female relationship actually softens the neighbourhood’s opinion of Stephen—they think she is normal after all “and almost ceased to resent her” (79). Finally, Martin declares his love and proposes to Stephen, much to her horror (81). Spurned, he leaves, and Stephen grieves their lost friendship; she cannot, however, deny her phallophobia: “What was she, what manner of curious creature, to have been so *repelled* by a lover like Martin? Yet she had been repelled, and even her pity for the man could not wipe out that stronger feeling. She had driven him away because something within her was *intolerant* of that new aspect of Martin” (82, emphasis added). Even without the words to describe her repulsion, even without a term to identify her sexual orientation, Stephen knows she cannot be with Martin and again loses a relationship she adored.

At age 21, Stephen encounters an older, married woman named Angela and immediately forgets all the unpleasant gossip she has heard about the Crossby family in the wake of her attraction to this woman (108-109). They begin to see each other frequently and Stephen, not realizing her feelings at first, feels "exultant, very much alive and full of purpose" (112). Eventually, after only three weeks, she admits to Angela: "I know that I love you, and that nothing else matters in the world" (121). Angela, too, falls for Stephen—moments later, Stephen kisses her "full on the lips, as a lover" (121). Unfortunately, Angela uses Stephen's passionate love letter to save her own reputation and marriage (168-169), therein publicising Stephen's homosexuality and resulting in her exile from her estate. She also causes Stephen's estrangement from her mother, who calls her "unnatural" and "a sin against creation" and is physically repulsed by her own daughter (171). The mother even says she would rather see Stephen dead at her feet than alive and loving a woman (171). Soon, Stephen packs her bags and leaves her home and her country. She serves as an ambulance driver in the First World War in France and settles down with a younger colleague, Mary Llewellyn, in Stephen's house near Paris.[42] But the protagonist takes this final romance slowly, now fully aware of how society treats what it calls *inverts* and wondering what she has to offer Mary but disgrace (254). Finally, while on vacation in Spain together, the two finally give into their love in spite of the consequences and, Hall writes, "that night they were not divided" (265). They spend many months if not years together, enjoying each other's company, going through ups and downs like any relationship, and joining homosexual social circles bit by bit. Then, tragedy strikes: two of their lesbian friends die, the first from illness (Barbara) and the second by suicide (Jamie) (343). This reminds Mary and

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[42] Hannah Roche states that "In the move from Morton, the archetypal English country house, to London to Paris, *The Well* progresses from the Victorian to the modern and, in doing so, shifts from the feminine (Stephen as daughter) to the masculine (Stephen as Mary Llewellyn's lover)," rejecting characteristics of the Victorian romantic tradition (10).

Stephen not only of their mortality, but also of the tragic condition of early 20th century British lesbians. Not long after, Stephen pretends to have an affair with another lesbian to encourage Mary to leave her, therein protecting her from life as an outcast. Mary falls into the waiting arms of Martin, with whom the couple had reconnected. Stephen makes the ultimate sacrifice in the last pages of Hall's novel: she tricks Mary into hating her enough to leave with Martin, whom she knows loves Mary fiercely and can provide the life she deserves.[43] Love proposes that Hall

> does not offer a humanist vision of Stephen's 'true self,' separate from society and the traumas it inflicts. … Hall's portrait of the tragic lesbian comes into distinct conflict with later utopian visions of lesbian identity as outside or beyond the terms of patriarchy … Hall offers simply a plea for social acceptance, which, in her radically historicist view, is necessary for any shift in identity or consciousness. (119)

The tragic lesbian trope appears frequently throughout literature and continues to exist in contemporary media portrayals of homosexual women, showcasing the inseparable nature of personal lesbian identity and a larger societal discourse. Although the representation of same-sex couples helps shift the present consciousness towards acceptance, the manner of representation proves that the lesbian condition is ultimately a tragic one. Hannah Roche explains that "Stephen's bildung or quest for self-realisation as an invert is ultimately abandoned, with other lesbian characters finding themselves stripped of their right to love and self-fulfilment by either an engagement (Mary) or death (Jamie and Barbara)" and that "Martin's 'victory' over Stephen indicates compliance with the prescribed notion that 'the romance plot … valorizes heterosexual as opposed to homosexual ties' (DuPlessis, p. 5)" (11). This may, however, simply fit into Rachel DuPlessis' understanding of the romance novel as a genre that concludes with a wedding or death, therein evoking "sympathy for the cause" and appropriating "the institution of heterosexual romantic fiction" (Roche 11). Hall does not shy away from the tragic realities of love, especially same-sex love, and represents it accurately in *The Well*: "Rather than imagining a society on other terms, Hall is attentive to the destructive power of society as she currently experiences it" (Love 119). The parallels between author and protagonist bring an extra layer of desperation to the plea Hall makes in her lesbian works. This call for acceptance and recognition is most obvious in the final line of *The Well*: "'Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!'" (Hall 375). The voice may be Stephen's, but the message clearly goes beyond the novel's boundaries. Hall wants a better life for lesbians in her conservative British society and writes to call on her peers for support and respect.

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[43] Love summarizes this heart-wrenching passage: "Stephen martyrs herself to the discourse of inversion, giving up the happiness she has known with Mary to open herself to the horrible army of inverts who physically possess her, demanding that she speak on their behalf" (120).

With both implicit and explicit scenes of lesbian love, *The Well* was bound to be received amidst much controversy. Maria Popova declares that "three months before the publication of Virginia Woolf's groundbreaking novel *Orlando* … the English novelist and poet Radclyffe Hall … set into motion a cultural revolution. With the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*, the way gender and sexual identities are formulated and articulated was forever changed".[44] Hall knew, when she sent off her manuscript for publishing, that her words would have an immeasurable effect on society. In fact, she wrote to her publisher, Jonathan Cape, to say: "I have put my pen at the service of some of the most persecuted and misunderstood people in the world" (qtd. in Popova). Of course, Hall herself is included in this category of persecuted people. Soon, reviews poured in—some positive and others extremely negative.[45] The most infamous of these reviews came from a journalist named James Douglas and led to widespread moral panic, culminating in *The Well*'s notorious trial. In his review, Douglas said: "We must protect our children against their specious fallacies and sophistries. Therefore, we must banish their propaganda from our bookshops and our libraries. I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body, but moral poison kills the soul" (qtd. in Oram & Turnbull 187). Doan notes that most subsequent articles about the novel or the trial included this passage about the poison of the "lesbian threat" ("The Mythic Moral Panic" 2). Douglas's scathing editorial pathologized female homosexuality, using words like *contamination*, *plague*, and *putrification* to turn his country against Hall and lesbians in general; this one journalist publishing in the *Sunday Express* singlehandedly spearheaded the movement against *The Well* (3). Although the charges against Hall and the novel's ban were eventually dropped, the public trial for obscenity served its purpose in more ways than one. According to Oram and Turnbull, the book became a "literary cause célèbre" ("*The Well of Loneliness*" 182), while Doan proposes that had Douglas truly intended to protect innocent readers, he would not have publicized his opinion so vehemently—his outcry only ensured the novel "an immediate 'succès de scandale'" ("The Mythic Moral Panic" 20). What, then, what his intention in creating such a fuss around this literary poison? While censure did not touch *Orlando* (1928), "*The Well of Loneliness* pleads the cause of sexual inversion by taking up an aggressively polemical stance," resulting in its temporary ban (Parkes 434). Perhaps Virginia Woolf's work would have benefitted from the publicity, fame, and infamy *The Well* gathered thanks to outspoken journalists like Douglas.

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[44] Popova describes *Orlando* as "a classic celebrated as 'the longest and most charming love letter in literature,' which subverted censorship and revolutionized the politics of same-sex love". Both Virginia and her then husband Leonard Woolf openly criticized *The Well* for its "dullness"—Roche suggests they may have felt threatened by Hall's talent and confidence (4).

[45] Positive reviews quoted in Oram and Turnbull: "it is a plea, passionate, yet admirably restrained and never offensive, for the extension of social toleration, compassion and recognition to the biologically abnormal woman" ("*The Well of Loneliness*" 184); "I admire Radclyffe Hall's courage tremendously" (196); "When you read [*The*

Well], it gave you some identity about what it was you were feeling. I really realised there was some labelling then, to who I was. … And I used to fancy myself looking like this woman [Hall], you know, with the cravat and white shirt and tie" (198); "it made me feel less lonely" (199). Although many celebrated Hall's work as "turning point in the understanding of lesbian sexuality" (181), *The Well* received no shortage of negative and homophobic reviews like this one: "this novel forces upon our society a disagreeable task which it has hitherto shirked, the task of cleaning itself from the leprosy of these lepers, and making the air clean and wholesome once more" (qtd. in Oram & Turnbull, "*The Well of Loneliness*" 186).

Though Hall could not have predicted the immensity of *The Well*'s effect on her country and later the world, her practiced hand chose exactly the right mannish lesbian protagonist. Adam Parkes highlights that "In order to advocate sympathy and tolerance for lesbians, Hall had made sure that her lesbian heroine, Stephen Gordon, appeared above reproach" (434). Indeed, Stephen is honourable and kind, ultimately sacrificing her happiness for Mary's chance at a socially acceptable heterosexual union. She serves her country in the war and is regarded as a brave person, a talented writer, and a generous aristocrat. The main criticism of Stephen's character is her overall sadness. Love asserts that "one reason why Radclyffe Hall's work has remained so controversial in the lesbian community is that she rarely, if ever, 'left out how bad people felt'" (125). Many readers "have rejected *The Well* as excessively dark" and condemn "its extremely abject tone, overblown expressions of self-hatred, and tragic ending" (117). There is no denying that the novel's underlying atmosphere is a melancholy one, but for Love, "it is precisely the tragedy of Hall's text that makes it so compelling" (118). Hall does not shy away from the hard truths of homophobia and presents her characters with the same self-awareness she has in regards to society's views on homosexuality. Some critics also denounce Hall's internalized homophobia and the stereotypes she reproduces in *The Well*: "lesbian feminists condemn [the novel] for presenting lesbians as different from women in general … the mannish lesbian, of whom Stephen Gordon is the most famous prototype, has symbolized the stigma of lesbianism" (Newton 560). According to Newton, "Hall's association of lesbianism and masculinity needs to be challenged not because it doesn't exist, but because it is not the only possibility" (575). In the 21st century, concepts of gender identity and sexual orientation are much more present and understood in social discourse, at least in the Occident. But Hall's era was more limited in terms of social justice and equality—in spite of its flaws, *The Well* is a ground-breaking "political statement about the position of lesbians" and a "propaganda novel" intent on impacting readers everywhere and challenging dominant views on same-sex attraction (Roche 6). Taylor concludes that regardless of an individual's opinion on *The Well* as a literary text or lesbian missive, "Hall's fictionalisation of the female invert has made an important contribution to the establishment of a lesbian literary heritage, and the development of a visible political identity" (288). *The Well* presents a positive depiction of same-sex attraction that was broadcasted across Britain, shaping its views on homosexual and cross-dressing women.

Finally, Hall's forlorn yet passionate *Bildungsroman* not only challenged perceptions of lesbianism but also created a sense of community among nonconforming women of the early 20th century. While Stephen Gordon confronted the gender binary and suffered through an agonizing journey to self-realization, Hall herself brought attention to British lesbians' plight and demanded recognition, action, and respect in an effort to shift the tragic lesbian's destiny from a personal problem to a social issue, therein reversing the aforementioned inseparability of social discourse and private desire. The original lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, disrupted the social order, changed literary norms, and contributed to the limited corpus of literature portraying same-sex love between women.

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