

PULP AND CIRCUMSTANCE:  
THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF DEAD LESBIAN SYNDROME, 1895-1949

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## Introduction

### Diagnosing Dead Lesbian Syndrome

#### *Diagnosis: What is Dead Lesbian Syndrome?*

Dead Lesbian Syndrome has long held a monopoly on lesbian representation. Now often elided with “Bury Your Gays,” the trope of Dead Lesbian Syndrome is rooted in the idea “gay characters just aren’t allowed happy endings.”<sup>1</sup> In 2016, after the death of beloved lesbian character Lexa on the television show *The 100*, fans, critics, and scholars critiqued Dead Lesbian Syndrome, with well-respected popular culture media outlets, including *Vanity Fair*, *Refinery29*, *Buzzfeed*, and *BBC News*, offering contemporary critiques.<sup>2</sup> However, few of these outlets looked at the history of this trope or the ramifications of Dead Lesbian Syndrome on women-loving women fans, the lesbian identity, and women-loving women subcultures across the country.<sup>3</sup> The history of Dead Lesbian Syndrome dates back as far as anglophone women-loving women literature itself. With the advent of sexological studies into women-loving women and the simultaneous popular interest in women-loving women through the international coverage of a lesbian murderess’ trial, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century served as the perfect incubator to create both a demand for lesbian literature *and* the necessity for all lesbian literary figures to be punished—through death or dishonor—by the novel’s end. Created during the Victorian Era, Dead Lesbian Syndrome somehow remains an integral part of fictional portrayals of women-loving women. From novels based on Alice Mitchell in the 1890s to obscene and macabre lesbian pulp fiction of

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<sup>1</sup> “Bury Your Gays.” TV Tropes. (<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays>), Accessed February 07, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Bradley, “TV Is Better for L.G.B.T.Q. Characters than Ever—Unless You’re a Lesbian,” *Vanity Fair*, November 3, 2016 (<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/11/tv-lgbtq-representation-glaad-report-dead-lesbian-syndrome>); Molly Horan, “Why TV’s “Dead Lesbian Syndrome” Needs to Stop,” *Refinery29*, April 27, 2016, (<https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2016/04/109404/tv-dead-lesbian-characters-psa-video>); “Fans Revolt After Gay TV Character Killed Off,” in *BBC Trending* (<https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-35786382>), March 11, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, “women-loving women” will be used to encompass cisgender women who have had romantic relationships with a woman partner. Trans identity will also be discussed, separately and conjointly. Lesbian will be used when referring to the genre of lesbian fiction, in which at least one woman protagonist is primarily or only attracted to women throughout the piece of fiction.

the 1950s to the gruesome murder of Xena, Warrior Princess, in 2001, Dead Lesbian Syndrome has followed fictional lesbians for over a century. It is only by understanding where this trope comes from that we can fully comprehend its influence on women-loving women identities, communities, and interactions with the cisheteronormative world—from the very first women labeled “sexual inverts” to the present day.

Dead Lesbian Syndrome is the identifiable pattern, evident in fictional media throughout the anglophone world, in which women characters who are romantically or sexually attracted to other women characters are much more likely to die than cisheteronormative female characters.<sup>4</sup> One of the most widely-publicized lesbian novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The Well of Loneliness*, features the physical deaths of two women-loving women characters and uses death as metaphor for the end of the relationship between the lesbian protagonist and her female lover. The author, Radclyffe Hall, saw this novel as a psychological manifesto written to defend the existence of sexual inverts, primarily through the lens of Havelock Ellis’ *Sexual Inversion in Women*.<sup>5</sup> Almost immediately after publication in 1928, *The Well of Loneliness* was brought up on charges of obscenity, and the book lost a censorship trial in England by the end of the year. From that point forward, postal censorship became an important tool used to police queer representation for women in the United Kingdom, the United States, and other anglophone countries.<sup>6</sup> By banning the postal service from shipping books which offered positive portrayals of various vices and taboo subjects, postal censorship effectively dictated the terms and conditions by which authors and publishers dealt with a variety of topics, including adultery, alcoholism, theft, and

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<sup>4</sup> “Cisheteronormative” will be used throughout to categorize heterosexual couples composed of a cisgender man and cisgender woman who follow the romantic arc of dating to marriage to motherhood with the man predominantly providing financial support and the woman predominantly providing emotional support.

<sup>5</sup> Sally Cline, *Radclyffe Hall: A Woman Called John*, (New York: The Overlook Press, 1999), 229.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this paper “queer” will be used as an unbiased adjective and covers homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender identity, dominant women, and other forms of “sexual deviancy” as understood in 20th century anglophone cultures.

homosexuality. Although the directive to kill all queer characters was rarely delivered overtly, legal battles, postal censorship, and the Motion Picture Production Code and its foreign equivalents effectively eliminated queer identity in most books and films throughout the first half of the 20th century. For those authors who attempted to circumvent censorship, the only way to obtain both the publication and circulation of these books seemed to be using the death of the queer characters as a form of moral judgment upon their lives. Thus, the only way to represent women-loving women was to have them die, and Dead Lesbian Syndrome was born.

The main character of *The Well of Loneliness*, Stephen Gordon, was a masculine sexual invert who served as an ambulance driver in World War I and fell in love with a feminine woman, Mary, who returned Stephen's feelings.<sup>7</sup> Stephen quickly became, "the most infamous mannish lesbian," for both the lesbian subculture and cisheteronormative mainstream society.<sup>8</sup> This was possibly a conscious move on Hall's part, as Sally Cline, author of *Radclyffe Hall, A Woman Called John*, explained: "The book, after all, was aimed at a twin audience: a middle-class heterosexual audience whose attitudes she wished to change, and an audience of guilty and voiceless inverts whose suffering she hoped to reduce."<sup>9</sup> Although *The Well of Loneliness* was neither the first nor the best example of Dead Lesbian Syndrome, its popularity and longevity make it an important and necessary dissection for understanding this disease.

While the cisheteronormative mainstream culture of the early twentieth century appropriated *The Well of Loneliness* to portray lesbianism in a negative, pitiful, and frightening light, many women-loving women utilized *The Well of Loneliness* as a textual source for the construction of lesbian subculture for generations to come. Through this text, Stephen Gordon

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<sup>7</sup> Celia Marshik, "History's 'Abrupt Revenges': Censoring War's Perversions in *The Well of Loneliness* and *Sleeveless Errand*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, (26.2, Winter 2003: 145-159, doi: 10.1353/jml.2004.0019), 148-150

<sup>8</sup> Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," *Signs* (9.4, Summer 1984: 557-575, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173611>), 559.

<sup>9</sup> Cline, *Radclyffe Hall: A Woman Called John*, 230.



became a martyr for women-loving women. Her story is one of double-sacrifice: first, the sacrifice of Mary to Martin, so Mary can live a happy, cisheteronormative life married to a man; second, the sacrifice of Stephen's pride as she breaks the fourth wall at the end of the novel, entreating mainstream cisheteronormative society to take pity upon the plight of the homosexual. Stephen Gordon was not the first lesbian protagonist to sacrifice something in order to ensure the success of a cisheteronormative storyline in a women-loving women novel. Her story was one that had been told before *The Well of Loneliness* and would be told continuously throughout the first half of the twentieth century. By understanding the similarities in how sacrifice, martyrdom, and Dead Lesbian Syndrome were utilized tropes in women-loving women novels, we can better understand how society came to view lesbianism and how women-loving women came to view themselves. To look closely at the roots of Dead Lesbian Syndrome, this study focuses on fictional women-loving women portrayed in anglophone literature, plays, and movies from the 1890s to the 1940s, *before* the recognition and visibility afforded to lesbian communities with the advent of World War II. By ending this study prior to the Golden Age of Pulp Novels, as the 1950s and 1960s are often considered, we can look more closely at where literary precedents for women-loving women characters emerged and how women-loving women characters were portrayed by women writers before the commercialization of their stories.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on Lesbian Pulp Novels, please see Yvonne Keller, "'Was It Right to Love Her Brother's Wife so Passionately?': Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965," *American Quarterly*, (57.2, 2005, 385-410, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068271>); Christopher Nealon, "Invert-History: The Ambivalence of Lesbian Pulp Fiction," *New Literary History*, (31.4, 2000: 745-64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057634>); and Sarah Radtke and Maryanne L. Fisher, "An Examination of Evolutionary Themes in 1950s-1960s Lesbian Pulp Fiction," *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*, (6.4, 2012: 453-468. <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2013-05136-004.pdf>).

*Treatment: Symbolic Anthropology Locates the Disease*

In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Clifford Geertz suggests culture is articulated through “the flow of behavior—or, more precisely, social action.”<sup>11</sup> Geertz explains social action creates models, both *of* the social action and *for* the social action. Models *of* the social action express and explain the social action after it has taken place, whereas models *for* the social action function as guidelines or blueprints for the social action prior to it taking place. Models of culture serve both purposes, as they give meaning and guidance to social action while at the same time the models are shaped by the social action as well.<sup>12</sup> Following Geertz’s definitions, Dead Lesbian Syndrome is a model *of* society because it offers accurate portrayals of women-loving women’s lived realities and mainstream society’s homophobia, and a model *for* society because Dead Lesbian Syndrome suggests to both the cisheteronormative culture and the lesbian subculture that masculine women-loving women, the “predatory inverts,” *should* be marginalized and femme women-loving women, the “victimized real women,” *should* return to heteronormativity through marriage to a man.

The field of symbolic anthropology, and especially the work of Mary Douglas and Victor Turner, are key to exploring the societal desire to eliminate the lesbian, which was a root cause of Dead Lesbian Syndrome. Douglas’ theories regarding taboos in society are instrumental in understanding why and how cisheteronormative society and women-loving women interpreted lesbian fiction to construct Dead Lesbian Syndrome, and then perpetuated Dead Lesbian Syndrome in cultural media throughout the twentieth century. Douglas believed culture consists of categories and barriers which uphold social order and, when transgressed, create social disorder. Culture within society is very rigid due to its public nature and consistent reinforcement

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<sup>11</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 17

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

through public ritual.<sup>13</sup> According to Douglas, ambiguity is a cause of social disorder, and therefore requires public action. As books, plays, and films intended for public consumption, lesbian fiction became a public medium through which the social disorder of sexual inversion could be observed, diagnosed, and treated.

Douglas cites four ways in which society treats ambiguity: reduction, destruction, avoidance, and danger.<sup>14</sup> Reduction forces the ambiguity into one of the culturally sanctioned categories from which it has formed. With regards to gender identity, an example of reduction would be to consider all masculine-of-center people “men” regardless of which sexual organs they possess. Destruction permits the killing of the ambiguity; because effeminate men did not live up to British standards of what a “man” was, they were killed through the nineteenth century. The avoidance technique requires society to avoid the ambiguity, and through avoiding the ambiguity, society moves towards acceptable categories. Society used avoidance with regards to lesbians during the interwar era, as society both avoided the “mannish” woman and used her ambiguity to reify what was characteristic of true femininity. Finally, ambiguous entities can be labeled as dangerous, as gay men were in the 1980s during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the United States and Europe. According to Douglas, people who transgress societal boundaries are pollutants, and the transgression creates either actual or imagined danger for either the pollutant or another member/other members of society.<sup>15</sup>

Douglas saw context as necessary to understand ambiguity and pollution. A lesbian in and of herself is not a pollutant; she only becomes a pollutant when contextualized within a cisheteronormative society. It is through the process of comparing the Pure with the Other that

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 40; 64-65.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-42.

pollution becomes an understood concept within society. Relating this to Judaism, Douglas believed pigs are impure not because of any pig characteristics, but because pigs are not cows. Transposing this same idea on to lesbianism, lesbians are undesirable in society not because of any inherent lesbian characteristics, but because lesbians are not heterosexual women. This, coupled with the ambiguity of lesbian gender nonconformity, explains some of the dislike of lesbianism inherent in Western cisheteronormative society. Ambiguity and not adhering to predetermined categories are just two ways in which lesbians, and all women-loving women, exist as pollutants in cisheteronormative society.<sup>16</sup>

Douglas lists four different types of social pollutants: danger pressing on external boundaries, danger from transgressing the internal boundaries of society, danger in the margins of the boundaries delineated by society, and danger from internal contradiction within society.<sup>17</sup> As anglophone lesbian novels came from within Western cisheteronormative society, these pollutants cannot be seen as danger pressing on external boundaries. Instead, lesbianism transgresses internal boundaries by a woman, who is supposed to love a man, loving a woman. Gender nonconformity is a pollutant because it embodies the danger in the margins of society's boundaries, as a "mannish" woman exists in the boundary between "man" and "woman." Furthermore, the existence of a "mannish" woman creates internal contradiction within society, which sees man and woman as binaries. Victor Turner expands upon this concept of transgressing internal boundaries in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, written in 1967. Turner's work on William James's Law of Dissociation by Varying Concomitants and monsters in culture are integral to understanding *The Well of Loneliness* in Chapters Two and Three. The lesbian novels, drawing from the tradition of *The Well of Loneliness* and other

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 124.

interwar lesbian works, used sexual inversion and gender nonconformity as themes, thus creating ambiguity and polluting cisheteronormative society. As such, the themes of these narratives needed to be dealt with as society deals with all ambiguity: through reduction, destruction, avoidance, or danger. Applying Douglas' theories to the ways British and American societies interpreted and appropriated lesbian novels helps to explain the creation of Dead Lesbian Syndrome, its perpetuation throughout the twentieth century, and its impact on lesbian subcultures around the world.

*Patient History: A Historiography of Dead Lesbian Syndrome*

To contextualize a conversation about lesbianism, censorship, and literary representation it is necessary to analyze censorship studies on lesbian and feminist writing. Alison M. Parker's *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933* charts the growth of the United States censorship movement from the Comstock Laws through the Hays Code. Parker's work focuses primarily on the work of middle-class women in their crusades against obscenity and pornography, which resulted in laws and statutes that directly and indirectly impacted state censorship and self-censorship of lesbian texts. This work, published in 1997, is one of the few works that center women's roles in creating and upholding censorship precedents and laws. From most of the available literature, women were more likely to fall victim to censorship than to enforce censorship laws. Two decades after Parker's book, Amy Werbler wrote *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock*. In her book, Werbler explains how censorship helped to produce modernism. After explaining how Anthony Comstock forced the periodical *American Student of Art* to self-censor nudes through threat of legal action, Werbler concludes: "Comstock's actions at the Art Students

League had made nudity even more of a *cause célèbre* and great inspiration. Thanks to Anthony Comstock, obscenity was the newest American modernity.”<sup>18</sup>

Celia Marshik’s work covers the same years as Parker’s and Werbler’s books, but moves focus across the pond, in *British Modernism and Censorship*, published in 2006. Marshik’s argument rests in the idea that state censorship, either actualized or idealized by modernist writers, helped to produce modernism as writers looked for more esoteric ways to address obscene subjects so as to evade censorship. Like Werbler, Marshik believes that writers responded to laws and customs that stifled their creativity through artistic resistance. By finding ways to evade or confront censorship, writers such as Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf were able to use coded language, satire, and implication to share their thoughts with their culturally aligned audience.

Research that focuses on the individuals involved in censorship trials of the 20th century is also essential in understanding the motives behind the actions of the prosecutors, governments, and defendants of each case. In 1985, *Dance Chronicle* offered a five-part series on Maud Allan, written by Felix Cherniavsky. Therein, Cherniavsky offers a summary of the libel trial Allan put in motion against Noel Pemberton Billing. Cherniavsky uses this trial as the turning point for Allan’s life, the beginning of the end. After losing the trial and sacrificing her reputation in the process, Allan all but rejected the stage, becoming a teacher and quasi-recluse. Cherniavsky’s early work on Allan is important in that it contextualizes how the libel suit impacted Allan’s career and later life. This element of contextualization is missing from Phillip Hoare’s 2017 expose on the trial, *Oscar Wilde's Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy, and the Most Outrageous Trial of the Century*. However, Hoare’s research does offer more information about how the

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<sup>18</sup> Amy Werbler, *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 279.

implication of sexually deviancy was used to link homosexuality and unpatriotic espionage and extortion as early as 1918. This connection would only continue to evolve over the next five decades.

In 1986, William Wright wrote a book on Lillian Hellman, the author of *The Children's Hour*. Wright was a journalist who interviewed many of Hellman's friends and enemies but did not speak with Hellman herself. *Lillian Hellman: The Image, The Woman* offered an in-depth analysis of Hellman's decision to write a play that involved lesbian themes, produce the play on Broadway in the 1930s, and then rewrite the play to censor lesbian themes for a movie version. Wright's work also connects her outspoken, interwar views on homosexuality to her connection to Communism in the postwar, McCarthyite Era. Millicent Dillon followed a similar methodology when researching Jane Bowles, an overt women-loving woman contemporary of Lillian Hellman who published *Two Serious Ladies* in 1943. Dillon even went to as far as to interview Bowles' estranged widower, Paul Bowles, in her 1981 biography *A Little Original Sin: The Life and Work of Jane Bowles*. Conversely, Hank O'Neal spent years with his subject, Djuna Barnes, before publishing "*Life is Painful, Nasty, & Short...In My Case It Has Only Been Painful and Nasty,*" *Djuna Barnes, 1978-1989*. Barnes was the author of the 1935 lesbian cult classic *Nightwood*, which evaded censorship through limited publication and modernist language. Both *Nightwood* and *The Children's Hour*, as well as their authors, are discussed in Chapter Four, while *Two Serious Ladies* is explored in Chapter Six.

Although *The Well of Loneliness* predates *The Children's Hour* and *Nightwood*, research into the life and trials of Radclyffe Hall did not pick up steam until the late 1980s. Hall's longtime lover, Una Troubridge wrote a biography of her life partner, *The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall*, in 1961. It was not until Esther Newton's published "The Mythic Mannish

Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman” in *Signs* in 1984 that historiographical work on Hall entered lesbian discourse. Newton’s work offered early analysis of the trials *The Well of Loneliness* faced and the motivations behind Hall’s decision to write a book about female sexual inversion. A year later, Michael Baker published a biography of Hall entitled *Our Three Selves: The Life of Radclyffe Hall*, which utilized personal writings from Hall and Troubridge, as well as other women in Hall’s life. Gale Whitlock expanded upon Newton’s ideas, and the impact of the book on women-loving women, in her 1987 essay, “‘Everything Is out of Place’: Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Literary Tradition,” published in *Feminist Studies*. Rebecca O’Rourke’s *Reflections on ‘The Well of Loneliness’* was also published in 1989, but focused almost singularly on the novel itself, not the writer nor her trials.

Beginning in the late 1990s, research on Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, and the censorship trials of the late 1920s became a focal point of lesbian historical discourse. Sally Cline published *Radclyffe Hall: A Woman Called John* in 1997, which could have been the seminal biography of Hall had Diana Souhami not gained access to previously censored materials from the British government and published *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall* a year later. Although Souhami’s work was groundbreaking in the insight she provided into the government’s rationale for the trials, Cline’s biography remains the most holistic look at Hall’s life as a writer, lover, martyr, and Catholic sexual invert of the turn-of-the-century English upper-middle class.

Together, Cline and Souhami laid the groundwork for 21st century research into the history of *The Well of Loneliness*. In 2001, Laura Doan published two books with Columbia University Press: *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on The Well of Loneliness* with co-editor Jay Prosser, and *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of Modern English Lesbian Subculture*. *Palatable Poison* collected both primary sources and historical reflections related to



*The Well of Loneliness*, while *Fashioning Sapphism* explored how the popularity of Hall's trials and the popularization of her photograph alongside coverage of the trials helped to cement the concept of a masculine identity for lesbians in the United Kingdom. Doan's own research and the essays collected within *Palatable Poison* provide new insight into the role of *The Well of Loneliness*, its author, and their publicity on the construction of a lesbian subculture in the interwar era. In 2006, Doan published additional research on the trials of *The Well of Loneliness* in her essay, "Topsy-Turvydom: Gender Inversion, Sapphism, and the Great War." Doan's research was part of a larger trend that brought *The Well of Loneliness* into the discussion of Great War literature.

While Doan's work focused primarily on the British understanding of *The Well of Loneliness*, Leslie A. Taylor's essay, "'I Made Up My Mind to Get It': The American Trial of the *Well of Loneliness*, New York City, 1928-1929" published in the *Journal of Homosexuality* in 2001, focused on the American trial and context of *The Well of Loneliness*. Other works important to the discussion of *The Well of Loneliness* are Michael S. Howard's *Jonathan Cape, Publisher*, which is the only study of Cape, the publisher of *The Well of Loneliness* and other obscene novels in the interwar era and Huw F. Clayton's 2008 dissertation at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, entitled "'A Frisky, Tiresome Colt?' Sir William Joynson-Hicks, the Home Office, and the 'Roaring Twenties, 1924-1929.'" The conversation around *The Well of Loneliness*, its trials, and contexts continues to the present day, as exemplified by Kathryn Klein's "The Well of Inspiration: Radclyffe Hall and the Growth of Popular Lesbian Fiction in America" published in June 2019 in *The Journal of Popular Culture*—the first article in this study not published in a strictly feminist or queer publication.

In 1975, Laura Mulvey published “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in *Screen*, a British film theory journal, and introduced the concept of “the male gaze.” This keystone of modern feminist thought created a dialectic around the politics of pleasure and was a major point of reflection in the 1983 anthology *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson. In this collection, E. Ann Kaplan further problematizes the politics and phallogocentric nature of modern culture in her essay “Is the Gaze Male?” Ellen Willis took Mulvey’s point that women are usually recognized as neither subject nor symbol in popular culture and wrote “Abortion: Is a Woman a Person?” Recognizing that even in feminism, men are often the focal point, Deirdre English’s essay in this collection looks at the benefits of feminism for men and addresses “The Fear that Feminism will Free Men First.” These essays which confront and question the male gaze are integral to better understanding how lesbian novels were formulaically written to appeal to a voyeuristic male audience.

In “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different,” Ann Barr Snitow mapped the essence of most harlequin novels, in which a woman is afraid of a man for most of the book, finds out the man is in love with her, and instantly decides the man is marriageable. According to Snitow, “Once the heroine knows the hero loves her, the story is over.”<sup>19</sup> As harlequin novels simply reinforce societal demands that woman hunger for a relationship with a man, Snitow concluded: “This is a mirror image of much writing more commonly labeled pornography.”<sup>20</sup> In the end, Snitow simultaneously normalized pornography by comparing it to a harlequin romance and problematized harlequin romances by comparing them to pornography. Overall, Snitow was much more concerned about the effect of harlequin romances on the

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<sup>19</sup> Ann Barr Snitow, “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women Is Different,” *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 250.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

psychosexual development of women than the effect of pornography on the psychosexual development of men.<sup>21</sup> Snitow's work on harlequin heterosexual novels helps lay foundation for understanding how the formulae for lesbian pulp fiction developed, where the two genres parallel and where they diverge.

While most of the works in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* focus on cisheteronormative women and their oppression within patriarchal heterosexual relationships, Cherríe Moraga and Amber Hollibough address homosexuality in “What We're Rollin Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism.” Two seminal works of queer theory were also published in this collection: Adrienne Rich's “Compulsory Sexuality and the Lesbian Existence” and John D'Emilio's “Capitalism and Gay Identity.” Adrienne Rich's “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” is a staple in feminist canon. Rich's article responded to the normalization of heterosexuality prevalent in feminist theoretical texts. In this always-already mindset, feminists failed to question how romantic and sexual partnerships with men affect women and the inevitability of these partnerships shape women's development. Rich's essay focused on problematizing heterosexuality and offering another course of psychosexual development for women—lesbianism.<sup>22</sup> Rich bemoaned the appeal of “Happily Ever After” with “Prince Charming” in young girls' fairy tales, which Rich believe indoctrinated them towards heterosexuality.<sup>23</sup> Rich believed that compulsory heterosexuality limits a woman's ability to choose between sex with a man and sex with a woman, thus rendering all sex with men

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 179-184

<sup>23</sup> Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 184. J. Jack Halberstam made similar arguments in *Gaga Feminism*, when Halberstam discussed the role of men in the world of empowered women. Halberstam bemoaned the fact that “losers” always get the girl in romantic comedy movies, and in a Gaga feminist world, this would not be the case. (Jack J. Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013. Kindle), 19).

nonconsensual.<sup>24</sup> As rape is a commonly-used plot device within lesbian fiction, Rich's theory is important in understanding how rape is conceptualized and reified in society.

In "Capitalism and the Gay Identity," John D'Emilio argued that capitalism allowed for the dissociation of procreation and sexuality while simultaneously bringing an end to the economic independence and interdependence of the cisheteronormative family and interdependent household. By doing so, capitalism presented the opportunity for men and women to "organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attachment to their own sex." D'Emilio believed that strong opposition to gay liberation lay in capitalist belief that children "belong" to parents, who exercise rights of ownership.<sup>25</sup> In this way, capitalist rhetoric encourages heterosexist models while at the same time capitalist material realities sever the bonds between family members, thus rendering the family unit unstable. D'Emilio's ideas are similar to the ones espoused by J. Jack Halberstam in *Gaga Feminism*, in which non-heterosexuals have a perceived advantage over cisheteronormative people who submit to the nuclear family ideology of old and refuse to evolve to the next stage of social mores within the capitalist system.

As the purpose of this research is to place lesbian fiction within the lesbian subculture, understanding the historiography of the lesbian subculture allows for greater contextualization. Lillian Faderman is often considered the leading scholars on lesbian history of the 20th century. Her 1981 book *Surpassing the Love of Men* charts the construction of lesbianism from the Renaissance to Second Wave Feminism. In this work, Faderman creates the foundation upon which later attacks on *The Well of Loneliness* will rest—that the dissemination of sexological research into homosexuality in the interwar and postwar eras led to the construction of the

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<sup>24</sup> Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 191-200.

<sup>25</sup> John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and the Gay Identity," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 104-109

lesbian as evil. According to Faderman, Hall's take on lesbianism as congenital "further morbidified the most natural impulses and healthy views."<sup>26</sup>

Faderman has an obvious agenda when it comes to her analysis of lesbian fiction—to prove that 20th century fiction painted lesbians as evil, vampiric, and sick. In looking at fiction of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Faderman concludes, "The lesbian who is not a sadist is in any case a sickie in most other lesbian novels of this period...When she does not cause others to suffer, she suffers herself and is doomed to be an outcast and lonely."<sup>27</sup> Faderman sees the 1970s as a turning point for lesbian literature, as lesbian writers "began to write not to the demands of conventional morality and wisdom, but rather to the demands of the truth and complexity of their own experiences."<sup>28</sup> Although Faderman does recognize that lesbian pulp novels of the 1950s and 1960s existed, her research primarily skips this time period, creating a gyre between *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928 and post-Stonewall literature.

Ten years after *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Faderman published *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*. Although Faderman published this book almost 30 years ago, it remains the most in-depth and broad comprehensive history of lesbian life in 20th century America. As with *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Faderman accepts that lesbians existed, identified as such, and created a subculture prior to the end of World War II, and yet chapter seven is entitled "Butches, Femmes, and Kikis: Creating Lesbian Subcultures in the 1950s and '60s." Faderman's work went a long way in vilifying *The Well of Loneliness* as the disseminator of homophobic congenital theory, erasing the lesbian subculture of the interwar era and the 1940s, and glorifying the lesbian-women's movement of the 1970s. A major element of

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<sup>26</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1994, p. 323.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>28</sup> Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 356.

this research is to problematize Faderman's claims and determine to what extent revisionist history has oversimplified lesbian literature, erased early 20th century lesbian identity, and, peripherally, whitewashed the nuances of the lesbian-women's movement.

In 1993, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis published *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, which quickly became recognized as the history of *the* lesbian community. Using dozens of interviews with women-loving women who lived, worked, and dated in Buffalo, NY from the 1930s to the 1960s, Kennedy and Davis offered an ethnographic study of lesbian dating, identity, and survival during the mid-20th century. Their research helped to fill the chasm between the romantic friendships of the 19th century and the butch-femme bar scene of the 1950s. This research illuminates the construction of the butch and femme identities, the rise of bar culture, and the tools used by lesbians to live within the homophobic patriarchy while loving other women. Three years later, D. Michael Quinn published his study *Same-Sex Dynamics among Nineteenth Century Americans: A Mormon Example*, which drew heavily from Vern and Bonnie Bullough's research, published in *Signs* in 1977 under the title "Lesbianism in the 1920s and 1930s: A Newfound Study." Quinn's research reinforced the existence of a lesbian subculture in the early half of the 20th century and dispelled the idea that only New York and Los Angeles had thriving lesbian subcultures at this time.

Although many works elided the lesbian experience under the umbrella of either "girls" or "queer," the scarcity of research into a lesbian subculture makes it necessary to mine for information within the larger context of either "homosexuality," which focuses decidedly on white, middle- and upper-class gay men, or "women," which centers the experiences of white, middle class cisheteronormative women. In 2014, respected historian and Cherry Grove resident

Esther Newton published *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town*. Although Newton herself is a lesbian and she worked to include testimony from other local lesbians, the founding of Cherry Grove and Fire Island was mainly the work of theater folk—primarily gay men and their straight women friends. Karin L. Zipf's *Bad Girls at Samarcand: Sexuality and Sterilization in a Southern Juvenile Reformatory*, published in 2016, offers background information into the lesbian experience in the American South and behind bars, both of which are experiences that rarely make it into lesbian history dialectic. Meanwhile, Hugh Ryan's 2019 *When Brooklyn Was Queer* helps to create a causal chain of how homosexuality came to Brooklyn, and the role port cities played in allow homosexuality to flourish in the navy, prior to World War II.

While Faderman, Kennedy and Davis, and Quinn used lesbian-produced primary sources to chart lesbian history, it is also necessary to understand how the homophobic mainstream society addressed the problem of lesbianism. William N. Eskridge Jr.'s *Gaylaw: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet*, published in 1999, is a groundbreaking study that shows how laws against homosexuality came to exist in each individual US state; how seemingly nondescript laws such as those against wearing “masks” were used to harass, arrest, and punish homosexuals; and how many of these laws stayed on the books until well into the 1980s.<sup>29</sup> Although other researchers allude to laws that controlled and eliminated lesbianism, Eskridge's book is unique in its focus on locating state laws relating to homosexuality and explaining through a legal lens how these laws impacted the lives of homosexuals—instead of using only the personal testimony of victims of these laws. Matt Houlbrook's *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957*, published in 2005, almost completely writes lesbians out of the legal

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<sup>29</sup> William N. Eskridge, Jr. *Gaylaw: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

history of queer London. Unlike Eskridge, who took the time to investigate how laws specifically impacted lesbians, Houlbrook washes his hands of this responsibility, explaining:

While female sexual deviance—particularly prostitution—was inscribed with forms of surveillance that echoed the regulation of male sexualities, lesbianism remained invisible in the law and, in consequence, in the legal sources on which this book draws. Lesbian London demands its own study.<sup>30</sup>

There is little historical research into Lesbian London before the 1960s, but primary source documents and Laura Doan’s work discussed above help to understand the legal, political, and government forms of oppression queer women faced.

Led by Faderman, most researchers agree that World War II was a turning point in the construction of a lesbian subculture. According to Faderman, World War II helped women-loving women were able to overcome “the problems of meeting other lesbians, as well as the economic problems of supporting themselves.”<sup>31</sup> In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Faderman argues World War II was a clarifying moment for many women-loving women, in which they realized their ability to find work and provide for themselves and their loves outside of a cisheteronormative marriage. Faderman’s ideas build upon those introduced by Allan Bérubé, a well-respected independent scholar of gay history and a MacArthur Fellow. In 1983, he published the article “Marching to a Different Drummer: Lesbian and Gay GIs in World War II,” in the anthology *Powers of Desire*. He then wrote *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* in 1990 and created the 1994 film of the same name.<sup>32</sup> Bérubé’s research supports the idea that serving in the Armed Forces was revolutionary for gays and lesbians in the United States, allowing for people to meet others like them and forge lasting

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<sup>30</sup> Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 116.

<sup>32</sup> MacArthur Foundation, “Allan Berube,” January 1, 2005, Accessed December 30, 2017. <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/529/>



relationships. At the same time, World War II led to increased crackdowns on homosexuals working in government offices, including the military, and served as a harbinger to the Lavender Scare of the McCarthy Era.

Leisa D. Meyer published her book *Creating GI: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps during WWII* in 1996. Much of her research into the lives of lesbians in the WAC aligns with and reinforces the ideas Bérubé put forth. As the leadership of the Women's Army Corps attempted "to portray servicewomen as generally feminine and respectable," their focus was on eliminating masculine lesbian servicewomen. "Rooting out lesbians who maintained their 'femininity,' and did not call attention to themselves, would have made the 'lesbian problem' more visible to the public than the WAC leadership desired."<sup>33</sup> While both Bérubé and Meyer's work includes chapters on the lesbian experience, this research is subsumed by their main focus on "gay" or "women" soldiers. Centering the lesbian experience continued to be the work of lesbian scholars, and not a part of mainstream discussion under the umbrellas where "lesbian" falls.

In the same year in which he published "Capitalism and the Gay Identity," John D'Emilio cemented his place in the canon of homosexual historiography by publishing *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*. In this work, D'Emilio continues to develop the idea that capitalism both reinforces and deconstructs the nuclear family. He starts with 1940 to center World War II, which, he explains, "temporarily weakened the patterns of daily life that channeled men and women toward heterosexuality and inhibited homosexual expression."<sup>34</sup> D'Emilio also addressed the war

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<sup>33</sup> Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. 83, 153.

<sup>34</sup> John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1998, 31.

between assimilation and militancy that took place in the homosexual communities of the mid-20th century, one which continues to the present day. D’Emilio concluded, “Unwilling to go its own way, the New York DOB [Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian rights organization] remained loyal to the directives of the governing board in San Francisco and kept its distance from the militant wing on the East Coast.”<sup>35</sup> D’Emilio illustrates that while the Civil Rights movement led to increased militancy among homosexual individuals—especially of the working class and in Black communities—the powerful middle class organizations such as the DOB and the Mattachine Society remained focused on deescalating homophobia and gaining entrance into heterosexual society.

Jonathan Ned Katz, who made his mark in the canon of gay and lesbian studies with the book *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* in 1976, published *The Invention of Heterosexuality* in 1995. This work set forth many of the elements of queer theory now taken for granted. In this book, Katz explains that heterosexuality was invented alongside the invention of homosexuality—just as the concept of light could not exist without the concept of darkness; prior to the medicalization of people who enjoyed same-sex relations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the identity of the heterosexual was non-existent. Katz’s work provides evidence that the patriarchal, heterosexual norms to which society now subscribes were created by sexologist and psychologists during the early 20th century and then filtered to the masses through mass media. Building from D’Emilio’s arguments, Katz shows that these systems rested on the differences created between the genders and the caste system built from those differences. As such, “[a]s the ‘gender gap’ between women and men narrows, so does the sexual orientation gap.”<sup>36</sup> Writing in 1995, Katz observed, “The instability of homosexual relationships

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, 185.

(unsupported by the law and the dominant culture) no longer serves to distinguish them essentially from the many heterosexual relationships destabilized by divorce.”<sup>37</sup> For Katz, capitalism destroyed the nuclear family and assimilation has made gay and straight relationships look identical from the outside.

In 1999, Patricia Juliana Smith published *The Queer Sixties*. Smith dedicated this collection of essays, “To Lillian Faderman, The Mother of Us All,” further proving Faderman’s influence on historians and social sciences in the field of queer theory and queer history. Smith’s collection works from the premise that the Stonewall Riots were not “the flashpoint—the originary moment—of the American Gay Liberation.”<sup>38</sup> Instead, this collection focuses on the explicit and implicit ways in which the 1960s were a decade filled with queer culture. This collection includes “Pulp Politics: Strategies of Vision in Pro-Lesbian Pulp Novels, 1955-1965” by Yvonne Keller and “The Cultural Works of Sixties Gay Pulp Fiction” by David Bergman, both respected scholars on pulp novels. Jennifer A. Rich’s essay, ““(W)right in the Faultlines’: The Problematic of Identity in William Wyler’s *The Children’s Hour*” is also an important addition to research and reflections on this seminal play and film first written by Lillian Hellman in 1934. Together, the essays in Smith’s collection help combat the erasure of homosexual communities prior to Stonewall.

In the 2000s, three books were published which focused specifically on the ways homosexuals and the government interacted throughout the Cold War Era. In 2004, David K. Johnson published *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*. Two years later, Marcia M. Gallo published *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement*. According to

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>38</sup> Patricia Juliana Smith, “Introduction,” in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith, New York: Routledge, 1999, xiii.

Johnson's research, Senator Joseph McCarthy was convinced that homosexuality "was the psychological maladjustment that led people toward communism."<sup>39</sup> McCarthy did a thorough job of convincing his fellow members of Congress to conduct investigations into the homosexual threat. However, Senator Clyde Hoey, who oversaw the early investigations, seemed unaware of the existence of lesbianism, almost comically asking, "Can you please tell me, what can two women possibly do?"<sup>40</sup> This single question asked in the beginning of hearings on homosexual behavior in the State Department highlights the almost complete invisibility of lesbianism within larger society, even five years after World War II. Johnson's work charts the progress of the congressional tactics used to find and fire homosexuals in government offices and illustrates how these tactics became models for homosexual witch hunts in state governments and private business. Johnson concludes that the oppression from the government led to organization and resistance from groups such as the Mattachine Society, so that "the policies meant to counter the power and influence of the gay civil servants actually fostered the creation of an effective and influential political gay pressure group."<sup>41</sup>

While the government and the media were attempting to rouse suspicion of homosexuality around every corner and in every closet, the Daughters of Bilitis were attempting to appear less threatening. Gallo's research begins with the lesbian clubs of the 1930s and 1940s, recognizing that a lesbian community did exist before middle class women created the Daughters of Bilitis. *Different Daughters* expands upon D'Emilio's research into the respectability politics of the mid-20th century and proves that by the 1960s the Daughters of Bilitis was composed of primarily white, middle-class women who focused on presenting the lesbian as a harmless,

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<sup>39</sup> David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, 16.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

acceptable woman that could easily assimilate into cisheteronormative culture and pass as a heterosexual woman.

Johnson and Gallo’s research, paired with Margot Canaday’s groundbreaking research in *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, published in 2019, are integral to understanding the context of the 1950s and 1960s—the Golden Age of lesbian pulp novels. Canaday’s research explains the elements of homosexual history that other publications take for granted: the roots of homosexual stigma in the military during World War I, the economic impact of the dishonorable discharges after World War II, and the role of homosexuality in 20th century immigration policies. Like Eskridge’s *Gaylaw*, Canaday’s research shows that laws unrelated to sexual interactions were often used to discriminate against homosexuals, such as immigrant officials forbidding homosexuals to come to the United States because it was assumed that they were likely to become a public charge.<sup>42</sup> Canaday further explains that the welfare state as developed under Roosevelt and Truman worked to explicitly discourage homosexuality. Citing the GI Bill in particular, Canaday proves “homosexual exclusion was deliberate, built into the very foundation of the welfare state.”<sup>43</sup> This research concludes with Canaday claiming homosexuals have been purposefully excluded from citizenship status in the United States, and that this exclusion cannot be solved with a single congressional act. Instead “the architecture of exclusion will have to be taken down the same deliberate way it was put up: piece by piece.”<sup>44</sup>

For D’Emilio, novels about the homosexual experience were important for both groups, as “Each novel...communicated to gay readers that their situation was widely shared” and

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<sup>42</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, 21.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

“fictional renditions and journalistic accounts of lesbians and gay men filled in the outlines of a common predicament, a way of life experienced by millions.”<sup>45</sup> While lesbian literature written after Stonewall has received ample attention from literary critics and historians such as Marion Zimmer Bradley, Bonnie Nestle, and Lillian Faderman, works written in the first two-thirds of the 20th century often go overlooked. To understand Dead Lesbian Syndrome, one must understand the rise of lesbian literature and its connection to the lesbian communities from which it came and into which it circulated.

An early history of lesbian literature is Catherine R. Stimpson’s essay “‘Zero Degree Deviancy’: The Lesbian Novel in English,” published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1981. Stimpson argued that writers of lesbian fiction worked under a double burden: “a patriarchal culture and a strain in the female tradition that accepted and valued heterosexuality.”<sup>46</sup> Stimpson believes that the response to this burden took two distinct forms, either the “dying fall” which was a “narrative of damnation” or the “enabling escape,” which allowed for the lesbian’s “rebellion against social stigma and self-contempt.”<sup>47</sup> According to Stimpson, the dying fall trope was more common throughout the 20th century, supporting the idea that Dead Lesbian Syndrome was pervasive within lesbian literature. Stimpson’s work also shows how censorship coerced lesbian writers into silencing themselves, either not referencing lesbianism at all in their writings, or doing so through encryption. Stimpson admits that there was a third route for lesbian writers to take:

“As if making an implicit, perhaps unconscious pact with her culture, the lesbian writer who rejects both silence and excessive coding can claim the right to write for the public in exchange for adopting the narrative of damnation.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities.*, 147.

<sup>46</sup> Catherine R. Stimpson, “‘Zero Degree Deviancy’: The Lesbian Novel in English,” in *Critical Inquiry*, 8.2 (Winter, 1981), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343168>, 363-379, 363.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

Stimpson's argument rests primarily on a part-by-part analysis of *The Well of Loneliness*. After this analysis, she explains that women characters are often forced to choose between maternity and power.<sup>49</sup> This struggle for lesbians between their truth and their desire for or expectation of children is a major theme in multiple lesbian novels of the 20th century. Stimpson ends with her belief that the late 1960s brought more "hopeful lesbian novels," beginning with *Patience & Sarah* in 1969.<sup>50</sup> In this way, Stimpson suggests a narrative of progress for the lesbian novel, from the narrative of damnation supplied by Radclyffe Hall to the enabling escapism of lesbian novels in the 1970s.

In 1989, Suzanna Danuta Walters analyzed the novels of Ann Bannon, author of the Beebo Brinker series. Walters' article, "As Her Hand Crept Slowly Up Her Thigh: Ann Bannon and the Politics of Pulp" published in *Social Text*, catalogues Bannon's novels as "cultural products rich with the sedimentations of history."<sup>51</sup> Walters' research quickly explains, "Little, in fact, is known about this audience, the readers who hunted for these books in their local drugstore or who cautiously borrowed them from friends."<sup>52</sup> Walters also points out that Bannon's characters were overly caricatured so as to force a sense of anonymity and universality—Beebo Brinker represents *all* working class butch lesbians, not just herself.<sup>53</sup>

Walter also introduces the use of lesbian pulp novels as "travel guides." She explains,

From these books, one could learn the terminology, dress codes, and etiquette necessary to negotiate the lesbian subculture. And one could even pick up a good line or two in the process.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 373. Stimpson writes, "man may have both paternity and power, but a woman must too often choose between maternity and comparative powerlessness."

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 375.

<sup>51</sup> Suzanna Danuta Walters, "As Her Hand Crept Slowly up Her Thigh: Ann Bannon and the Politics of Pulp," *Social Text*, (83.23, 1989, doi:10.2307/466422), 87.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 87-89.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 90.

It is this definition of lesbian novels upon which the importance of Dead Lesbian Syndrome rests. If lesbian novels were completely divorced from the women-loving women subculture, then the perpetuation of Dead Lesbian Syndrome would have little importance to historians and study of this fiction trope would be relegated to the field of literature studies. However, as Walters substantiates, these novels served as reflections of and gateways into the real women-loving women subculture of their time. If lesbian pulp novels were the “travel guides” of lesbian subculture, then Dead Lesbian Syndrome could have possibly fatal effects on the women who read these books.

Karen Michele Cadora’s 1999 dissertation “The Limits of Lesbiana: Race and Class in Twentieth Century Lesbian Genre Fiction,” may be the most important piece of research never published in the field of lesbian history. Looking primarily at *The Well of Loneliness* but placing it in conversation with other lesbian novels of the early twentieth century, Cadora shows the ways in which lesbianism and sexual inversion were written as direct nemeses of the ongoing eugenics movement of the early twentieth century. Cadora’s work is instrumental in proving Radclyffe Hall’s innate conservatism and its impact on the ways both society and women-loving women viewed lesbianism after reading *The Well of Loneliness*.

A year after Cadora finished her dissertation, Monica Bachman published “‘Someone Like Debby’: (De)Constructing a Lesbian Community of Readers” in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. This research provides an early first step in understanding how women-loving women readers interpret and understand the literature they consume—both that written with the women-loving women audience in mind and that which perpetuates cisheteronormative expectations for women. While elements of Bachman’s work are useful for constructing a critique of lesbian literature outside of that which Bachman researched, the work



that most closely aligns with the aims of this study is Yvonne Keller's 2005 text, "'Was It Right to Love Her Brother's Wife so Passionately?': Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965," in which she explained that "nonliterary, often homophobic books mattered intensely to some women of the time" as these novels provided a type of "nourishment" that these women "found necessary to their survival—lesbian representation."<sup>55</sup> Sarah Louise Stratton drew from Keller's earlier work and analyzed why lesbians were so willing to read such negative depictions of lesbian life. In her 2018 dissertation, "'More than throw-away fiction': investigating lesbian pulp fiction through the lens of a lesbian textual community," Stratton argued that lesbian fiction played a "survival role," enabling lesbians to find community and identity, despite the negative storylines.<sup>56</sup> The concept of survival literature is an essential point in understanding how lesbian literature thrived in homophobic publishing markets and the impact this literature had on both women-loving women and cisheteronormative readers.

#### *A Colony of Lepers: Dead Lesbian Syndrome & Imagined Communities*

Alongside Geertz's model of and for society, Douglas' theory of danger, and Turner's explanation of monsters, two other major theorists are necessary for understanding Dead Lesbian Syndrome, lesbian literature of the pre-Stonewall Era, and how lesbians navigated their identities and communities in the mid-twentieth century. Benedict Anderson's work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, offers an important explanation of how communities are imagined into existence utilizing language, and how identities are created based on these imagined communities. While the 1991 edition of this book

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<sup>55</sup> Yvonne Keller, "'Was It Right to Love Her Brother's Wife So Passionately?': Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965," *American Quarterly*, (57.2, 2005), 385-410, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068271>, 385.

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Louise Stratton, "More than throw-away fiction: investigating lesbian pulp fiction through the lens of a lesbian textual community," Dissertation, *University of Birmingham*, 2018.

is important in understanding how nations are imagined and defined, Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is important in understanding how nations can be deconstructed and traversed. Taken together, the theories of both imagined communities and the Borderlands theory allow us to understand how lesbian literature first constructed the lesbian identity, and how Dead Lesbian Syndrome allowed this identity to exist on the margins of society, where lesbians could problematize the cracks in the system and find power in ambiguity.

First, Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" offers a basis for which community construction is rooted in language—specifically the printed word. According to Anderson, the "nation" is imagined, limited, and a community. It is imagined because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."<sup>57</sup> However, in being imagined, the nation is also created. It is limited because every nation "has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations." There is an "other" nation, against which this nation can be identified. Finally, nations are communities because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."<sup>58</sup> The lesbian communities of the mid-twentieth century were much the same: imagined through literature and letters; limited to women who were attracted to other women; and communal in that women were required to make sacrifices and compromises in order to be a part of the lesbian subculture that emerged in major American cities beginning in the 1930s. Anderson's theories of how the novel introduces simultaneity will be essential for understanding how lesbian fiction helped challenge the isolation of individual women.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2016), 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

While Anderson's work shows how nations, analogized to subcultures for the purposes of this dissertation, can be constructed, Anzaldúa's work illustrates how nations as limited and bordered communities can be destabilized. For Anzaldúa, the border between the United States and Mexico is "in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants."<sup>60</sup> This same definition could apply to the LGBTQ+ community of both the past and the present. As the lesbian community struggled to define itself, this subculture was in a constant state of transition, where women's love for other women was prohibited and forbidden by societal norms (and, by the 1950s, Cold War policies). Anzaldúa addresses the lesbian existence when she writes:

Deviance is whatever is condemned by the community. Most societies try to get rid of their deviants. Most cultures have burned and beaten their homosexuals and others who deviate from the sexual common. The queer are the mirror reflecting the homosexual tribe's fear: being different.<sup>61</sup>

Like Douglas, Anzaldúa recognizes that the prohibited and forbidden in society often face brutal elimination. Like Anderson, Anzaldúa sees the nation as an imagined community rooted in comradeship, in which "being different" is the nation's fear. Anzaldúa's borderlands theory is essential to understanding how lesbian readers were able to navigate lesbian literature and Dead Lesbian Syndrome to find *la facultad*, "the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface" and to navigate pain, finding ways to navigate away from pain, a "survival tactic that people, caught between worlds, unknowingly cultivate."<sup>62</sup> For women-loving women who had to navigate the cisheteronormative society for jobs and their families, this survival tactic also colored the way they read novels suffering from

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<sup>60</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 25.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

Dead Lesbian Syndrome, as will be supported by oral history testimony in future chapters. Finally, Anzaldúa's work on the gendered creation of culture will be important in discussions of Dead Lesbian Syndrome in comparison with *Bury Your Gays* in the final chapter of this dissertation.<sup>63</sup>

Taken together, Anderson and Anzaldúa's theories explain how Dead Lesbian Syndrome reinforced the construction of a lesbian subculture because it enabled lesbian novels to circulate throughout the country *and* because lesbian readers recognized *la facultad* in the borderlands of what was and was not acceptable in lesbian literature. However, not only were lesbians prohibited and forbidden, but they were also seen as lepers and vampires in modern society. D'Emilio's work best explains the relationship between capitalism and homosexuality.

In "Capitalism and the Gay Identity," D'Emilio argues that capitalism allows for the dissociation of procreation and sexuality while simultaneously bringing an end to the economic independence and interdependence of the nuclear family and household. By doing so, capitalism presented the opportunity for men and women to "organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attachment to their own sex." D'Emilio believes that strong opposition to gay liberation lay in capitalist belief that children "'belong' to parents, who exercise rights of ownership."<sup>64</sup> Although capitalist rhetoric reinforces the importance of the nuclear family, most of the work of twentieth century capitalism is done outside of the home, in stark contrast to the agricultural life of the 18th century in which family members were connected not just by love and relation, but by the work they performed as farmers. As such, "while capitalism has knocked the material foundation away from family life, lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual feminists

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>64</sup> John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and the Gay Identity," 104-109.

have become the scapegoats for the social instability in the system.”<sup>65</sup> In this way, capitalist rhetoric encourages heterosexist models while at the same time capitalist material realities sever the bonds between family members, thus rendering the family unit unstable. Lesbians are a part of Trinh T. Minh-ha’s “in-between grounds” which “keep on being suppressed because they tend to render more visible the failures operating in every system.”<sup>66</sup> Marxist feminist interpretations of lesbianism and the nuclear family will be introduced throughout Chapters Three and Four as this dissertation analyzes the interwar era and the dissonance between women’s rights and companionate marriages.

*Prognosis: Deadly*

As with any disease, Dead Lesbian Syndrome has its own symptoms, some which manifest blatantly and some which are insidious but still destructive. Much of the lesbian fiction which suffers from Dead Lesbian Syndrome share other commonalities. Most of these novels, plays, and films center around lesbian bars, drinking, and alcoholism. This dissertation will argue that alcoholism was rampant in the lesbian communities of the mid-twentieth century, and that writers often used alcoholism as both a tool to show that women-loving women were susceptible to all vices—not just sexual perversity—and to explain how women-loving women were able to live with their damned status. As such, writers portrayed alcoholism as both a cause for the women’s misery and a result of this misery. Many of these novels also include the butch-femme dynamic, the crossing of racial boundaries, and rape. All these symptoms of Dead Lesbian Syndrome reflect truth within the women-loving women communities on which these novels are

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>66</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 41.

based, though often the writer exaggerates or decontextualizes these facets to fit the agenda of the writer.

To better understand the causes and effects of Dead Lesbian Syndrome within the contexts of both the lesbian subculture and mainstream society, this dissertation strives to chart the prevalence of these symptoms in lesbian fiction from 1895 through the end of World War II. While this study was designed to be exhaustive, some fictional works were excluded for comparative purposes. All the examined fictional works center the lesbian relationship within of the narrative and had to be recognized by the characters as a romantic, inverted, or homosexual relationship. All works which were immediately censored and unavailable until after 1949 were not included, as they would not have had direct impact on women-loving communities of the period examined.<sup>67</sup> The fictional symptoms are also compared to the lived realities of women who were romantically involved with women throughout the early twentieth century. Drawing primarily from oral histories collected by the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, NY and the Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, fictional models are compared to their real-life counterparts to ascertain what elements of Dead Lesbian Syndrome are modeling lived behavior and which elements were constructed by authors to enable publication. While this comparison becomes difficult as the circulation of lesbian novels increased and women began to use the books as models *for* their lives, instead of models *of* their lives, this research argues that the comparison allows us to better understand how much of an impact Dead Lesbian Syndrome had on individual women-loving women, the lesbian subcultures, and mainstream society.

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<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, two novels, *Star Against Star* by Gawen Brownrigg (Paris: Obelisk Press, 1936) and *Uncharted Seas* by Eric Ward (Paris: Obelisk Press, 1937) were excluded from this study because they were published in Paris in English but there is no evidence suggesting they were readily available in the United Kingdom or the United States before 1950.

Using both the available lesbian literature of the mid-twentieth century and testimony from women-loving women during this time, this dissertation argues that Dead Lesbian Syndrome, while toxic, was necessary for lesbian representation, which was an important ingredient of lesbian identity, and thus essential to the construction of a lesbian subculture. Rooted in legal, editorial, and self-censorship, Dead Lesbian Syndrome both enabled lesbian representation and limited this representation to mostly negative narratives. This research illustrates how society used censorship to eliminate the danger of lesbianism, as detailed by Mary Douglas and Victor Turner. Although many of these novels were written by women-loving women, Dead Lesbian Syndrome forced these novels to serve as models for the treatment of lesbians: women who have engaged in a romantic relationship with other women should return to cisheteronormative society or suffer the consequences. While these novels did not suggest that lesbians should be killed for their sexuality, corrective rape, asylum stays, and complete rejection of a non-cisheteronormative past were all strongly enforced by Dead Lesbian Syndrome.

Simultaneously, this dissertation argues that negative representation was better than no representation, and that the stories created through Dead Lesbian Syndrome empowered women who loved other women to create their identities and construct a community. While women-loving women felt *misrepresented* by the plot devices and character development symptomatic of Dead Lesbian Syndrome, these works helped to represent lesbianism both to women-loving women themselves and mainstream society. Throughout the following chapters, there is evidence readers turned to these novels for a better understanding of their own sexual and gender identities and that these novels provided solace unavailable in the overly clinical descriptions of sexual inversion and, later, lesbianism in psychology textbooks, medical journals, and the dictionary.

To understand how fiction and reality reflected and refracted one another, it is important to start this research with the field of sexology and the early examples sexologists used to explain sexual inversion and same-sex attraction. Chapter One of this dissertation explores examples of women-loving women in real life and in fiction throughout the last decade of the nineteenth century. The chapter looks at how fiction involving tomboys provided blueprints later used for lesbian fiction. Chapter One also examines the role of Alice Mitchell's murder trial in creating lesbian fiction and influencing Havelock Ellis' understanding of lesbianism, which in turn influenced the lesbianism Radclyffe Hall constructs in *The Well of Loneliness*.

In Chapter Two, this work examines the world into which Radclyffe Hall and her publisher, Jonathan Cape, released *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928. Beginning with the turn of the century, this chapter examines the impact of Women's Suffrage, World War I, and class differences on society's views of lesbianism and women-loving women prior to the publication of *The Well of Loneliness* in both the United Kingdom and the United States. By analyzing how First Wave Feminism, Oscar Wilde, World War I, and Hall's earlier works culminated in *The Well of Loneliness*, we can better understand the societal influences and zeitgeist which served as midwife to the earliest well-known lesbian novel. Chapter Three expands upon this idea by examining the consequences of the three trials of *The Well of Loneliness*. Beginning with loss of *The Well of Loneliness* in England because of the British trial, the chapter then looks at the precedents upon which *The Well of Loneliness* would face judgement in the United States. Of particular interest are *The Captive*, a 1926 play that New York censors refused, and *Mademoiselle de Maupin* by Théophile Gautier, a nineteenth century French novel which faced censorship for its sexual tones—including lesbianism—in New York in 1920. Together, Chapter Two and Three explore the impact of the interwar era on the creation of *The Well of Loneliness*



and the impact of *The Well of Loneliness* on the creation of women-loving women identities, communities, and fictional works.

In Chapters Four and Five, this dissertation explores the fiction created in the immediate aftermath of *The Well of Loneliness*, its publication, and its trials. Looking at novels of the 1930s, Chapter Four outlines the ways in which the burgeoning lesbian identity stood at odds with the evolving concept of companionate marriage. How could a man—who has lived separate from woman his whole life—compete with a woman—who understands women innately—for the love of a woman? This was a question confronted and answered numerous times in lesbian novels of the 1930s, some of which even had happy endings for the two women-loving women characters. In Chapter Five, we turn to plays and movies of the 1930s and explore the ways in which Broadway and Hollywood agreed and differed in their opinions of they should censor and what was permissible for viewers to consume. Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* and *These Three* are prime specimens for dissection when it comes to understanding Dead Lesbian Syndrome.

The final chapter focuses on lesbian literature during and immediately after World War II and the impact of World War II on women-loving women identities, communities, and fictional works. This chapter analyzes how Postwar women-loving women examined *The Well of Loneliness* and other pieces of lesbian fiction in the first lesbian periodical, *Vice-Versa*, and in mainstream media. It also looks at the birth and early demand for lesbian pulp fiction, and the influence of earlier forms of lesbian fiction on the construction of these novels. Throughout this dissertation, there is emphasis placed on continuity and precedence, to better understand the insidious nature of Dead Lesbian Syndrome and its parasitic growth alongside lesbian fiction in such a way that makes the disease almost indelible in the fiction. This research argues Dead

Lesbian Syndrome has been a part of lesbian fiction since the beginning of modern lesbian fiction and, unless consciously confronted and absconded from lesbian narrative arcs, will continue to poison lesbian fiction and society's views of women-loving women for generations to follow.

From patient zero to a prognosis for the future, this dissertation proves the centrality of Dead Lesbian Syndrome in both lesbian fiction and women-loving women imaginations. The symptoms of Dead Lesbian Syndrome became the bulwark of the lesbian identity for many within the women-loving women subculture prior to the Stonewall Riots. It was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that women-loving women began to actively pushback against the stereotypes and ideals presented in the works suffering from Dead Lesbian Syndrome, and it was this pushback that helped to define the lesbian experience for the radical feminists of the 1970s. Despite these evolutionary reactions within the women-loving women community, cisheteronormative society continues to perpetuate Dead Lesbian Syndrome to the present day, as evidenced by the death of Tara in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Jenny in *The L Word*, and Lexa in *The 100*. By historicizing Dead Lesbian Syndrome, this dissertation strives to reinforce the need to deconstruct this trope and eradicate it from modern lesbian fiction to provide more positive and healthier representation for the next generation of women-loving women consumers.

**Chapter One**  
**Prelude to a Plague: Lesbian Death before Dead Lesbian Syndrome**

*Introduction: Women-loving Women of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

Prior to the sexological classification of same sex attraction that became most prevalent in the 1890s, there existed women-loving women around the world. For many of these women, the concept of identifying as a lesbian, a sapphic, or even a sexual invert would have seemed strange: people were not yet identifying by the people with whom they had sex. Instead, the homosocial environments, the “separate spheres” of the Victorian Era, privileged same-sex relationships, especially for the young. Society believed young, white middle-class and upper-class women who engaged in romantic liaisons with their friends at boarding schools were modelling the choices they would have to make after their societal debuts. The concept of these women having sexual inclinations at all was anathema to Victorian understanding of sexuality and gender. Meanwhile, working-class white women and Black women of any class were considered overly and perversely sexual, with homoeroticism almost acceptable in the way that it existed as a foregone conclusion.

Still, the lack of scientific or legal classification did not prevent women-loving women from existing—as they have throughout history—in nineteenth century life and, therefore, in 1890s fiction. This chapter unearths the women-loving women of the latter half of the nineteenth century, both in history and in fiction, to understand the blueprints and foundations upon which Dead Lesbian Syndrome attached. Although most of this chapter is rooted in the conceptualization of women-loving women in the United States, this chapter will also look at sexology and its conceptualization on the European continent as well. As the research will prove, the tragic narratives of tomboys in the late nineteenth century created a framework for novels about women-loving women throughout the twentieth century. Like women-loving women,

tomboys pushed at the internal boundaries of society and, in turn, had to be eliminated. Children's books such as *Little Women* became instructive for young girls, showing how a preadolescent tomboy like Jo March could grow into the maternal and kind Mrs. Josephine Bhaer, with the implication that those young girls who did not give up their tomboy ways would fall to ruin and grow up unhappy. Tomboys, seen as undesirable to society, were eliminated in both fiction and society—a fate that would later befall the lesbian, who future generations would see as an even greater threat to cisheteronormative patriarchal hegemony.

Although women-loving women existed within homosocial environments such as finishing schools and prisons, their existence was largely reduced or avoided by society at large. This chapter explores women-loving women's experiences and classifications in prisons and psychiatric hospitals during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century. Although commonly kept out of fictional portrayals of lesbians in 20<sup>th</sup> century novels, many of these novels imply their women-loving women either end up in prison or a psychiatric hospital or, at the very least, belong there. Through public indecency charges, the illegalization of sex work, and the forced institutionalization of women-loving women by their parents, guardians, and social workers, the government and its supporters were able to push women-loving women, mostly from the lower classes, out of the public view. Society used reduction to address the threat of lesbianism by isolating these women from the rest of the world and avoidance by keeping the public ignorant of women-loving women in prisons and psychiatric hospitals.

The publicizing and pathologizing of women-loving women occurred simultaneously in the 1890s, as first Tennessean, then national, then international newspapers rushed to print the story of Alice Mitchell and her murder of the woman she loved. The first widely-publicized

narrative of two women in love—or at least one woman romantically and sexually infatuated with another—was rife with jealousy, violence, and crossdressing. As sexologists on both sides of the Atlantic rushed to understand and deconstruct Alice Mitchell’s identity and desire, her violent attack on Freda Ward became intertwined with her love for a woman. This chapter looks at the newspaper coverage of Alice Mitchell’s trial, the sexologists’ interpretation of Alice Mitchell, and the three novels published in the immediate aftermath of the murder and trial that portrayed women-loving women, gender nonconformity, and violence as intrinsically linked at the turn of the twentieth century.

This chapter ends with a look at how society pathologized women-loving women to keep women from pursuing independence or threatening the cisheteronormative culture. The final section of this chapter also looks at how evolution theory and eugenics influenced sexology and the treatment of women-loving women and other women who questioned or troubled the white supremacist cisheteronormative patriarchy. Through understanding how race and class created different understandings of women’s sexuality—both those understandings forced upon them by society and the understanding these women had of themselves—we can better understand why lesbian fiction of the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century is seemingly devoid of Black experiences and why so much of this early fiction is written by and about middle-class and upper-class, cisgender, white women.

*The Marriage and Murder of Josephine March*

For young readers of the Gilded Age, the fictional tomboy was a litmus test with regards to what was and was not allowed for young girls, how far young girls could push back against cisheteronormative patriarchy, and the extent to which girls could dress in “boy’s clothing,” that is, wear pants. The tomboy’s narrative arc is designed to convince young girls to adhere to societal demands prior to their teenage years, out of fear that after the age of twelve, lack of self-discipline and containment will result in a young girl being unmarriageable by the end of her teenage years. Starting with a tomboy, often an orphan who indulges in crossdressing and disobeys her elders, these novels end with the tomboy recognizing she no longer wishes to indulge in pursuits Victorian society dictated were “for boys.” One fictional tomboy from 1895 announced, after climbing a tree: “You may be glad to hear that I have not the slightest wish ever to climb a tree again”<sup>68</sup> thus bringing her desires to “act like a boy” to an end and signaling “the tomboy’s timely turn to marriage and motherhood.”<sup>69</sup> By the late nineteenth century, there were two forms of tomboy narratives: those in which the tomboy could be redeemed and those in which the tomboy could not. An early example of the irredeemable tomboy is Nancy Vawse in Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850). Unable to transform from a tomboy into a married woman, Nancy is labeled a “wicked thing,” a “bad girl,” and “too impudent to live” by the novel’s end.<sup>70</sup>

Ending the novel with a still-untamed tomboy was uncommon, as “tomboys cannot be allowed to prevail unchecked through the entire narrative, for their purpose is to correct excess

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<sup>68</sup> Isabel Rogers, “A Tomboy’s Justification,” *School Girls*, n.s. No. 2 (1895), 84.

<sup>69</sup> Mary Elliott, “When Girls Will Be Boys: “Bad” Endings and Subversive Middles in Nineteenth-Century Tomboy Narratives and Twentieth-Century Lesbian Pulp Novels,” *Legacy*, (15.1, 1998, pp. 92-97), 93.

<sup>70</sup> Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World*, (New York: Feminist, 1987), 127, 194, 248 quoted in Elliott, “When Girls Will Be Boys,” 94.

or, more precisely, to demonstrate that it can be corrected.”<sup>71</sup> This correction is common throughout nineteenth century novels about tomboys and unwed mothers and twentieth century novels about sex workers and lesbians. With all four of these gender-nonconforming women, the narrative works to correct problems “such as domestic invalidism or unruly individuality that would, if unchecked, conflict with the goals of motherhood and presumptions of male authority.”<sup>72</sup> Like the tomboy, women-loving women push against the boundaries of what society considers “acceptable” for women, and often the fictional lesbian is painted as tomboy *ad extremis*. While the tomboy can eventually be taught to cook, dressed in lace, married to a man, and impregnated, the lesbian is a woman who refuses her domestic duties in order to provide for herself financially, dresses as a man in order to take on manly roles, is repulsed by the possibility of marrying or fornicating with a man, and denies both herself and the capitalist society the joy of being a mother to the next generation of workers. “This undermining of gender systems at the centers of these narratives renders tomboys and lesbian romance heroines, regardless of the endings, unfixed and unfixable in the texts themselves. They provide liminal identities that operate as tricksters within their cultural contexts.”<sup>73</sup> Punished or not, married or not, and in the lesbian’s case, dead or not, the existence of these characters between the pages of a book offered the suggestion that such characters *can exist*, can undermine the patriarchal demands of society, and, in rare cases, can find their own happiness—even if fleeting—in the process.

Perhaps the most widely known example of the nineteenth century tomboy is Jo March, the second oldest sister of *Little Women* fame. Although most readers see Louisa May Alcott’s most well-known novel as a coming-of-age tale for young American women, in 1989, Angela M.

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<sup>71</sup> Elliott, “When Girls Will Be Boys,” 95.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant offered a new understanding of *Little Women*, one in which the story is that of a murder and resurrection instead of entering adulthood and marriage. “For in presenting the conflict between appropriate womanly behavior and the human desire for assertiveness and fulfillment, Alcott finds herself forced to wage war upon her protagonist, Jo. Young Jo—fiery, angry, assertive—represents all that adult Jo can never be, and for this reason young Jo must be destroyed.”<sup>74</sup> For young Jo, who loves her sisters and her homosocial family above all else and who wishes to serve as the man of the house, “no future is possible.”<sup>75</sup>

According to John Matteson, Jo March was never meant to get married.<sup>76</sup> Alcott published the first part of *Little Women* before she wrote part two, and reader response as well as pressure from her publishers shaped the way she finished the novel.

“She found that people wanted her to write in ways that did not strengthen their moral fiber, but seemed instead to cater to their taste for conventionality and female submissiveness. Alcott’s chief annoyance came in the form of fan letters—untold numbers of them—that expressed a common theme. Her young fans raved about Part First and could not wait for Part Second, in which, as many seemed to think inevitable, Jo would marry Laurie.”<sup>77</sup>

In early 1868, Alcott bemoaned the demands of her audience in her journal. “Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please any one.”<sup>78</sup> In a letter to Elizabeth Powell dated March 20, 1869, Alcott

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<sup>74</sup> Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant, “Dismembering the Text: The Horror of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*,” *Children's Literature*, (17, 1989, pp. 98-123), 101.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Matteson won a Pulitzer Prize for his 2007 autobiography of Louisa May Alcott, entitled *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father*. He is a Distinguished Professor of English at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and considered one of the foremost scholars of Louisa May Alcott's life and writings. (“The Annotated *Little Women*, W.M. Norton, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://wnorton.com/books/9780393072198/about-author>).

<sup>77</sup> Louisa May Alcott and John Matteson, *The Annotated Little Women (The Annotated Books)*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Nov 2, 2015, n.p.), Chapter One.

<sup>78</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*, ed. Ednah D. Cheney, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1898, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38049/38049-h/38049-h.htm>), 202.



claimed she wanted Jo to remain “a literary spinster.”<sup>79</sup> Jo claims this title for herself in Part Two, exclaiming:

“An old maid, that's what I'm to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps, when, like poor Johnson, I'm old and can't enjoy it, solitary, and can't share it, independent, and don't need it. Well, I needn't be a sour saint nor a selfish sinner, and, I dare say, old maids are very comfortable when they get used to it, but...”<sup>80</sup>

In her letter to Powell, Alcott explains that she would not have married Jo March off, except, “[P]ublishers won't let authors finish up as they like, but insist on having people married off in a wholesale manner which much afflicts me.”<sup>81</sup> Forced to provide Jo with a suitable spouse and revolted at the notion of pairing Jo with her childhood friend Laurie, Alcott created a “funny match” for Jo with the newly-introduced Dr. Bhaer. Reflecting on this marriage, Alcott told Powell: “I expect vials of wrath to be poured out upon my head, but rather enjoy the prospect.”<sup>82</sup>

While the need for Jo March to marry can be seen as censorship foisted upon Alcott by her publishers, the demand from her readers that Jo and Laurie live happily ever after was also a mitigating factor in Alcott's decisions for the end of *Little Women* and its sequels. The young Jo who conquered much of the first part of the novel watches her sister Beth die and is completely altered by the death. This type of death transference—a physical death of a supporting cisheteronormative character that propels the spiritual death or complete character change of a women-loving woman character—is a concept seen throughout women-loving women novels of the twentieth century. According to Estes and Lant,

In order for Jo to live fictionally, to maintain her position within the narrative framework Alcott has constructed, Alcott must

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<sup>79</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Selected Letters*, ed. Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 125.

<sup>80</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008, Print), 424.

<sup>81</sup> Alcott, *Selected Letters*, 125.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

murder Jo spiritually. Given Jo's lust for independence, her devotion to her own power and development, Alcott could never have allowed her to marry for love—in other words, to love and marry Laurie—for, as the novel demonstrates with Meg's marriage to John Brooke, marriage for love reduces woman to 'submission' (*Little Women*, 209). Alcott was vehement in her refusal to allow this to happen to Jo.<sup>83</sup>

In a world where all mitigating factors were pushing Jo towards marriage—the compulsion of society's cisheteronormativity, the letters begging Alcott to marry Jo off to Laurie, and the pressure from Alcott's publishers to marry off each of the Little Women—the only way to prevent losing Jo's character to heterosexual marriage was through death. Young tomboys who die before they grow up never have to face the spiritual death of matrimony and motherhood.

Jo March's character may have already been a compromise prior to the decision to marry her off to Professor Bhaer. Ednah D. Cheney, editor of a collection of Alcott's letters and journal entries, reports that Alcott explained at one point which characters were based on true people and which were not. The statement reads as follows:

Facts in the stories that are true, though often changed as to time and place: –  
 'Little Women'—The early plays and experiences; Beth's death; Jo's literary and Amy's artistic experiences; Meg's happy home; John Brooke and his death; Demi's character. *Mr. March did not go to the war, but Jo did.* Mrs. March is all true, only not half good enough. Laurie is not an American boy, though every lad I ever knew claims the character. He was a Polish boy, met abroad in 1865. Mr. Lawrence is my grandfather, Colonel Joseph May. Aunt March is no one.<sup>84</sup> (emphasis added)

This further supports the idea that Jo March was an autobiographical portrayal of Alcott—who was also the second oldest of four girls in impoverished circumstances and who served in the Civil War as a Union nurse. Like Jo, Alcott lost her younger sister Elizabeth (in 1858), and her

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<sup>83</sup> Estes and Lant, "Dismembering the Text," 103.

<sup>84</sup> *Louisa May Alcott*, Cheney, 193.

youngest sister Abba (Amy in *Little Women*) was an artist.<sup>85</sup> Having never had to acquiesce to the burdens of matrimony and motherhood herself, Alcott now needed to figure out how Jo's life diverged from Alcott's own.

Like many of the women-loving women of twentieth century lesbian novels, Jo March was disappointed by the fact that she had not been born a boy.<sup>86</sup> As her sisters grow up and Meg and Amy find suitable men to marry, Jo is repulsed by the idea of submitting to a man. Conversely, death saves Beth from having to get married. "[I]t seems much more likely that for a nineteenth-century woman writer and her audience, a 'dead woman' would indeed be the only 'safe woman,'" and as such, "death is the only thing, at least in Jo's eyes, that can save a female from the psychological rape—the violation of self-direction and the disintegration of female community—that await her if she grows up and takes her proper feminine place in the heterosexual world."<sup>87</sup> Estes and Lant explain this as:

Ultimately, then, deep in the macabre subtext of *Little Women*, Alcott's true victim is Jo; Alcott has, in fact, killed the self-celebratory Jo and replaced her with the self-effacing Beth. And the horror of this corpse switching, this premature burial of the living and impersonation of the dead, is accentuated by the fact that not a scream or moan is uttered. All is executed in this novel for children under the pleasant guise of a young girl's gently guided growth into a "little woman."<sup>88</sup>

Thus, it is Beth who suffers physically from the Dead Lesbian Syndrome, but Jo who suffers a personality death. By killing Beth, the cisheteronormative sister, the novel's death transference punishes Jo's gender and sexuality transgressions twice: first in the physical loss of Beth and then in the personality loss of Jo's own self.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 16, 138, 307.

<sup>86</sup> Alcott, *Little Women*, 5.

<sup>87</sup> Estes & Lant, "Dismembering the Text," 113.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 115.

Now dead, Jo must be reborn as an acceptable woman. Dr. Bhaer, the older German man Jo meets and marries after Beth's death, acts as midwife for this rebirth. For Estes and Lant, Dr. Bhaer is an accomplice to Jo's murder as much as he is a tool in her rebirth.<sup>89</sup> He kills off the last of Jo's authentic self—her writing. While Dr. Bhaer lives, Jo destroys her literary fiction and sensationalist writings and instead publishes children's books that appease and please her husband. Miss Jo March, who is fiercely protective of her sisters and mother, who refuses to marry and hopes to support herself independently as a writer, and who sees Meg's marriage as submission, is transformed by Beth's death into Mrs. Josephine Bhaer, married mother of boys, who serves as a teacher and writes books about morality for children. Reading the book through, it is difficult to reconcile Miss Jo March and Mrs. Josephine Bhaer, so much that they could very well be two different people: "The tragedy of *Little Women* is, of course, that Jo is no longer Jo when she reaches maturity, for the real Jo never could reach maturity."<sup>90</sup>

The death transference of *Little Women* is an early example of the viral bacterium within fiction writing that would eventually evolve into Dead Lesbian Syndrome. Young girls or women who did not adhere to the roles dictated for them by a white supremacist, cisheteronormative patriarchy could not be permitted to excel or even exist at the end of a novel fit for public consumption. No police officer or judge wrote to Alcott demanding Jo be married or murdered for the sake of young readers, but the pressure from both her readers and her publishers forced Alcott to do both. In the same way, lesbian fiction of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would come to end with one woman dead, or at least gone, and the other safely married off to a man.

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<sup>89</sup> Estes and Lant explain: "For while Professor Bhaer and Jo covertly admire each other from across the room, Bhaer is discussing "the burial customs of the ancients" (408), and he impulsively moves toward Jo, the text tells us, "just in the act of setting fire to a funeral pile" (409). It is significant, then, that Alcott presents Professor Bhaer as a "birthday gift" (406) to the murdered Jo, for out of the death of her old self, Jo must now enact a new birth, a grisly resurrection." (Estes & Lant, "Dismembering the Text," 116)

<sup>90</sup> Estes & Lant, "Dismembering the Text," 120.

These tragic endings for women-loving women were not born exclusively from the homophobia of the twentieth century. As illustrated by Jo March and prevalent throughout narratives of tomboys and all “fallen women” of the nineteenth century, “‘bad’ endings for ‘bad’ women is a literary legacy.”<sup>91</sup> Created from a mixture of the gender-nonconforming tomboy, the hypersexual sex worker, the frigid literary spinster, and the financially-independent woman, the women-loving woman of twentieth century fiction only followed the path these real and fictional women who came before her first walked—one of societal ostracization, tragic love, and, at least in fiction, death.

### *Victorian Understandings of Women-Loving Women*

While Louisa May Alcott was writing Part Two of *Little Women*, psychiatrists in Germany were beginning to publish research on the connections between same-sex attraction and neurological degeneration. One of the earliest documented scientific studies conducted regarding same-sex attraction at the Charité Psychiatric Clinic in Berlin involved a woman named “N,” who, to the confusion of her doctors, did not have an enlarged clitoris, despite the fact that she was sexually attracted to women, repulsed by men, and assumed male social characteristics.<sup>92</sup> Despite this very early proof that women did not need to have enlarged or otherwise abnormal genitals in order to be sexually attracted to other women, this link would continue to exist in both sexological studies and popular culture for generations. Soon after researchers at the Berlin clinic published these studies in 1868, German lawyer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs invented the concept of “sexual inversion” in hopes of protecting it. Unlike the socially open Napoleonic Code that had

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<sup>91</sup> Elliott, “When Girls will be Boys,” 94.

<sup>92</sup> Chiara Beccalossi, “Female Same-sex Desires: Conceptualizing a Disease in Competing Medical Fields in Nineteenth-century Europe,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, (67.1, January 2012, 7-35), 13-14.

ruled Hanover for almost a century, the laws of the newly united Germany included Paragraph 175, which equated homosexual coitus between men with bestiality and pedophilia and summarily criminalized all three. Across Europe, governments banned and criminalized male homosexuality throughout the nineteenth century, while homosexuality among women existed solely as an academic exercise or, as it was for Krafft-Ebing, “an expository device for constructing complex arguments in support of male sexuality.”<sup>93</sup>

As such, there was little language for explaining or identifying women-loving women in real life or in fiction prior to the latter half of the nineteenth century. While historical figures such as Sappho, Queen Kristina of Sweden, and Anne Lister all existed before sexologists began analyzing same-sex attraction, there were few women-loving women in fiction, and those that did exist were usually found in salacious pornography sold on the Parisian black market or as a tangential subplot to the story of a woman sex worker, such as in *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe.<sup>94</sup> However, throughout the 1870s and 1880s, sexologists across the European continent and the United States began conversations that would come to a head with the murder trial of Alice Mitchell in 1892, to be discussed in the next section.

Much of the discussion and scientific research surrounding same-sex attraction in the late nineteenth century centered on the belief that sexual inversion and gender inversion—that is one’s sexuality and one’s gender identity and performance—were intrinsically connected and dependent upon one another. Women-loving women were categorized as having “a male soul

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<sup>93</sup> Heike Bauer, “Theorizing Female Inversion: Sexology, Discipline, and Gender at the Fin de Siècle,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, (18.1, January 2009, “Feminine Sexual Pathologies in Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century Europe,” 84-102), 90-93. This article is of particular importance for understanding the evolution of sexological studies from the late 1860s to the late 1890s for both men-loving men and women-loving women.

<sup>94</sup> For more information about the contents, censorship, and black market sales of French books dealing with sexuality, particularly women’s bisexuality prior to late 1800s, see: Jack Richard Censer, *The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1994); Raymond Birn, *Royal Censorship of Books in Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); and Robert L. Dawson, *Confiscations at Customs: Banned Books and the French Book Trade during the Last Years of the Ancien Regime*, (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2006).

confined to the female body” by Ulrichs, and the masculinization of women-loving women continued throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—both in sexological treatises published in Germany and lesbian novels published in the United States.<sup>95</sup> However, the women-loving women who actually lived and loved in the late nineteenth century were not videotaped nor recorded. They rarely recorded their romantic partnerships in photographs or diary writings. In looking at how male sexologists, cisheteronormative women journalists, and even women-loving women writers portrayed women-loving women relationships of the nineteenth century, it is difficult to surmise if the descriptions are accurate reflections of women-loving women or if both the sexological notes and sensationalist novels are inaccurate proscriptions meant to rid the world of these sexual inverts. “The long historical process through which a new identity was constructed remains relatively obscure. At the heart of this obscurity lies the problematic relationship between the cultural representations (or texts) that historians use as sources and the living historical subjects who produced, consumed, and reproduced them.”<sup>96</sup>

From the sexological perspective, the main goal appears to have been understanding the cause or root of same-sex attraction. Wilhelm Griesinger and Carl Westphal, the sexologists at Charité Psychiatric Clinic in Berlin who first published on sexual inversion, believed that the cause was a type of neurological psychopathy but also found it important to measure N’s genitals, suggesting a connection between physical degeneration and sexual preference. The subsequent three decades included studies into gynecological causes, traumatic childhoods, mental illness and congenital degeneration, intersex births, and connections to hypersexuality. These different ideas were linked together almost as often as they competed against one another

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<sup>95</sup> Bauer, “Theorizing Female Inversion,” 90.

<sup>96</sup> Lisa Duggan, “The Trials of Alice Mitchell: Sensationalism, Sexology, and the Lesbian Subject in Turn-of-the-Century America,” *Signs*, (18.4, Summer 1993, “Theorizing Lesbian Experience,” 791-814), 792.

as *the* cause of homosexuality, suggesting that both sexologists and popular culture saw homosexuality as a multifaceted problem with multiple causes and effects—all of which were bad for society.<sup>97</sup> In the 60 years between Griesinger’s first publication on sexual inversion in 1868 and Havelock Ellis’ introduction to *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, sexologists and doctors struggled—and failed—to understand why women-loving women existed and if they could be “cured” of their same-sex attraction.

However, as the nineteenth century progressed, an increasing number of sexologists and lawmakers began to view women-loving women as criminally responsible for their sexual preferences and gender identities. In his 1892 *Dictionary of Psychological Medicine*, for example, Daniel Hack Tuke labeled same-sex acts as “unnatural crimes” and an “acquired habit.”<sup>98</sup> Unlike the gynecological view, which suggested that women-loving women had genetic reasons for their proclivities, or the congenital degeneration cause, which suggested women-loving women received their sexual proclivities from their parents, Tuke’s definition suggests that women turned to women for sexual pleasure due to a criminal impulse. This concept gained traction across Europe as more French and Italian researchers were able to publish internationally, thus publicizing the connection between women-loving women and women sex workers that was considered common knowledge throughout the Mediterranean by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>99</sup> If women *chose* to break the law by being sex workers, Tuke’s logic insister they also *chose* to transgress societal boundaries by having sex with other women.

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<sup>97</sup> Beccalossi, “Female Same-sex Desires,” 13-21. Degeneration theory was perhaps the most prevalent, especially in the British tradition that studied under Krafft-Ebing: “The appeal of degeneration theory is that, through it, mental disorders could be traced to an underlying, invisible bodily source; in other words, to the individual’s whole constitution. At least until the end of the nineteenth century, a significant number of psychiatrists such as Krafft-Ebing conceived of sexual inversion within the framework of degeneration; and through this theory same-sex desires remained grounded in the body.” (Beccalossi, 17)

<sup>98</sup> Beccalossi, “Female Same-sex Desires,” 19.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.



Labeling same-sex relationships between women as immoral or unnatural may have put the responsibility for same-sex sex acts on the women offenders, but it did not dismiss other explanations for sexual inversion. Medical journals circulated articles about the concept of the women-loving women sex workers, connecting a life of vice and crime with medical causes like congenital degeneration. In his 1836 book *Prostitution in the City of Paris*, Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchâtelet described homosexuality among women sex workers in Paris as contagious, while simultaneously suggesting same-sex desire had no cure. While older sex workers turned to each other for sexual relationships of their own volition, Parent-Duchâtelet warned that younger women were seduced into same-sex partnerships. While at times Parent-Duchâtelet supported already established theories of same-sex attraction amongst women, including congenital degeneration, he did not believe in the widely publicized idea of the masculine lesbian. In fact, by claiming the masculine lesbian “was a general medical assumption at the beginning of the nineteenth century in France,” he may have been suggesting this assumption was outdated by 1836—sixty years *before* this stereotype became a part of lesbian literary canon through the novels inspired by Alice Mitchell discussed below. Parent-Duchâtelet’s dismissal of the masculine lesbian this early in the nineteenth century further supports the idea that “causes” for same-sex attraction among women went in and out of favor, overlapped, and rarely had any evidence to support their popularity.<sup>100</sup>

Studies and discussion of women-loving women in prisons further conflated women-loving women and criminal vices throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although few studies analyze the phenomenon of the “prison lesbian,” their existence appears to have been a well-established *a priori* fact with which prison wardens, psychologists, and social

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 24-30.

workers were forced (or forced themselves) to contend. According to the few Progressive Era studies that did exist on prison lesbians, same-sex attraction in most prisons in the United States was interracial and rooted in the presumed masculine aggression of Black women, onto which white women misplaced their cisheteronormative desires for men while in a homosocial environment.<sup>101</sup>

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States expanded its prison system and opened an unprecedented number of women's prisons across the country. This allowed for homosocial environments that were at least ostensibly racially integrated. Most of the women prisoners of the Progressive Era were convicted of "Crimes against Public Order," including vagrancy, sex work, and public drunkenness, all of which were associated with sexual immorality and gender-nonconformity by the middle-class social workers who hoped to "uplift" the prisoners.<sup>102</sup> While most wardens and prison workers ignored signs of same-sex fornication, Margaret Otis, PhD wrote about the 'prison lesbian' in a 1913 article entitled "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted." In the very first sentence, Otis pushed the idea that all prison lesbians were involved in interracial relationships by writing, "A form of perversion that is well known among workers in reform schools and institutions for delinquent girls, is that of love-making between the white and colored girls."<sup>103</sup> According to Otis, interracial lesbian relationships in reform schools and women's prisons were well-known to the workers, though not yet brought to the attention of scientists. "The difference in color, in this case, takes the place of difference in sex, and ardent love-affairs arise between white and colored girls in schools where both races are

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<sup>101</sup> Estelle B. Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965," *Feminist Studies*, (22.2, Summer 1996, 397-423), 397.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 398-399.

<sup>103</sup> Margaret Otis, "A perversion not commonly noted," *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, (8.2, July 1913, 113-116, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0073016>), 113

housed together.”<sup>104</sup> Otis went on to explain the Black prisoner was always the initiator of these interactions, and, for the most part, the white prisoner went on to marry a white man upon successfully leaving prison. In this way, Otis supported accepted stereotypes of Black women’s hypersexual and taboo tendencies common in the United States and Europe at this time.<sup>105</sup>

Two years after Otis published this article, the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills investigated recent unrest at the prison. Multiple workers came forward supporting Otis’ belief that the white women were romantically—if not sexually—attached to the Black women they were imprisoned alongside. Although the workers knew such interracial women-loving women relationships took place throughout the nineteenth century, the increasing population of women’s prisons and recent overcrowding led to an increase of the visibility and frequency of these relationships. The investigative committee decided the best course of action was to segregate the prison by race, as “‘the most undesirable sex relations grow out of this mingling of the two races.’ Even though these homosexual relationships did not lead to the kind of amalgamation most feared by white supremacists, namely mixed-race offspring, the thought that white women would reject heterosexuality entirely—and thus reject their racial duty to reproduce—was intolerable.”<sup>106</sup> As such, white women were perceived as helpless victims of Black lesbian aggression, and “the identification of Black women as aggressive butch lesbians rested on a denial of their womanhood.”<sup>107</sup> This racist policy also hinged on the belief that a white woman’s responsibility to the state was to have children, even if the mother had been convicted of a crime. As we will see with the trial of Alice Mitchell, the concept that all white

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<sup>104</sup> Freedman, “The Prison Lesbian,” 400.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 399-400.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

women should have children became contentious once lesbianism became more visible in society.

In the same way the Black man was lynched because white men imagined Black men were a threat to virginal white woman victims, the Black lesbian was labeled congenital and criminal because of white women's sexual attraction to her—not through any fault of her own. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, fictional portrayals of both the prison lesbian and the lesbian sex worker came into existence, but writers excluded the interracial elements of these relationships. Even for books about sexual inversion, gender-nonconformity, and the destruction of cisheteronormative partnerships, an interracial lesbian couple was too taboo to publish. Throughout the subsequent chapters, this research will examine instances of either interracial or lesbian relationships to show how fiction punished romantic liaisons outside of the white supremacist cisheteronormative patriarchy and how this relates to Dead Lesbian Syndrome.<sup>108</sup>

Although specific legislation criminalizing sexual relations between women was never put on the books in Germany, France, England, or the United States, lesbianism as a discussion topic was labeled taboo and obscene almost as soon as Ulrichs coined the term “sexual inversion.” One of the earliest criminal proceedings against writing about lesbianism was the Bedborough Case, which targeted Havelock Ellis' writing as obscene. According to a summary of the trial published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1899, *Sexual Inversion* by Havelock Ellis was “the first volume of a series of works on the general psychology of the study of sex.”<sup>109</sup> In Ellis' own words, *Sexual Inversion* was,

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<sup>108</sup> Rea Michael's books *How Dark My Love* (New York: Domino Books, 1964) and *Duet in Darkness* (New York: Domino Books, 1965) were most likely the first published lesbian novels featuring an interracial relationship. The end of this chapter includes further discussion of why Black voices are missing from early lesbian novels.

<sup>109</sup> “The Bedborough Trial,” *JAMA*, (XXXII.3, 1899, doi:10.1001/jama.1899.02450300037006), 135.

“founded on original data, and contains the first collection of cases of sexual inversion, unconnected with the prison or the asylum, which has ever been obtained in England; it is written in bald and technical language, published at a high price; and having been announced and sent for review only in special medical and scientific quarters, its existence was practically unknown to the general reader until these proceedings were initiated.”<sup>110</sup>

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* agreed with Ellis’ assessment, explaining *Sexual Inversion* was read by “judges and criminal anthropologists” and praised for its “conservative, scientific tone.”<sup>111</sup> The book was supported by the *British Medical Journal* and, according to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, over one hundred independent journalists. In May 1898, the year after *Sexual Inversion* was first available in English, bookseller George Bedborough sold one of these books to an undercover detective. The detective immediately arrested Bedborough and charged him for selling an “indecent” and “obscene” book “with the intention of corrupting the morals of her Majesty’s subjects.”<sup>112</sup>

Instead of charging either Ellis himself for obscenity or going after his publishing house, the British legal system chose to arraign the lowly bookseller, a practice common in both the United Kingdom and the United States. In his pamphlet on the trial, Ellis explains, “Thus, although my book was the real subject of the trial, there was no legal opportunity to be heard on its behalf.”<sup>113</sup> Bedborough’s bail was set at an inaccessibly high sum equating to \$2,500 USD at the time, and the accused pled guilty, avoiding a long and expensive legal battle. After the trial ended, Bedborough moved to Germany and took a teaching position, effectively rejecting the career that led to his arrest.<sup>114</sup> The British legal system ruled *Sexual Inversion* to be obscene and

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<sup>110</sup> From “A Note on the Bedborough Trial” by Havelock Ellis, reproduced in Isaac Goldberg, *Havelock Ellis: A Biographical and Critical Survey*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1926, <https://archive.org/details/b29931289>), 156.

<sup>111</sup> “The Bedborough Trial,” *JAMA*, 135.

<sup>112</sup> Goldberg, *Havelock Ellis*, 151-152.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>114</sup> “The Bedborough Trial,” *JAMA*, 135; Goldberg, *Havelock Ellis*, 166.

stopped its circulation, despite the fact that earlier books such as Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* was allowed to circulate among doctors and judges without censure.<sup>115</sup> The difference may have been in the timing—when Krafft-Ebing's book came to England in the 1880s very few people outside of medicine or law were thought to know about sexual inversion and it had been kept out of the press. When Ellis' *Sexual Inversion* came to England in 1897, it appeared on the heels of both the Alice Mitchell murder trial and Oscar Wilde's indecency trial, both of which the press covered widely, thus making sexual inversion an accessible topic to the middle- and literate working-classes of the time. Prior to 1892, books on the subject could circulate uncensored because people in power believed no one outside of medicine or law would understand the subject if they accidentally stumbled upon them in a bookstore. After 1895, with sexual inversion well-understood due to the legal system, the British government felt compelled to protect the morals of literate lower classes by banning these books *en masse*. This goes against Ellis' conviction that sexual inversion's "existence was practically unknown to the general reader until these proceedings were initiated."<sup>116</sup> Even if Ellis were correct, the trial ensured many more literate Brits learned about sexual inversion. While the trial may have censored *Sexual Inversion* in English bookstores, the book continued to circulate among the medical and judicial elite, as shown in Chapters Two and Three. Furthermore, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported the book would be copied and published in New York "'at once."<sup>117</sup> If the purpose of the Bedborough trial was to eradicate books of sexual inversion from anglophone bookstores or disincentivize people from publishing on the subject, the British legal system

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Goldberg, *Havelock Ellis*, 156.

<sup>117</sup> "The Bedborough Trial," *JAMA*, 135

failed on both counts.

*Alice Mitchell: A Lesbian Who Ends Up Dead*

As Havelock Ellis argued during the Bedborough trial, newspaper coverage of trials related to sexual inversion and gender nonconformity was a major medium through which the public learned about sexual inversion, sexology, and women-loving women. As the trial of Alice Mitchell in 1892 illustrates, these trials were also an important part of sexological research at this time. As journalists tend to write that which sells, so much of what we know about Alice Mitchell, her character, and her trial is filtered through a lens of homophobic, misogynist sensationalism. Still, in understanding how journalists relayed Alice's story to the masses, we can further uncover the roots of Dead Lesbian Syndrome.

On January 25, 1892, when Alice Mitchell was nineteen years old, she murdered Freda Ward, an intimate friend with whom she claimed to be in love. To explain why and how Alice killed her friend, the defense attorneys outlined Alice's life from her childhood, focusing primarily on any instance in which she transgressed or ignored gender boundaries. They listed her hobbies as boyish pursuits such as marbles and sports, concluding with "To the family she seemed a regular tomboy."<sup>118</sup> Alice did not have any boyfriends in her teen years, and pursued her romantic friendship with Freda Ward with much more vigor and passion than similar friendships among her peer group.<sup>119</sup> Unlike other romantic friendships, which existed complementary to marriage and allowed women to pursue intense friendships within the domestic sphere in the hours while their husbands were in the public sphere, Alice did not want

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<sup>118</sup> Duggan, "The trials of Alice Mitchell," 796.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 797; Lisa J. Lindquist, "Images of Alice: Gender, Deviancy, and a Love Murder in Memphis," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, (6.1, July 1995, 30-61), 32.

to share Freda with a man. When Ashley Roselle began courting Freda in June of 1891, Alice accused Freda of “deception and infidelity.”<sup>120</sup> The increased intensity of Alice’s passion for Freda eventually led to their families learning of the plan to elope and live as husband and wife. Freda’s family returned the ring Alice had given Freda to signify their engagement and forbade Freda from speaking to Alice.

According to the defense attorneys, this imposed isolation from her beloved was almost unbearable for Alice. “She wept, passed sleepless nights, lost her appetite, frequently declined even to come to the table...”<sup>121</sup> Six months after the isolation began, Alice saw Freda again and attacked her with a stolen straightedge razor. Freda was about to board a boat to head back to her family home after visiting with her sister. While it is unclear if the murder was premeditated—Alice had the stolen razor but also waited until the last possible moment to attack Freda—witnesses claimed that Alice yelled “I’ll fix her!” before attacking Freda. The description of the murder reported in several newspapers was grisly: Alice pulled back Freda’s hair, exposing the victim’s neck, and sliced her neck ear to ear. Then, while Freda bled out, Alice ran back to her horse and buggy covered in her victim’s blood. With her friend Lillie Johnson inside the buggy, Alice took the reins and “drove off at a furious pace.”<sup>122</sup>

Despite Alice’s decision to leave the scene of the crime, both she and Lillie were found, arrested, and charged with murder. After six months on bail, Lillie and Alice faced trial in July 1892. Lillie pleaded not guilty and was found innocent—how could she have known Alice had stolen Mr. Mitchell’s straightedge razor and decided to kill Freda Ward? Alice, who also pleaded not guilty by way of present insanity, was ruled insane after a ten-day trial.<sup>123</sup> The courtroom was

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<sup>120</sup> Duggan, “The Trials of Alice Mitchell,” 797.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 797.

<sup>122</sup> Lindquist, “Images of Alice,” 32.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.



filled with women all ten days of the trial, which news outlets reported as unprecedented. In fact, because the judge provided preferential seating for women, sketches of the courtroom tended to show only women in the courthouse, watching the trial of a woman murderer.<sup>124</sup> These women were not, however, there in support of or in solidarity with Alice Mitchell. In fact, after the *Memphis Commercial* newspaper interviewed Alice's jailer, they reported, "It is his impression that if Miss Mitchell were tried by a jury of women, the severest penalty under the law would be imposed."<sup>125</sup> Earlier in the year, the *Memphis Commercial* had spoken with the Judge presiding over the case, who agreed with the jailer's belief "that every woman in Memphis who is not related to the girl is in favor of her conviction."<sup>126</sup> Instead of seeing Alice as a victim of the demands of womanhood, her fellow middle- and upper-class white women in Memphis damned her for stepping outside the bounds of traditional womanhood.

According to the defense team, Alice and Freda, or Fred as Alice called her, were good friends. "Fred was girl-like and took no pleasure in the boyish sports that Alice delighted in. Her instincts and amusements were feminine. She was tender and affectionate. Time strengthened the intimacy between them. They became lovers in the sense of that relation between persons of different sexes."<sup>127</sup> While the defense attorneys argued that both Alice and Freda had feelings for one another, they admitted that Alice's feelings were much stronger than Freda's. Despite this inequity, the two young women schemed to run away together. According to the case study created by Alice's lawyers:

It was agreed that Alice should be known as Alvin J. Ward, so that Fred could still call her by pet name Allie, and Fred was to be known as Mrs. A. J. Ward. The particulars of formal marriage and elopement were agreed upon. Alice was to put on man's apparel,

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>127</sup> Duggan, "The Trials of Alice Mitchell," 796.

and have her hair trimmed by a barber like a man; was to get the license to marry, and Fred was to procure the Rev.... [or] a justice of the peace to marry them. The ceremony performed, they intended to leave for St. Louis. Alice was to continue to wear man's apparel, and meant to try and have a mustache, if it would please Fred. She was going out to work for Fred in men's clothes.<sup>128</sup>

In this hypothetical case study, the defense attorneys introduced the concept of “passing,” a common-enough phenomenon among the lower classes but completely anathema to the hyperfeminized way of life to which most Southern women of the upper classes were accustomed. While the upper classes were aware of incidents of “passing,” perhaps a farmhand who lived as a man to make men’s wages, such instances were seen as either an economic necessity or a strange occurrence among the inscrutable lower classes. Furthermore, many young upper-class women were known to love their friends in a way that went beyond platonic girlhood friendship. These “romantic friendships” were quite common throughout the separate spheres period of the nineteenth century and continued in homosocial environments such as girls’ day and boarding schools or, as shown above, women’s prisons throughout the twentieth century.<sup>129</sup> In Memphis, where Alice’s trial took place, such a practice was known as “chumming.” Independently, society could ignore passing and chumming, given certain circumstances. Cisheteronormative patriarchal society recognized passing and chumming as threats that needed to be reduced. To reduce passing to something acceptable, the person Assigned Female at Birth had to “pass” as a man so completely that their gender was never brought into question. To reduce the danger of chumming, the practice was only accepted while the young women were in school, and women were expected to give up these “romantic friendships” when they got

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 797.

<sup>129</sup> For more on romantic friendships and the role these romantic friendships played in the emotional maturation and wellbeing of nineteenth century women, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs*, (1.1, Autumn 1975, 1-29).

married. In some cases, women could continue their romantic friendships, only if such relationships in no way threatened both women's marriages to men. However, Alice's love for Freda was the perfect storm: she transgressed class boundaries by wanting to pass as a man, like poor women did to earn more money; she transgressed gender boundaries by wanting to not only dress and work like a man but also claim a woman as wife, as only men are allowed; and she transgressed sexual boundaries by claiming she loved Fred and wanted to marry her. Apart, these transgressions were strange. Together, they were enough to secure Alice an insanity plea and convince the white, upper-class women of Memphis and the surrounding area that Alice was a danger to society.<sup>130</sup>

While the women saw Alice's disavowal of life as a wife and mother as inherently evil and worthy of punishment, the twelve male jurors and men connected to the case seemed to agree that Alice's gender transgressions were clear signs of insanity. The defense attorneys made note of Alice's determination to wear men's clothes, marry Freda, grow a mustache, and work as a man. Nowhere in their case study did they mention a sexual element to the relationship between Freda and Alice. An expert witness called to explain Alice's insanity explained:

She seemed in her simplicity and weakness of mind to have no conception of the preposterous character of the marriage she looked for, and spoke in detail of the preparations as to man's apparel for the occasion, the procurement of a license for the ceremony, of the clipping of her hair after the fashion of men, and the cultivation of a mustache if Freda wanted her to wear one. The frankness and sincerity of her manner on this topic was evidence either of a gross delusion or the conception of a person imbecile or of a child without knowledge of the usual results of matrimony or

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<sup>130</sup> "Though the local papers regularly noted cases of workingmen and farm laborers who turned out to be "passing" women, their lives and partnerships with other women were reported as simply eccentric or remarkable-not sexual, deviant, or in- sane. But at the trial, Alice's belief that she could marry Freda while disguised as "Alvin" was portrayed by her attorneys and their medical experts, and reported in the press, as a "morbid" or "imperative delusion" and a sign of sexual "perversion." (Duggan, "The Trials of Alice Mitchell," 798).

the connubial state, or of the purpose of the organs of generation in the sexes.<sup>131</sup>

In this way, both the lawyers' case study of Alice's life and the explanation of Alice's views on marriage explained above created distance between the gender transgression and the sexual transgression. Alice was guilty of wanting to do a man's job, dress as a man, and marry a woman as men do, but their arguments pushed the idea that she could not possibly want to claim a woman sexually. Alice was, therefore, found guilty of wanting to be a man, not wanting to have sex with a woman. The lawyers explained her gender transgressions as symptomatic of hereditary insanity and Alice was sent to the Tennessee State Insane Asylum. She never left the asylum and died six years later, not even thirty. While official reports claimed she died of tuberculosis, rumors emerged that she committed suicide by jumping into a water tower.<sup>132</sup>

Alice Mitchell's trial was a study in the erasure of even the concept of homosexual desire in women. Alice's love for Freda was seen as a symptom of her gender transgression instead of the romantic and sexual love of one woman for another. With both "chumming" and "passing," white society of the upper classes desexualized the intimacy of two women and relegated the romantic friendships to second-class love after cisheteronormative marriage and crossdressing women as an economic advantage. However, despite efforts from both the defense attorneys and the psychologists who testified to desexualize Alice and Freda's relationship, their story has ultimately been remembered as the violent murder of an innocent victim by a perverse and unnatural woman. Try as they might to make Alice appear to be more interested in living as a man than in loving Freda, "her name became synonymous with same-sex love."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> F. L. Sims, "Forensic Psychiatry: Alice Mitchell Ad- judged Insane," (*Memphis Medical Monthly*, 12, 1892, 377-4), 40 quoted in Lindquist, "Images of Alice," 55.

<sup>132</sup> Lindquist, "Images of Alice," 34.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

The ways in which local and national newspapers told the story of Alice Mitchell and Freda Ward left lasting impressions on the Gilded Age readers in the United States and Europe. Newspaper coverage of the case far outpaced coverage of previous and subsequent murder trials of the 1890s, but this was also a decade of increased sensationalist coverage of such court cases. Local newspapers including the *Nashville Banner*, the *Rogersville Herald*, the *Memphis Commercial*, and the *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche* reported on murders of white women across the state and around the country, with many of these stories painting the women's intimate lovers—married and otherwise—as the murderers.<sup>134</sup> After the coverage of Alice Mitchell's trial went international, newspapers started looking for and printing other stories of women passing as men, intimate relationships between women, and sensationalist stories of women murdering other women in non-heteronormative love triangles. In 1892 alone, newspapers printed headlines such as “A Similar Case Recalled” and “Another Resemblance” in the *Memphis Commercial* printed a month after Alice murdered Freda. In June 1892, the *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche* published “Just Like Alice Mitchell” on June 22<sup>nd</sup> and the *Memphis Commercial* published “Another Mitchell-Ward Case” on June 23<sup>rd</sup>. These stories, all printed before Alice's trial in July, pushed a narrative of women killing, either the object of their desires or themselves, because an intimate friend chose either a man or family acceptance over the homosexual relationship.<sup>135</sup>

In her analysis of how 1890s newspaper articles portrayed women's partnerships, Lisa Duggan found “When successful partnerships between women were mentioned in the news columns, they almost always appeared in desexualized forms only. The suggestion of sexuality,

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>135</sup> Lindquist, “Images of Alice,” 79.

however subtle or implicit, was generally paired with bloodletting.”<sup>136</sup> In this way, the danger of lesbianism was avoided and reduced, two of the techniques Douglas identified for a society to treat pollutants. Newspapers reduced women-loving women’s romantic and sexual love for one another to friendship, thus eliminating the concept of women being sexually intimate with one another all together. After the Alice Mitchell trial, coverage of women-loving women in the press *only* focused on violent murders and attacks by jealous lovers, linking women-loving women and violence in the minds of America’s literate middle-class.<sup>137</sup> Lesbianism was labeled as a danger to be avoided as journalists painted love between women as inherently violent, a picture that popular culture would continue to reinforce throughout the subsequent century.

Alice Mitchell’s story introduced three major elements of the women-loving woman experience that would be enculturated into popular understanding of lesbian identity across the anglophone world: crossdressing or “passing” as a man as a part of the lesbian identity; the connection between lesbianism and psychosis; and the inevitable death of a women-loving woman because of her same-sex attraction. In this way, the lesbian as represented by Alice Mitchell was a pollutant because of her ambiguity: by crossdressing, she transgressed society’s internal boundaries of what was a “man” (masculine) and what was a “woman” (feminine). This led society to link lesbianism and psychosis, making lesbianism as danger that must be avoided. Finally, if the danger of lesbianism could not be avoided, it must be destroyed.

The women who rallied against Alice in the courtroom did so because her insistence on loving Freda *in place of* a man instead of *alongside* a man threatened white upper-class courtship, marriage, and motherhood. Although discussed in earlier sexological works, coverage of Alice’s trial reified and popularized the connection between masculinity in women and

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<sup>136</sup> Duggan, “The Trials of Alice Mitchell,” 808.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 800.

homosexuality in women. Feminine women who loved women, such as, ostensibly, Freda Ward and, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, Mary Llewellyn from *The Well of Loneliness*, were not seen as threatening to white supremacist, cisheteronormative patriarchal society because they were immediately seen as the victim or the seduced. As with the white prisoners discussed above, society saw these feminine women as seduced *by* the masculine women-loving woman. The feminine women-loving woman was redeemable. She, like Freda Ward, could find a man to marry and pursue the acceptable timeline of white womanhood. Masculine women such as Alice, who insisted on the continuance of “chumming” long after graduation, were the pollutants who transgressed societal boundaries and had to be reduced, destroyed, avoided, and labeled dangerous.<sup>138</sup>

Whether Alice Mitchell died of tuberculosis or committed suicide in 1898, the fact remains that she died young and far away from society. “Alice Mitchell, though conveniently rendered invisible by the Memphis medical establishment and the legal system, had become the prototype for the unhappy and dangerous lesbian.”<sup>139</sup> She may have been dead before the end of the nineteenth century, but her story lived on through the sexological work of Havelock Ellis and the three novels her life inspired before the end of the decade. Ellis included Alice Mitchell in his groundbreaking book *Sexual Inversion*, the same book which led to the arrest of George Bedborough, discussed above. Ellis begins his discussion of Mitchell with: “It is noteworthy that a considerable proportion of the number of cases in which inversion has led to crimes of violence, or otherwise acquired medico-legal importance, has been among women.”<sup>140</sup> Ellis notes Mitchell’s case was “the most widely known” case of such a crime, and notes that he is not

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 798-809.

<sup>139</sup> Lindquist, “Images of Alice,” 59.

<sup>140</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*, Second Edition, (Philadelphia: FA Davis Company, 1901, Digitized by Google), 119.

the first sexologist to study Mitchell's case. Dr. Arthur Macdonald published a report on Alice Mitchell in 1895, a year before Ellis' *Sexual Inversion* first went to print in Germany. Ellis makes a departure from the American psychologists who testified at Alice's trial, however, when he declares, "There is no reason to suppose that she was insane at the time of the murder. She was a typical invert of a very pronounced kind."<sup>141</sup> He explains Alice's mother had also been "insane and had homicidal impulses," making Alice's inversion congenital. He also links Alice's sexual preference with her physical appearance, "Her face was obviously unsymmetrical and she had an appearance of youthfulness below her age."<sup>142</sup> *Sexual Inversion* was published in England in 1897, banned in England in 1898, and published in the United States at least twice before 1901. Through this book, its subsequent trial, and the fact that Radclyffe Hall read it prior to writing *The Well of Loneliness*, Ellis cemented his views on women-loving women, especially those linking masculinity, homosexuality, and congenital psychosis, in the canon of lesbian fiction for at least the next 120 years. In many ways, his view of lesbianism continues to influence the portrayal of lesbians in fiction into the 2020s.

*Alice Mitchell: The Blueprint of Anglophone Lesbian Fiction*

In the year 1895, American publishers introduced three novels that had evolved from the Alice Mitchell trial. *Norma Trist or Pure Carbon: A Story of the Inversion of the Sexes* by Dr. John Wesley Carhart is the most studied of these three novels, ostensibly because its author was a respected medical doctor from Texas and not, as with the other two novels, a woman novelist from the northeast. In the years leading up to the publication of *Norma Trist*, Texas faced increasing xenophobia against Mexico, economic depression, and droughts, creating a situation

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 120.



in which anything that did not align with white supremacist, cisheteronormative patriarchal family values was suspicious. Into this mix, Southern newspapers added the trial of Alice Mitchell. Austin doctor F.E. Daniel published “Castration of Sexual Perverts,” in the December 1893 edition of the *Texas Medical Journal*. As a medical doctor in Texas in the 1890s, it is unlikely that Dr. Carhart did not subscribe to this journal. Even if he had not read this particular article, based on a talk Dr. Daniel had given nationally entitled, “Should Insane Criminals or Sexual Perverts be Permitted to Procreate?” in August and October of 1893, Dr. Carhart would have been exposed to the continual interweaving of sexuality and racial eugenics at the heart of the Gilded Age.<sup>143</sup>

Dr. Daniel argues, “Rape, sodomy, bestiality (sic), pederasty and habitual masturbation should be made crimes or misdemeanors, punishable by forfeiture of all rights, including that of procreation; in short by castration, or castration plus other penalties, according to the gravity of the offense.”<sup>144</sup> Citing Alice Mitchell’s case specifically, Dr. Daniel explains “I say ‘castration’ and not ‘asexualization,’ because that applies as well to women; and in sexual perversion the woman is usually passive; she cannot commit a rape, at all events (though she can practice sexual abominations that shock morals, wreck health, and worse, can transmit her defects to posterity). In light of the Alice Mitchell case it might be well enough to adopt Dr. Orpheus Evert’s suggestion and asexualize all criminals of whatever class.”<sup>145</sup> In this discussion section following Dr. Daniel’s paper, he published two dissenting views, in which one doctor proposed psychotherapy as the appropriate cure to sexual perversion and another doctor, Duncan of Chicago, declared these sexual perverts “have not mental nor moral control of themselves;

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<sup>143</sup> F. E. Daniels, MD. “Castration of Sexual Perverts,” in *Texas Medical Journal*, ed. Mrs. F. E. Daniel, (9.6, December 1893, p. 255-271).

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

therefore, the State ought to take care of them.”<sup>146</sup> Although the other discussants did not offer alternatives, *none* of the five doctors agreed with Dr. Daniel’s approach of castrating people for crimes including masturbation and consensual sodomy. The Chair of this session, Dr. H. M. Bannister, suggested that castration may be appropriate “in the male” but only in limited measures.<sup>147</sup>

In Dr. Carhart’s *Norma Trist*, the titular character is a young Southern Belle who has fallen in love with her widowed female friend, Mrs. LaMoreaux. From the beginning of the novel, Norma is pursued by a local man, Frank Artman, who is of appropriate racial background (he is Anglo-Saxon whereas Mrs. LaMoreaux is French), social class, and gender to be pursuing Norma Trist. This love triangle is further complicated when Norma goes away to school, and her teachers catch her writing love letters to Mrs. LaMoreaux. When asked about her attraction to women, Norma explains, “I have no love or desire for the opposite sex—indeed the thought of intimacy with them is abhorrent to all the finer, better feelings of my nature. Such a thing would be impossible.”<sup>148</sup> In this way, Norma confirms for the reader and her school’s principal that she is a congenital homosexual—one who was “born this way.” When Norma learns, through her mother, that Mrs. LaMoreaux is to be remarried to a Mexican military man named Captain Rodriguez, she is bereft. Norma locks herself away in her room, crying for hours, before she heard a voice inside her. “The voice said ‘Avenge!’ and murder was in Norma’s heart. She felt torn from the main artery of her being, and ‘life for life’ was sweet to her, and she could do no less.”<sup>149</sup> Like Alice Mitchell, Norma Trist would not allow her beloved to marry a man. She decided she would kill Mrs. LaMoreaux the next day. The following morning, Norma woke up,

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 268-269.

<sup>148</sup> John Wesley Carhart, *Norma Trist, Or, Pure Carbon: A Story of the Inversion of the Sexes*, (Austin, Texas: Eugene Von Boeckmann, 1895), 61.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 173.

walked to the place where she knew Mrs. LaMoreaux would be walking, and attacked her with a knife.<sup>150</sup> However, unlike Freda, Mrs. LaMoreaux did not die—she lived, and married Captain Rodriguez while Norma was locked away in a psychiatric hospital.

Although the specifics of the relationship between Norma and Mrs. LaMoreaux differed from those of the relationship between Alice and Freda, the basic premise was the same: a more masculine woman who never had any interest in men fell in love with a more feminine woman who was more clearly bisexual and entertained male suitors. When the bisexual woman accepted a suitor, the lesbian attacked her beloved out of jealousy, with the intent to kill. Like Alice, Norma was found insane by an all-male jury and sentenced to a psychiatric hospital.<sup>151</sup> However, unlike the Alice Mitchell case, Norma was only on trial for *attempted* murder. Dr. Carhart effectively erased the death of the other women-loving woman character, allowing both women-loving women to live to the end of the novel. Instead of using fiction to destroy the lesbian character, he chose to “cure” her instead.

After Norma is institutionalized, Dr. Carhart introduces the character of Dr. Jasper, a psychologist who believes he can cure Norma using hypnosis. Unlike with Alice Mitchell, who by the time Carhart published *Norma Trist* had been languishing in the state asylum for two years, Norma’s doctors declared her fit for a second trial, in which Dr. Jasper testified he could “fix” her through hypnosis. The trial resulted in a hung jury, and Norma returned home. Her mother, who was mortified by her daughter’s sexual proclivities, had at one point declared, “I would almost as soon have followed her to her grave as to have had occurred the terrible disaster that has befallen her.”<sup>152</sup> Accordingly, she took Dr. Jasper up on his offer to cure her daughter,

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-179.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-185.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

which he eventually did by hypnotizing her. Dr. Jasper commanded the hypnotized Norma to believe, “I abhor the love of my own sex, and shall never again think women handsome. I shall and will become well again, fall in love with Frank Artman, be happy and make him happy.”<sup>153</sup> In the fictionalized version of Alice Mitchell’s life, Dr. Carhart saved the bisexual love interest and allowed her to return to cisheteronormative society through her marriage to Captain Rodriguez *and* saved the lesbian villain through experimental psychotherapy. Of course, unbeknownst to Dr. Carhart, Alice Mitchell would never get a second trial and would die young while still imprisoned at the state asylum. Still, the narrative arc of Norma Trist offered its readers hope that doctors could cure “sexual inverts.” Instead of killing the lesbian in order to destroy the danger posed by lesbianism, Dr. Carhart chose to destroy the danger by destroying the lesbianism within Norma. Compared to the murder-centric newspaper articles that followed in the wake of Alice Mitchell’s trial and the suggestion of castration Dr. Daniel had recently put forth, Dr. Carhart’s explanation of and remedy for women-loving women was relatively positive and almost compassionate.

Soon after *Norma Trist* hit bookshelves in Texas, reviewers denounced the book. Two months after the novel’s publication, an anonymous reviewer reported on *Norma Trist* in the *Texas Medical Journal*, of which Dr. F.E. Daniel was editor. As the review was anonymous and Dr. Daniel was editor of the journal, some have suggested Dr. Daniel was the anonymous reviewer, placing his ideas in direct conversation with Dr. Carhart’s novel.<sup>154</sup> The reviewer suggests that *Norma Trist* can be read as pornographic, given that there are illusions to her masturbating to orgasm while holding a fur coat Mrs. LaMoreaux owned. The reviewer called

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>154</sup> “John Wesley Carhart: “Norma Trist; or Pure Carbon: A Story of the Inversion of the Sexes” (September 26, 1895),” *OutHistory*, (June 16, 2021), accessed August 21, 2021, <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/norma/introtonorma>.

this scene, “a delectable morsel for the unsophisticated of the general public.”<sup>155</sup> The reviewer remarked they were surprised by Dr. Carhart’s decision to publish *Norma Trist*. The reviewer considered the publication of this novel to be “a rash breach of propriety, to say the least,” as Dr. Carhart should have tried to “sustain every effort in behalf of pure morals, and co-operate with medical journalists and teachers in the endeavor to suppress or eliminate the indecent in literature.”<sup>156</sup> The reviewer also called hypnotism a “new fad” that was “unworthy,” and concluded *Norma Trist* was “scarcely fit for a doctor to read,” let alone the general public.<sup>157</sup> The review ends with “The book can well be classed as obscene, and should be dealt with by the authorities as such; its sale prohibited, and transmission through the mails denied it.”<sup>158</sup> It does not appear *Norma Trist* was prohibited from being sold or mailed, but the book also did not have a sustainable audience, as it was not mentioned in Marion Zimmer Bradley’s 1960 compilation of all women-loving women novels, *Checklist: A complete, cumulative Checklist of lesbian, variant and homosexual fiction, in English or available in English translation, with supplements of related material, for the use of collectors, students and librarians*.<sup>159</sup>

In this way, two doctors in Texas in the 1890s came to encapsulate a discussion that would continue for the subsequent half-century. The discussion boils down to three main questions: Should the learned elite (doctors, judges, and writers) share their knowledge of sexual inversion with the general public? What is the best way to eliminate the threat of lesbianism in white supremacist, cisheteronormative patriarchal society? Is it better to speak of the problem or

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<sup>155</sup> Anonymous, “A Fishy Novel, by a Texas Doctor,” in *Texas Medical Journal*, (11.1, November 1895, 247-251. Accessed October 26, 2014 from [https://archive.org/stream/texasmedicaljour1118unse/texasmedicaljour1118unse\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/texasmedicaljour1118unse/texasmedicaljour1118unse_djvu.txt)), 249.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>159</sup> Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Checklist: A complete, cumulative Checklist of lesbian, variant and homosexual fiction, in English or available in English translation, with supplements of related material, for the use of collectors, students and librarians*, (New York: Library of Alexandria, 2012), 20-22.

silence it into obscurity? For Dr. Daniel, the answers to each of these questions pushed him towards destroying women-loving women bodies through castration and destroying women-loving women books through censorship. In both, women's desires for other women needed to be destroyed through violence. For Dr. Carhart, the need for destroying lesbianism is not a question, but he hoped to do so through a much gentler form of psychotherapy and hypnosis. Either way, both Dr. Daniel and Dr. Carhart appear to agree on one thing: women's desire for other women had to be contained and destroyed for the betterment of both the individual woman and for society as a whole.

*The Strange Disappearance of Eugene Comstocks* by Mrs. Mary R.P. Hatch was published in New York City in 1895, and also took ideas from the Alice Mitchell trial. The author, Mary R. Platt Hatch, was born and raised in New Hampshire and married soon after graduating Lancaster Academy. She lived much of her life on a farm, as both her father and her husband were farmers. Her most well-known novels were *The Bank Tragedy* (1890), which was about a bank robbery, and *The Missing Man* (1892), which was a detective novel in which the villain was caught using telepathy. Hatch's husband died a year after *The Strange Disappearance of Eugene Comstocks* came out, and Hatch never remarried. Though little is known about her personal life, she was a dedicated mother and lived with her son, Jared, for the last six years of her life. She was a member of the Boston Author's Club, where she met Mary Wilkins Freeman, the author of *The Long Arm*, discussed below.<sup>160</sup> The two women belonged to this society *after* the publication of their novels related to Alice Mitchell, so it is unknown if they knew each other or discussed the case with one another prior to writing their women-loving women novels.

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<sup>160</sup> "Hatch, Mary R. Platt." *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present*. Encyclopedia.com. (August 17, 2021). <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/hatch-mary-r-platt>

Instead of closely following Alice Mitchell's story, as the narrative of *Norma Trist* had, *The Strange Disappearance of Eugene Comstocks* introduced an entirely new situation into which writers could place a women-loving woman. Rosa Cameron was Assigned Female at Birth, but their father, who wanted a son, decided to raise them as a boy. Given the name Gustave, they were the daughter of a French Count and therefore had wealth and knowledge at their disposal.<sup>161</sup> They were raised to ride horses and pursue manly pursuits, and when their father died near their twelfth birthday and their mother worked to return them to a feminine state, Rosa/Gustave refused. After their mother's death soon after, Rosa/Gustave inherited wealth, handed their title to a distant relative, and made off for Paris, where they flirted with women and lived as a man. After insulting the honor of one too many women by not marrying them, Rosa/Gustave was challenged to a duel. Instead of taking part in the duel, they put on women's clothing and escaped to America, where they eventually fell in love with a woman.<sup>162</sup>

Rosa/Gustave married this woman under an assumed name and, when the woman's family learned of Gustave's true nature, escaped again to New England. There, they became both Captain Dandy—a Robin Hood of sorts—and Rosa Cameron—a dear friend of Gracia Hilton, the daughter of the local banker. Throughout the novel, the reader learns that Rosa/Gustave has stolen money from the bank and framed Sidney Howland, who is also the cousin of the woman Rosa/Gustave had previously married. In the end, Rosa/Gustave is revealed to be both Rosa and Captain Dandy and, unable to escape this time, Rosa/Gustave decides to kill themselves. Rosa/Gustave calls for their only faithful friend—their trusty horse Satan—and shoots first Satan and then themselves. According to the narrator, Satan was “the noble beast, faithful to the last, and

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<sup>161</sup> As Rosa/Gustave/Dandy never reveals their chosen pronouns in their story and vacillates between calling themselves a boy and a girl, I have chosen to refer to them with they/them pronouns.

<sup>162</sup> Mary R.P. Hatch, *The Strange Disappearance of Eugene Comstocks*, (New York: W. Dillingham Company, 1895), 279-290.

*exhibiting worthier traits than even the mistress, who loved him.*"<sup>163</sup> In this way, the narrator suggests that Rosa/Gustave was less worthy than Satan, definitely the horse but possibly also his namesake, because of Rosa/Gustave's nature and actions.

Rosa/Gustave and Alice Mitchell were both deemed dangerous by society and seen as unworthy because of their sexuality. Rosa/Gustave's character may be seen as Alice Mitchell thrown into relief, an overtly masculinized person who succeeded in marrying a woman despite being Assigned Female at Birth. Instead of "fixing" Rosa/Gustave, as Dr. Carhart had fixed Norma, Mary Hatch chose instead to have Rosa/Gustave commit suicide. While there is little narration or expression of opinion in the final pages of *The Strange Disappearance of Eugene Comstocks*, the arc of the novel suggests that, like Dr. Daniel, Hatch believed women-loving women (or nonbinary people) to be dangerous. Unlike Dr. Daniel, who hoped to destroy lesbianism through castration, Hatch pushed for the death of the lesbian—at their own hand, in Rosa/Gustave's case—in order to complete the novel with the cisheteronormative marriage of Gracia Hilton to Sidney Howard.

Although published in London, *The Long Arm* by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman took place in New England and its author was born in Vermont and lived in the United States her whole life. Wilkins Freeman was a respected writer whose work appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* and other nationally syndicated journals. In 1883, Wilkin Freeman's father died, and Wilkins Freeman moved off his farm to live with "her dear friend Mary Wales" for the next 18 years. It was while she lived with Mary Wales, during which time she was "relieved from household duties by Wales," that Wilkins Freeman became an established writer.<sup>164</sup> She wrote *The Long Arm* while

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>164</sup> "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman," Loyola University Chicago Digital Special Collections, n.d. Accessed August 21, 2021, <http://www.lib.luc.edu/specialcollections/exhibits/show/autograph-collection/mary-e--wilkins-freeman>.



living on Wales' farm. Though there is no evidence Wales and Wilkins Freeman engaged in a sexual relationship, they did live together for two decades in which Wales took on domestic chores and Wilkins Freeman brought in money, suggesting some form of "Boston Marriage" or "intimate friendship" between the two.<sup>165</sup> One of the most compelling pieces of evidence for their romantic involvement is the fact that Wilkins Freeman met her husband, Dr. Charles Manning Freeman in 1892, but did not move out of Wales' farm until c. 1901 and did not marry Dr. Freeman until 1902. Wales died a single woman on December 24, 1900.<sup>166</sup> If Mary E. Wilkins Freeman was, in fact, in a romantic relationship with Mary Wales at one point, *The Long Arm* may have been the first anglophone novel about women-loving women written by a women-loving woman.

One of Wilkins Freeman's lesser-known works, *The Long Arm* included a women-loving woman character who commits murder, and for this reason the novel is considered by some to be inspired by the Alice Mitchell trial.<sup>167</sup> However, much of the plot is different from Alice Mitchell's life. For one, the murderer is an older woman and is not the main character. The novel, told from the perspective of Sarah Fairbanks, begins with the murder her father. While Sarah initially believes she may have killed her father in a moment of insanity—they do not have the best of relationships before his death—it eventually comes to light the murderess is the Fairbanks' neighbor, Phæbe Dole. Phæbe is a spinster who lives with another woman, Maria Woods, a "sweet, weakly, dependent woman."<sup>168</sup> Phæbe fell in love with Maria when they were

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> "Mary Wales," PeopleLegacy, n.d. Accessed August 21, 2021. [https://peoplelegacy.com/mary\\_wales-622Q0d1](https://peoplelegacy.com/mary_wales-622Q0d1); "Mary Wales," Find a Grave, n.d. Accessed August 21, 2021 from <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/161694742/mary-wales>; The Women's Project of New Jersey, Inc., *Past and Promise: Lives of New Jersey Women*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 141. Wilkins Freeman's husband was an alcoholic who had to be placed in psychiatric care in the 1920s. Wilkins Freeman divorced him in 1921 and lived alone until her death in 1930.

<sup>167</sup> "John Wesley Carhart: "Norma Trist; or Pure Carbon: A Story of the Inversion of the Sexes" (September 26, 1895)," *OutHistory*; Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 55-57.

<sup>168</sup> Mary E. Wilkins, *The Long Arm*. By MARY E. WILKINS; and other Detective Stories by GEORGE IRA BRETT, Roy TELLET, and Professor BRANDER MATTHEWS, (London: Chapman & Hall, LD, 1895), 23.

very young and implored Maria to promise to never marry. When Maria met Mr. Fairbanks and fell in love with him, she accepted his proposal. Then, right before they were to be married, Maria, under duress from Phæbe, wrote him a note saying they could not marry. Mr. Fairbanks married another woman, whom he did not love, and had Sarah, and the Fairbanks family lived near Maria Woods for decades. After the recent death of Mrs. Fairbanks, Mr. Fairbanks and Maria were planning to get married in their old age, and Phæbe refused to allow this to happen. As she told the story, Phæbe explained, “This time I knew I couldn't unless I killed him. She's lived with me in that house for over forty years. There are other ties as strong as the marriage one, that are just as sacred. What right had he to take her away from me and break up my home?”<sup>169</sup>

The police arrest Phæbe and dies one month later in prison, while the final pages suggest Sarah will be able to marry the man her father had not approved of at the beginning of the novel. The reader does not know what happened to Maria Woods, in the end. Like *The Strange Disappearance of Eugene Comstocks*, the women-loving woman character confesses her crimes in the end and ends up dead by the end of the novel. Unlike Rosa/Gustave, however, Phæbe lives long enough to be punished by the system she wronged, and, like Alice Mitchell, she dies imprisoned (albeit in an actual prison as opposed to an asylum). As noted during the actual trial, men appear to treat the women-loving women with greater mercy—Dr. Carhart allowed *both* Mrs. LaMoreaux and Norma Trist to end the novel in happy marriages to good men whereas *both* Mary R. Platt Hatch and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman kill their women-loving woman in the end and do not offer this character the consolation of being ruled insane by a jury. By the end of 1895, the public had three novels about women-loving women that appear to have openly

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 61.

circulated throughout the country. For the first time, the literate public of the United States had access to novels about women-loving women. “The love that dares not speak its name” had a voice. Even if the authors destroyed the lesbianism by the end of the novels, the ignorance once afforded to the lower classes was slowly crumbling, and the burgeoning conversations about sexual inversion outside of medical journals and court rooms continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Congenital Inversion, Class Difference, and Eugenics at the Turn of the Century*

Alice Mitchell and each of the characters based on her story—Norma Trist, Rosa/Gustave, and Phæbe Dole—all had the luxury of living comfortably middle- and upper-class lives. Norma inherited money from her dead father, Rosa/Gustave was independently wealthy from both their parents’ county and a rich relative, and Phæbe was able to support both herself and Maria comfortably through her sewing business. Their financial security gave them protections unshared by the women-loving women of the working class. In his argument for the castration of all sexual deviants, Dr. Daniel offers a single sentence regarding any gender or class disparities in the application of this punishment. This sentence, “In light of the Alice Mitchell case it might be well enough to adopt Dr. Orpheus Evert's suggestion and asexualize all criminals of whatever class,” could mean either gender or socioeconomic class. Dr. Daniel does not expand on this idea.<sup>170</sup> For the working class, sexual inversion and perversion were clear signs of congenital degeneration, which could not be permitted in a society so dedicated to eugenics.

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<sup>170</sup> Daniels, “Castration of Sexual Perverts.,” 263.

In 1884, Herbert Spencer's *Study of Sociology* introduced a further understanding of the connections between Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* (1869) and the concept of congenital degeneration, which suggested people with mental or physical deformities would pass said deformities on to their children. This led to "Spencer's widely disseminated opinion that 'to aid the bad in multiplying, is, in effect, the same as maliciously providing for our descendants a multitude of enemies.'"<sup>171</sup> Dr. Daniel's desire to sterilize anyone found guilty of a sexual crime aligned with Spencer's belief that these criminals would pass their predilections—bestiality, homosexuality, pedophilia, and rape—to their children. Spencer and Dr. Daniel used law and medicine to support Darwin's push for decisions that would be "beneficial to the race, *though they may be fatal to individuals.*"<sup>172</sup> (emphasis added) In the creation of a master race, sacrifices had to be made.

Throughout the nineteenth century, psychologists used the term "psychopath" to explain women who displayed signs of sexual desire or were found guilty of sexual crimes such as sex work or public indecency. Medical professionals "explained that psychopathic hypersexuals, women who could not restrain their boundless desires, were to blame for slack sexual mores; men were at best the passive recipients or, at worst, the unwitting victims of their unwanted attentions."<sup>173</sup> As we will see in Chapters Four and Five, by the 1930s, women's heteronormative sexual urges would become respected among scientists, psychologists, and sociologists. In the 1890s, however, such urges were considered psychologically abnormal. Working-class women who embraced their sexual desires and seduced men were looked down upon both scientifically and socially. "Psychiatrists saw these women as sick; middle-class social workers, bonded by

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<sup>171</sup> Kim Emery, "Steers, Queers, and Manifest Destiny: Representing the Lesbian Subject in Turn-of-the-Century Texas," in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, (5.1, July 1994, 26-57, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3704079>), 32-33.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>173</sup> Elizabeth Lunbeck, "'A New Generation of Women': Progressive Psychiatrists and the Hypersexual Female" *Feminist Studies*, (13.3, Autumn 1987, 513-543, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3177879>), 514.

gender but distanced by class, saw them as victims and sought both to protect and to discipline them.”<sup>174</sup> This “psychopathic” behavior manifested in adolescence, at a time when young men were healthily discovering their sexual desires, the parallel experience in young women was seen as dangerous and unwanted. “They were years best avoided altogether; ideally, a girl would progress from childhood directly to the exalted state of motherhood.”<sup>175</sup> Young, sexually explorative working-class women found themselves labeled “psychopaths” and put on a carousel of asylum visits.

The label “psychopath” created a schism between women-loving women of the upper classes and women-loving women of the lower classes. While few women-loving women of the upper classes faced incarceration for their desires—Alice Mitchell’s incarceration was caused not because she loved another woman but because she killed one—many women-loving women of the lower classes received the label of “psychopath” and cycled in and out of asylums throughout their young lives.<sup>176</sup> This was doubly true in the case of the casual sex worker. For the working-class woman, sex was a commodity, and the act of sex was transactional. Sex bought working-class women a night on the town, tickets to a movie, and a decent dinner out.<sup>177</sup> Middle-class women, who did not have to wonder where the money for their next meal would come from, saw such behavior as crude and, if repeated, psychopathic. “If sex, or its promise, was the working girl’s capital, to middle-class eyes it was capital she too readily squandered. It is hardly surprising that middle-class observers of the working-class sexual economy saw girls’

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 514.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 517.

<sup>176</sup> “The women whom psychiatrists diagnosed as psychopaths at the Boston Psychopathic Hospital were overwhelmingly young (75 percent were younger than twenty-one), single, native-born whites. One-half were Protestant, one-third were Catholic, and the rest were Jewish. Although a few worked at middle-class occupations, such as teaching or office work, most, if employed at all, worked in factories or as domestic servants. Families, police, or courts committed one-half of them to the Boston Psychopathic Hospital for a variety of reasons; state social workers, or visitors, committed the rest.” (Ibid, 524).

<sup>177</sup> Kathy Peiss, “Charity Girls and City Pleasures,” *Magazine of History*, (18.4, Sex, Dating, and Courtship, July 2004, 14-16).

behavior as promiscuous.”<sup>178</sup> For working-class women, sex outside of marriage was power and currency. For their middle-class social workers, sex outside of marriage was a sign of degeneracy.

Women who had sex outside of marriage for the pleasure of it, without demanding anything in return, were classified as hypersexual. Hypersexuality, in turn, was seen as a physical manifestation of the New Woman movement, which seemed to suggest that women should have the same rights and freedoms as men—both politically *and* socially. Middle-class reformers and male physicians saw hypersexuality as a true threat to cisheteronormative households. One such woman who claimed a male identity was a patient at the Boston Psychopathic Hospital in 1915. “Julia Brown, alias Alfred Mansfield, [was] a lesbian cross-dresser who for twelve years had lived as a man—smoking a pipe, drinking whiskey regularly, sporting men's suits, working as a printer, and, most puzzling to psychiatrists, escorting young women to dances, suppers, and shows.”<sup>179</sup> One of the reasons Alice Mitchell’s case received so much media attention was Alice’s desire to dress as a man. While some of the public was aware of women who would dress as men, their decision to do so was often perceived by society as being purely financial: men were paid more than women. Conversely, women who lived with and made their lives with women but maintained white supremacist, cisheteronormative beauty standards were also exempt from too much scrutiny—as long as they were middle class. Jane Addams is the often-cited example of this. She and Mary Rozet Smith went as far as to request a double bed while traveling so they could sleep together, and no one had these respectable reformers arrested or institutionalized. “They avoided this criticism because they never lost their identification as

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 520.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 523.

ladies. They were refined, polite, educated, and well dressed.”<sup>180</sup> Those who chose to dress as men, perform men’s jobs, *and* live alone with women, such as Alice Mitchell and Julia Brown, were the problem.

To prevent instances like Julia Brown’s, anti-crossdressing legislation came about in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An 1863 law passed by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors prohibited “a person to appear in public ‘in a dress not belonging to his or her sex.’”<sup>181</sup> By the end of World War I, over 40 cities throughout the United States followed San Francisco’s lead, passing laws that prohibited the wearing of clothes from the opposite gender or which limited options so that a woman must be wearing at least three items of women’s clothing at all times and vice versa. Research suggests that local and state governments created crossdressing not for the purpose of policing a small, inconsequential segment of society, as popularly assumed. Instead, “crossdressing laws represented a specific strategy of government that constructed normative behavior, reinforced inequalities, and generated new modes of exclusion from public life.”<sup>182</sup> Claire Sears argues that the laws put in place during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age were instrumental in prohibiting crossdressing to the point of marginalization, allowing society to address this danger effectively. Sears draws from oral histories compiled from lesbians who lived throughout the 20th century to argue that police used anti-crossdressing legislation as a “key tool” for controlling the LGBT community throughout the 20th century. The police used these laws to arrest drag queens, butch lesbians, and gay men at working-class bars, and the laws were particularly useful when police raids turned up signs of homosexuality but no evidence of sexual solicitation or intercourse.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Lindquist, “Images of Alice,” 41.

<sup>181</sup> Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Crossdressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth Century San Francisco*, (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2014), 12.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

The differences between the lower classes and upper classes when it came to sex, sexuality, and sexual inversion created differing experiences and policing of non-cisheteronormative behaviors. Psychological reasoning used to maintain cisheteronormativity further divided women-loving women by oversexualizing Black women. “Psychiatrists contended that the fooling with boys that was a definite symptom of psychopathy in white girls was in [B]lack[s] [women] only the expression of the natural immorality of the race.”<sup>184</sup> This line of reasoning aligns with the treatment and logic applied to white and Black inmates in women’s prisons explained above. These divisive fault lines created by physicians, psychologists, reformers during the late nineteenth century continued to widen throughout the twentieth century and were blatantly evident in discussions about lesbian literature, culture, and identity both within lesbian culture and in mainstream culture. The subsequent chapters discuss how class and race influenced which characters existed in lesbian literature, who read these books, and how these books influenced lesbian identity in places as different as 1930s Harlem and the 1950s Upper East Side.

### *Conclusion*

Although the “lesbian” identity did not yet exist in the nineteenth century, Chapter One explored how elements of the “tomboy,” the “psychopath,” and the “crossdresser” all influenced the concept of “lesbianism” as it came into existence at the turn of the century. This chapter captured how a lesbian literary canon was forged from the fires of tragic narratives about tomboys and fallen women, the increasing evidence of homosexual behavior in homosocial

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<sup>184</sup> Lunbeck, “A New Generation of Women,” 535.



environments such as schools and prisons, and the international attention to women's sexual inversion provided by the Alice Mitchell trial. Although never identified as attracted to women and, in fact, written years before sexology made its way from Germany to the United States, Jo March was very intent on being perceived as the "man of the family" and maintaining a world filled with women.<sup>185</sup> The death of Beth effectively destroyed Jo, working as a sacrifice so the women-loving woman character could survive and live in the assigned narrative, described here as a death transference. This sacrifice of a cisheteronormative character in place of a women-loving woman character will be discussed throughout the dissertation, as it is a technique used by women writers long after Alcott. In a way, Jo March's independence from a life of marriage and children for most of the book provides a Geertzian model for future writers intent to disconnect their women characters from the cisheteronormative storyline of courting—marriage—children—death.

Although lesbian literature would later serve as a blueprint for women-loving women readers looking to affirm their identities and build communities, the concept of lesbianism originated in the real world. Drawing from women's prisons, girls' boarding schools, crossdressing workers, and romantic friendships, authors of early lesbian novels constructed Geertzian models of real-life women-loving women, like Alice Mitchell and examples in police reports, psychiatric cases, and prisoner interviews. Unlike Radclyffe Hall, who would read about Alice Mitchell from the descriptions in Havelock Ellis' books, Dr. Carhart, Mary R.P. Hatch, and Mary Wilkins Freeman created characters from contemporaneous news coverage and firsthand accounts. Furthermore, either known or unknown, these novels portrayed similar themes as those expressed by prison wardens and psychologists of the time: sexual inversion was a symptom of

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<sup>185</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, (Web, [https://planetpdf.com/planetpdf/pdfs/free\\_ebooks/Little\\_Women\\_NT.pdf](https://planetpdf.com/planetpdf/pdfs/free_ebooks/Little_Women_NT.pdf)), 8.

congenital degeneracy, sexual inverts were predators attacking innocent women, and the only way to interact with sexual inversion was to destroy it within the individual (through hypnosis in *Norma Trist*) or destroy the individual sexual invert (as with the deaths of Rosa/Gustave and Phæbe Dole). These lesbian characters, created early enough to be pure of the refraction through Ellis' lens, are different from Stephen Gordon. And yet, the result is the same: lesbianism is sacrificed in order to achieve a cisheteronormative ending. Through the processes of reducing lesbianism via hypnosis or destroying lesbianism through suicide, imprisonment, and death, each novel was able to treat the pollutant of lesbianism and uphold the white supremacist, cisheteronormative society in which these women-loving women characters existed. None of these novels challenged the status quo, although Dr. Carhart's belief that hypnotism could "cure" women-loving women represented a more lenient and careful approach to the question of how to treat the ambiguity of women-loving, gender-nonconforming people who were assigned female at birth. Regardless of the intensity of each novel's destruction of lesbianism, cisheteronormative patriarchy prevailed. Each of these three 1895 novels end with the young female protagonist marrying a suitable young man.

Two decades before *The Well of Loneliness* arrived in New York for American distribution, three novels based on the trial of Alice Mitchell established a lesbian literary canon that was primarily created in the United States. While Faderman suggests that these three are *not* harbingers of future lesbian fiction and *The Well of Loneliness* is the true catalyst of lesbian literary canon, this chapter and Chapter Two show lesbian fiction slowly developing in the United States prior to *The Well's* publication. Even more important, these novels fulfilled the maxim "the only good lesbian is a dead lesbian," put forth by Faderman in her discussion of *The*

*Children's Hour*, long before Hellman wrote this 1934 play, discussed in Chapter Four.<sup>186</sup> From the very beginning of lesbian fiction, Dead Lesbian Syndrome has been endemic to the lesbian narrative arc. It would take more than a generation before women-loving women would have a lesbian love story that ended with the two women happily in love, and at least another century before pop culture writers began untangling the parasite of Dead Lesbian Syndrome from the host of lesbian fiction.

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<sup>186</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 329.

## Chapter Two A Hostile Environment

### *Introduction*

The First World War demanded British women leave the relative anonymity of the domestic sphere and fill the roles left behind by men who had gone to War. Empowered by the country's need, masculine women joined the call to duty and emerged from hiding to find, "War and death had given them a right to life..." and having earned their right, "never again would such women submit to being driven back to their holes and corners."<sup>187</sup> War empowered women, especially 'sexually inverted' women, to stake their claim of citizenship on the sacrifices they made for England's victory. As a reward for their work, women over the age of 30 with more than £5 of property were given the right to vote with the 1918 Representation of the People Act.<sup>188</sup> On July 1928, weeks before the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*, the 1928 Equal Franchise Act lowered the voting age of women to 21, achieving equal legal voting rights between British men and women.<sup>189</sup>

Radclyffe Hall's war narrative in *The Well of Loneliness* offers insight into how women-loving women viewed their roles in the War as proof of their right to citizenship and existence. In a conversation with her nurse Puddle, protagonist Stephen Gordon says, "I'm afraid they won't want my sort [to enlist]." Puddle replies, "I wouldn't be too sure of that, this war may give

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<sup>187</sup> Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 272.

<sup>188</sup> "An Act to Amend the Law with respect to Parliamentary and Local Government Franchises, and the Registration of Parliamentary and Local Government Electors, and the conduct of elections, and to provide for the Redistribution of Seats at Parliamentary Elections, and for other purposes connected therewith," UK Parliament, February 1918. *Hansard*. Accessed December 31, 2020. <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/parliamentary-collections/collections-the-vote-and-after/representation-of-the-people-act-1918/>.

<sup>189</sup> "An Act to assimilate the franchises for men and women in respect of parliamentary and local government elections; and for purposes consequential thereon" 18 & 19 Geo. 5 c. 12. *Hansard*. Accessed December 31, 2020. <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/case-study-the-right-to-vote/the-right-to-vote/birmingham-and-the-equal-franchise/1928-equal-franchise-act/>

your sort of woman her chance. I think you may find that they'll need you, Stephen."<sup>190</sup> Hall, as narrator, agrees with Puddle, explaining:

For as though gaining courage from the terror that is war, many a one who was even as Stephen, had crept out of her hole and come into the daylight and faced her country: 'Well, here I am, will you take me or leave me?' And England had taken her, asking no questions—she was strong and efficient, she could fill a man's place, she could organize too, given scope for her talent. England had said: 'Thank you very much. You're just what we happen to want...at the moment.'<sup>191</sup>

By 1928, however, "the moment" for Stephen Gordon and others liked her had passed. By analyzing the decade between the end of World War I and the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*, we can better understand why Hall embraced the sexologists' views of women-loving women as sexually inverted martyrs and how the concept of Dead Lesbian Syndrome percolated within European society, the British government, and Hall's earlier writings.

This chapter begins with two court cases that took place during World War I: the libel case Maud Allan brought before the court after she faced slanderous accusations of sexual impropriety and the censorship case launched against *Despised and Rejected* by Rose Allatini, a novel about a homosexual pacifist musician, Dennis Blackwood, and the melancholy bisexual woman who loved him. Both cases took place towards the end of World War I and cemented connections between homosexuality and sabotage against British society in the public consciousness. A central aspect of the cultural zeitgeist of the interwar era was societal resistance against increased women's empowerment, burgeoning women-loving women identities, and public homosocial communities for women throughout Great Britain. The societal resistance to women-loving women was three-pronged: court decisions that discouraged public displays of

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<sup>190</sup> Hall, *Well of Loneliness*, 268.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

women's sovereignty, parliamentary decisions, and published materials about homosexuality. After exploring how court cases were used to curtail women's power during World War I, this chapter continues by analyzing Hall's first libel case, which she won in 1920. These court cases against Allan, Allatini, and Hall prove the patriarchal powers used both paternal protective methods and punitive methods in order to police women's sexuality just as women were beginning to demand more freedom. While the court cases attempted to eliminate lesbianism through legal recourse, the UK Parliament attempted to reduce the threat of lesbianism through silence. This chapter looks at parliamentary conversations that took place throughout the early 1920s which prove the Members of Parliament hoped lesbianism would go away if they ignored it. Both the court cases and parliamentary proceedings sought to reduce the threat of lesbianism by forcing women-loving women back into the shadows after the War.

After explaining how cultural producers like publishing houses, courts of law, newspapers, and the government approached women-loving women at the end of World War I, this chapter then presents an overview of the women-loving women individuals and communities prevalent in Great Britain and Continental Europe during the interwar era. Drawing from the idea that World War I empowered women-loving women to creep out of their "holes and come into the daylight," this chapter explores the lived experiences of women during and after World War I, highlighting specific case studies of famous and lesser-known women-loving women, including Natalie Barney, Virginia Woolf, and Vita Sackville-West.

This chapter concludes with an analysis of Hall's earlier novels, and their roles in preparing her to use *Dead Lesbian Syndrome* to curtail censorship while still exploring women-loving women themes openly. In both the novella *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself* and the short story "The Career of Mark Anthony Brakes," the main character engages in a taboo relationship and

dies in the end. This chapter maps how both stories serve as a blueprint for Dead Lesbian Syndrome, thus allowing Hall to cement her tragic narrative arc prior to writing *The Well of Loneliness*. These stories also offer some insight into why and how Hall helped to spread Dead Lesbian Syndrome, even when both women-loving women protagonists in *The Well of Loneliness* survive the end of the story.

This chapter focuses on the environment into which Hall birthed *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, while Chapter Three examines the immediate impact of this new novel on society. The novel's middle-brow existence, examined further in Chapter Three, is one of its most dangerous attributes, as it meant homosexuality was no longer the refined privilege of the upper class, but instead democratized for all people. This democratization of women-loving women identities and communities is an important ingredient in society's perpetuation of Dead Lesbian Syndrome. While this chapter begins with understanding the various methods used to keep silent "the love that dares not speak its name," it ends with suggestion that lesbianism was a concept discussed throughout England, and Hall and her contemporaries served to amplify the forbidden voice of lesbian desire.

*Despised and Rejected: Silencing Dangerous Women during and after World War I*

Between 1918 and 1920, the world slowly found new stability as "the War to End All Wars" came to an end. Having called upon women to stand up and fight for their country, British society now faced empowered women who knew their own worth and refused to return to their pre-war assembly line of debutante, then wife, then mother. Even as the war still raged throughout 1918, the British Homefront faced two unruly women who wanted their voices heard. That year, British society chose to make examples of Maud Allan and Rose Allatini, creating

precedents for censorship and silence that influenced courts on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the twentieth century.

Maud Allan, a fading starlet who made a final comeback attempt with a private showing of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, found herself fighting for her own reputation against the machinery of Britain's military industrial complex in the spring of 1918. A few months later, as the final battles were taking place across the continent, Rose Allatini and her editor C.W. Daniels faced backlash for their pacifist novel *Despised and Rejected*. Both Allan and Allatini were accused of discussing sexual taboos and silenced by British courts. Understanding their trials can help us better understand the techniques Britain used to address threats to women's place in society even as they prepared to give women the right to vote as 'reward' for their work in World War I.

In April 1918, Maud Allan sued Member of Parliament Noel Pemberton Billing for libel after he accused Allan of lesbianism. The trial resulted with Pemberton Billing clearing his name, in turn condemning Allan as a lesbian, and the implications of the trial had a disastrous impact on her career. Theaters shunned her and theater managers advised her to stay away from the London stage. According to Laura Doan, by bringing a libel suit against Pemberton Billing, Allan outed herself as a queer woman who was guilty of possessing "contraband knowledge" for a British gentlewoman of 1918.<sup>192</sup> Having once been an international star, and a household name throughout the Western world, by 1920 Allan was in the midst of what biographer Felix Cherniavsky considers, "The Years of Decline."<sup>193</sup>

Allan arrived in London for the first time in 1908, coming off a successful tour of Munich with her new performance piece, *The Vision of Salomé*, in which she belly-danced

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<sup>192</sup> Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of Modern English Lesbian Subculture*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 31-35.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.



wearing a halter top and long skirt. She gave a performance to King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, after which she went to supper with the royal couple.<sup>194</sup> She toured the United States, Europe, and the British Empire, always staying just to the right side of the line between art and pornography. Throughout her time on the stage, Allan liaised with heads of state, and the rumor mill suggested she was a mistress of both the King of England and the Prime Minister's wife.<sup>195</sup> However, if her fame burned bright, it also burned out quickly, and by 1917, when she returned to London, her name was not quite enough to draw a large crowd.<sup>196</sup>

In 1918, Allan agreed to star in a private staging of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*. Her casting agent was J.T. Grein, the drama critic for the *Sunday Times* and a member of the Independent Theater Society, which "specialized in modern and controversial plays presented before private audiences and therefore free of the Lord Chamberlain's censorship."<sup>197</sup> Allan's decision to stage a play that was considered forbidden by the British public put her in direct conflict with Pemberton Billing, who was elected to Parliament in 1916 on a purity platform. Recognizing that the Allies were not faring well in the Great War, Pemberton Billing linked British shortcomings on the battlefield with British immorality at home.

In the January 1918 issue of his newsletter *Vigilante*, Pemberton Billing suggested England was losing the war because English officials were being extorted. He claimed the Central Powers had a black book with the names of over 47,000 men and women of varying ranks within British government and society who were sexual deviants. As such, anyone who showed signs of impurity could be condemned as a possible blackmail victim and had to be

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<sup>194</sup> "Maud Allan Protests: Dancer Points Out Career Dates only Part Way to the '90s." *New York Times*, Jan 15, 1936.

<sup>195</sup> Philip Hoare, *Oscar Wilde's Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy, & the First World War*, (London: Duckworth, 1997), 85.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>197</sup> Felix Cherniavsky, "Maud Allan, Part V: The Years of Decline, 1915-1956," *Dance Chronicle*, (9.2, 1986, 177-236, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1567554>), 182.

removed from power.<sup>198</sup> Senator Joe McCarthy would use a similar tactic during the overlapping Red and Lavender Scares in the United States thirty years later.

In February 1918, the *Vigilante* published an article entitled, “The Cult of the Clitoris,” stating:

To be a member of Maud Allan's performance in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, one has to apply to a Miss Valetta of 9 Duke Street, Adelphi, W.C. If Scotland Yard were to seize the list I have no doubt they would secure the names of several thousand of the first 47,000.<sup>199</sup>

Pemberton Billing’s newspaper was a private publication, but Allan found out about the article and, following legal advice, chose to pursue a libel case.<sup>200</sup> It is unlikely Pemberton Billing’s article would have made international headlines had Allan not sued for libel. When asked to justify the article in court to avoid an obscenity charge, Pemberton Billing explained he used “clitoris” because he believed such a new medical term would prevent anyone of the lower classes from understanding the title or article enough to be morally corrupted by it.<sup>201</sup> Pemberton Billing alerted the press to the trial, which took place on a rainy day in April but still brought large crowds to the Bow Street Magistrates’ Court. To represent them, Grein and Allan hired Travers Humphreys, the son of C.O. Humphreys, who had represented Oscar Wilde in his preliminary hearings at Bow Street Magistrates’ Court three decades previous. Pemberton Billing’s idea of “The 47,000” now had a national audience. Newspapers across the country covered the trial and drew subtextual comparisons between Maud Allan and the recently

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<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> Hoare, *Oscar Wilde’s Last Stand*, 93.

executed Mata Hari. Although Pemberton Billing was technically the one on trial, it was Allan who stood trial in the court of public opinion.<sup>202</sup>

Pemberton Billings argued that the language used in the “Cult of the Clitoris” article was justifiable because the play *Salomé* was immoral. The play was forced to change location at least three times and moved from a Sunday show to a Tuesday show, all because of its questionable morality.<sup>203</sup> On May 21, 1918, Pemberton Billing entered a Plea of Justification which read: “Noel Pemberton-Billing says he is not guilty and for a further plea he says that all the defamatory matters alleged in the indictment are true.”<sup>204</sup> When asked if she knew what the word clitoris meant, Allan answered she did, but only because of light reading of medical textbooks. Pemberton Billing then revealed he had shown the headline to 24 different people and only one—a lawyer—had been able to define the word.<sup>205</sup> The press chose not to print the word, replacing it with either a line of asterisks or a straight line, as “sexual censorship remained the order of the day; the public must be protected.”<sup>206</sup> Pemberton Billing went on to ask Allan, “Are you aware that there are people in this country who practice unnatural vices?” to which Allan responded, “There are everywhere, but I am not responsible for that.”<sup>207</sup>

The trial itself was filled with newsworthy spectacles designed to shock and titillate the public. It included Pemberton Billing enlisting dozens of amputee soldiers to sit in the courtroom; one of the witnesses listing the names of political leaders and claiming they, too, were on the list of potential blackmail victims for their sexual deviancy; Pemberton Billing accusing Judge Darling of being a member of his 47,000 sexual deviants; and accusations of

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 95-97.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 95-98.

<sup>204</sup> Hoare, *Oscar Wilde's Last Stand*, 108.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 114

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 116.

treason and sexual deviancy thrown at Lady Margot Asquith, which were probably partially responsible for the subsequent end of Prime Minister H.H. Asquith's political career.<sup>208</sup>

Pemberton Billing used the press the trial received to further his political agenda, removing Allan from the spotlight and giving her a small supporting role. Even though she played a supporting role in the drama of this case, the case played a leading role in the end of Allan's career. The publicity of the trial effectively ended Allan's dancing career in England, both because of the insinuation of lesbianism and because it was revealed that her full name was Beulah Maude Durrant, and she was the sister of convicted murderer William Henry Theodore Durrant, a fact she admitted under oath.<sup>209</sup> Through the implication that she was a sexual deviant *and* inherently degenerate because of her connection to her brother, Allan and her salacious dancing were effectively reduced as a threat to the purity of English society.<sup>210</sup> Conversely, while the court case reduced Allan's power and therefore her individual ability to threaten cisheteronormativity in England, women's sexual deviancy was now a matter of public record. Topics of sexual perversion, the clitoris, and women's sexual appetites had been discussed in front of a crowd of thousands and in full view of the press, who dutifully reported Allan's knowledge of sexual deviancy (although not the word clitoris). Even as society quietly pushed Maud Allan into the margins, erased in all but existence, her trial meant sexual deviancy in women was now a part of public discourse.

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<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-119, 173-174.

<sup>209</sup> Lacy McDearmon, "Maud Allan: The Public Record," *Dance Chronicle*, (2.2, 1978, 85-105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01472527808568721>), 100.

<sup>210</sup> It should be noted that Maud Allan spent the last 15 years of her life living with Verna Aldrich, who Cherniavsky calls "her secretary-companion, and some twenty years her junior...[who] very clearly loved her employer." (Cherniavsky, "Maud Allan Part V," 206.)

As Allan's threat to society was reduced by forcing her from the spotlight, Rose Allatini's book *Despised and Rejected* was just beginning to circulate throughout England. Published under the pseudonym A.T. Fitzroy, this novel was first published by C.W. Daniel Ltd. in May 1918. Over the next six months, Daniel sold over 700 of the 1,012 copies he printed in the first edition of the novel. However, in September, the British government seized the remaining 230 copies under the Defense of the Realm Act. Contrary to other novels discussed herein, *Despised and Rejected* was not tried for obscenity, but rather, "under the Defense Regulations as 'likely to prejudice the recruiting of persons to serve in His Majesty's Forces, and their training and discipline.'"<sup>211</sup> Daniel and Allatini were found guilty primarily on the novel's ability to be used as pacifist propaganda, but the bisexual woman and homosexual man who served as the book's protagonists compounded the novel's taboo nature. Other themes for which this novel shows sympathy include Irish independence, Jewish acceptance, socialism, and, briefly, environmentalism.<sup>212</sup> Soon after the trial of *Despised and Rejected*, a similarly pacifist novel *What Not* by Rose Macaulay was pulled from the presses. Although the cisheteronormative novel *What Not* was published immediately after the War ended, its more pacifist passages were not printed until 2018.<sup>213</sup>

It is possible that Allatini drew inspiration from her own life to create the character of Antoinette de Courcy. Like Antoinette, Allatini was the daughter of immigrants, although while Antoinette was French, Allatini was Italian and Austrian. They were close in age, both in their twenties during World War I, and both were decidedly not heterosexual. Antoinette falls in love with a woman named Hesper early in the novel, and her sexual inversion leads to her ending the

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<sup>211</sup> Jonathan Cutbill, "Introduction" in *Despised and Rejected* by A.T. Fitzroy, (London: GMP Publishing, 1988), iv-v.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-155.

<sup>213</sup> Alison Flood, "What Not: lost feminist novel that anticipated Brave New World finally finds its time," *BBC*, December 10, 2018. Accessed December 30, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/dec/10/what-not-lost-feminist-novel-that-anticipated-brave-new-world-finally-finds-its-time>

novel completely alone. After separating from her husband in 1939, Allatini moved with Melanie Mills to Rye, where the two women lived together for the rest of their lives. During her time with Mills, Allatini published another thirty novels, leading one biographer to remark, “If Rose Allatini was a lesbian, she had a pretty good life for the time.”<sup>214</sup> As she married her husband, Cyril Scott, in the 1920s, it is also possible that Allatini had an affair with a homosexual man during the War, and the novel was semi-autobiographical, as Jonathan Cutbill suggests in his introduction to the 1988 edition. Regardless of how reflective of Allatini’s own history the novel was, it is evident that the novel’s perspective on homosexuality came from Edward Carpenter, a leading British sexologist of the time.<sup>215</sup>

In the novel, Antoinette is a sexual invert who passes easily in heterosexual society. Her future boyfriend, Dennis Blackwood, is a sexual invert who cannot pass. As one observer remarks, Dennis is “More his mother’s son than his father’s...”<sup>216</sup> Dennis is disconnected from the rest of his family throughout the novel, while Antoinette rebels against hers. Antoinette’s desire for another woman, Hester Cawthorn, is the focus of the first part of the novel, in which Antoinette, “was pleading as a very young boy might plead with his lady-love.”<sup>217</sup> However, unlike other novels written throughout the twentieth century, Antoinette’s love for another woman is a taboo in these early chapters. We learn that Antoinette has been chasing women since she was thirteen, approximately a decade before the start of World War I, and easily won the affection of the women she loved in the past. Her family finds her to be different, but more from her unwillingness to learn how to properly crochet or cross-stitch than for her attraction to women, which they know nothing about. Dennis’ family is also firmly in the dark regarding his

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<sup>214</sup> Cutbill, “Introduction,” iii.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, iii-iv, viii-ix.

<sup>216</sup> A.T. Fitzroy, *Despised and Rejected*, (London: GMP Publishing, 1988), 16.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

sexuality, but while Antoinette simply never found it important enough to discuss, Dennis guards his homosexual inclinations with isolation from his family and insolence whenever he is forced to visit them.<sup>218</sup>

In the second part of the novel, Dennis begins a courtship with Antoinette, writing to her regularly and visiting her upon his arrival in London. Dennis bores Antoinette, who is busy chasing after Hester. However, Hester is not a sexual invert, although Antoinette is not the first to believe her to be a women-loving woman. Upon meeting with Hester a few months after their initial acquaintance, Antoinette learns that Hester is entangled in a taboo love affair of her own—with a married man.<sup>219</sup> While this affair was still prohibited by sexual mores of the Edwardian Era, it was not the right type of taboo, and Antoinette returned home heartbroken. Over time, she transitioned her love to Dennis, who was the first man she ever felt true love for. However, the night after she realized she was in love with him, Dennis called off their engagement and disappeared. He was in love with Alan, a socialist engineering student, and could not continue the farce with Antoinette. It was at this point that Dennis finally told Antoinette about his homosexuality, the first time he ever told anyone, and then suggested that Antoinette shared this same “taint.”<sup>220</sup>

Antoinette reflected on her own sexual inclinations and concluded, “...whereas he had always striven against these tendencies in himself, in herself she had never regarded them as abnormal. It had seemed disappointing, but not in the least unnatural, that all her passionate longings should have been awakened by women, instead of by members of the opposite sex.”<sup>221</sup> Upon realizing that her sexual inclinations could be a hardship, Antoinette suggests that her love

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<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, 62-66.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 217-218.

for Dennis means she is, in fact, normal. Dennis disagrees, “It’s only another proof of your abnormality, my poor child. No normal woman could care for me, I’m sure. You only do, because you are what you are, and I am what I. It’s ‘like to like,’ as I said.”<sup>222</sup> This ideology haunts future women-loving women novels, as often one woman will “return” to a man and love him in place of her former ladylove. While most novels end here and thus bypass the question of whether a sexually inverted woman can love a man, others, such as *Loveliest of Friends* (1931) discussed in Chapter Four, suggest that women cannot return to a cisheteronormative life after falling in love with a woman. The concept of bisexuality is continuously dismissed throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this way, Antoinette remains a danger to society even after falling in love with a man, because she is still seen as sexually inverted. She must be punished, and so the novel ends with Dennis imprisoned and Antoinette destined to mourn for her beloved man, whose heart belongs to another man.

The tragic ending of this novel is far from cisheteronormative. Although the characters within the novel are terrified of the horrors that await their friends Dennis and Alan, both imprisoned for their pacifist views, anyone reading the book after November 1918 knows the War ended and many Conscientious Objectors were able to return home. According to official statistics, only 1.2% of the men imprisoned as Conscientious Objectors died in prison, meaning it was probable that both Alan and Dennis survived their internment.<sup>223</sup> As the novel implies that not only did Alan and Dennis engage in coitus on Alan’s last night of freedom but also that Dennis regretted not making love with Alan sooner, it is not outside the realm of possibility that,

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>223</sup> Across the United Kingdom (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, and England) over 6,000 men were court martialled and imprisoned as Conscientious Objectors. 73 men died while imprisoned for Conscientiously Objecting. Although most men returned to their lives once the War ended, many by the end of 1919, they were often shunned by their families and faced difficulties finding jobs. (“Domestic impact of World War One - society and culture” *BBC Bitesize*. Accessed December 31, 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/ztx66sg/revision/2>)



upon leaving prison, these two men were able to live their lives together, as many homosexual men covertly did throughout the interwar era.<sup>224</sup> Antoinette's life could continue in one of two ways: she could accept marriage with a man she did not love, or she could find new love with a woman and live with her, as Allatini did with Melanie Mills in 1941. Unlike the women-loving women novels that followed, *Despised and Rejected* did not end with a lesbian dying or her woman lover running off with a man. The lack of a cisheteronormative ending could have played a role in its censorship by the government within only a few months of the novel's publication.

Allatini offered *Despised and Rejected* to Edward Carpenter's publisher, Stanley Unwin, some time before Daniel finally published it in May 1918. According to Unwin, he rejected the book because "in view of the subjects dealt with I did not think that any publisher would consider it; the only man who might conceivably do so was C.W. Daniel."<sup>225</sup> This was most likely due to Daniel's growing reputation as a supporter of pacifist and socialist views. As was revealed in the trial for *Despised and Rejected*, Daniel was fined £40 at the Bow Street Magistrates' Court for publishing a pacifist pamphlet entitled "A Knock Out Blow."<sup>226</sup> Daniel chose to both publish and advertise Allatini's book, which led to a review in the *Times Literary Supplement* in June 1918. According to the *Times*, *Despised and Rejected* was:

A well-written novel—evidently the work of a woman—on the subjects of pacifism and of abnormality in the affections. The author's sympathy is plainly with the pacifists; and her plea for more tolerant recognition of the fact that some people are, not by choice but by nature, abnormal in their affections is open and bold enough to rob the book of unpleasant suggestions. As a frank and sympathetic study of certain types of mind and character, it is of interest; but it is not to be recommended for general reading.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Fitzroy, *Despised and Rejected*, 304.

<sup>225</sup> Nicholas Walter, *Damned Fools in Utopia: And Other Writings on Anarchism and War Resistance*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011), 235.

<sup>226</sup> "Despised and Rejected: Publisher of Pacifist Novel Fined," *The Times*, (London, October 11, 1918) 5.

<sup>227</sup> Walter, *Damned Fools in Utopia*, 235.

Unfortunately for Daniel, the book cost only five shillings, which meant it *was* recommended for “general reading.” As we will learn in the next chapter, prohibitive costs were used to argue that *The Well of Loneliness* was *not* “recommended for general reading.”<sup>228</sup> Citing Daniel’s earlier pacifist pamphlet, “A Knock Out Blow,” prosecutor Sir R. Muir declared “The defendant was a person who assisted those who desired to propagate the pacifist idea by printing for them these pamphlets. This was a pacifist pamphlet in the guise of a novel.”<sup>229</sup> Daniel was convicted under the Defense of the Realm Act on October 10, 1918, just 32 days before World War I ended. Daniel’s fine came to £460, which is approximately £26,812.94 in 2021.<sup>230</sup>

“The official reason was the pacifist message, but an unofficial one was the even more objectionable homosexual message.”<sup>231</sup> The alderman, Sir Charles Wakefield, noted that while he was not being asked to judge whether the novel was obscene, he did find *Despised and Rejected* to be “morally unhealthy and most pernicious.”<sup>232</sup> The book was not republished until 1988, leaving just over 750 copies in circulation after the unsold copies were seized and destroyed following Daniel’s conviction.<sup>233</sup> Without a means of finding these books unless they were sent overseas or sold in a bookstore, the British government had no means to control their circulation. Owning a copy of *Despised and Rejected* was not against British law.

After the book was convicted of violating the Defense of the Realm Act and labeled “morally unhealthy” by the presiding judge, Daniel published his own protest of the novel’s homosexuality. He claimed, “I was assured by the author that the love between the hero and his friend was analogous to that between David and Jonathan. I did not see what has since been

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<sup>228</sup> “Despised and Rejected,” *The Guardian*, (London, July 4, 1918,) 3.

<sup>229</sup> “Despised and Rejected: Publisher of Pacifist Novel Fined,” *The Times*, 5.

<sup>230</sup> “Value of £460 from 1918 to 2021,” *CPI Inflation Calculator*, Accessed September 4, 2021. <https://www.in2013dollars.com/uk/inflation/1918?amount=460>.

<sup>231</sup> Walter, *Damned Fools in Utopia*, 236.

<sup>232</sup> “Despised and Rejected: Publisher of Pacifist Novel Fined,” *The Times*, 5.

<sup>233</sup> Walter, *Damned Fools in Utopia*, 236.

pointed out – that certain passages are open to an immoral interpretation.” Daniel went on to suggest the government should burn book, rather than “I should be party to lending support to depravity of either the homo-sexual or the contra-sexual types. And I think that I am entitled to say that the invariable influence of my publications has been considerably above, not below, the conventional moral standards.”<sup>234</sup>

Despite his rejection of homosexuality, his fine was covered by known non-heterosexuals including Edward Carpenter and Virginia Woolf. In a letter written to ask for monetary support for Daniel, Carpenter explained that the book’s treatment of homosexuality as well as pacifism may cause “popular prejudice” to be “aroused to an even greater extent than if the book treated only of Pacifism. We therefore appeal to those who believe that the free expression of sincere opinion is for the public good to show their sympathy by contributing generously.”<sup>235</sup> Carpenter collaborated with *The Herald*, which had rallied support for Oscar Wilde 23 years earlier, to raise money for Daniel’s fines. Unwin, despite refusing to publish *Despised and Rejected*, contributed to the fund.<sup>236</sup> Still, Daniel recognized association with homosexuality endangered his business and his goal to support pacifism and socialism. A staunch Trotskyite, he founded CW Daniel Ltd in 1902 to further socialist ideals.<sup>237</sup> He chose to eliminate the threat posed by homosexuality by not reprinting the book even after the War end and by dissociating himself and his firm with the homosexual implications of *Despised and Rejected*. In the end, even though the novel was banned based on its pacifist views, these were views for which Daniel was willing to risk his business. Homosexuality, on the other hand, was not.

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<sup>234</sup> George Simmer, “Great War Fiction Plus,” December 5, 2009. Accessed December 31, 2020.

<https://greatwarfiction.wordpress.com/2009/12/05/despised-and-rejected/>

<sup>235</sup> Edward Carpenter, “Letter on a banned publication (1918),” *Deviance, disorder and the self*, Birkbeck College, University of London. Accessed December 31, 2020. <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/deviance/sexuality/carpenter/18-2-1%20carpenter.htm>

<sup>236</sup> Cutbill, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>237</sup> “Archives Charles William Daniel Company (1815-) 1906-19921906-1992,” *International Institute of Social History*, (Amsterdam, 2020, <https://search.iisg.amsterdam/Record/ARCH00279/Export?style=PDF>), 3.

Overall, *Despised and Rejected* was less a novel about women-loving women and more a novel about the intersections of male homosexuality, artistic inclination, socialist ideologies, and pacifism. Antoinette recognizes this intersection at the end of the novel: “‘Everyone seems to imagine that you’re abnormal because you like being abnormal,’ Antoinette burst out, ‘just as they imagine that men go to prison because they like it better than going to the Front. As if being different from normal people weren’t curse enough in itself, without having them think it’s your own choice, and that you enjoy being different!’”<sup>238</sup> However, by censoring the book and insisting that all remaining unsold copies be destroyed, the British government effectively silenced the first English attempt to fictionalize the ideas sexologists had put forth for the upper classes and make these ideas accessible to a wider audience. By the end of 1918, Britain had succeeded in labeling both Maud Allan and *Despised and Rejected* as dangerous and then eliminating them from public discourse. Still, London newspapers publicized both trials, creating cracks in the silence that Hall would force wider with her trials in the coming decade.

In November 1920, two years after Allan and Allatini were effectively silenced, Radclyffe Hall brought a libel suit against St. George Lane Fox-Pitt, a member of the Society for Psychical Research, who was working to block Hall’s nomination to the Society. Fox-Pitt was accused of implying an immoral relationship had once existed between Hall and Mabel Batton, and that Hall was responsible for the destruction of the marriage between Admiral Sir Ernest Troubridge and Lady Una Troubridge.<sup>239</sup> While Pemberton Billing’s case reached national news because he worked to bring publicity to his 47,000 and political agenda, for Fox-Pitt “A slander action of a very simple nature has attracted a great deal of attention, because the evidence

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<sup>238</sup> Fitzroy, *Despised and Rejected*, 347-348.

<sup>239</sup> Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 31-32.

revealed to a wondering public something of what goes on in the regions of psychical research.”<sup>240</sup> People were more interested in Hall and Fox-Pitt’s work with seances and psychics than with who Hall was sleeping with. Although Fox-Pitt rescinded his accusations, claiming he found Hall’s research, not her lifestyle, to be immoral, he was still found guilty of libel. As with Pemberton Billing’s trial, the press tried to reduce the threat of sexual deviancy in women by not referencing it. Throughout Fox-Pitt’s trial, most of the press coverage focused on the spiritualism aspect, discussing how the privileged few conducted psychical research and looked at the mysteries of the occult, such as clairvoyance and seances. Spiritualism was also taboo, but unlike sexual inversion, it was not indecent.

The topic of female sexual deviancy was so taboo, in fact, that one of the witnesses, a woman *who had heard Fox-Pitt accuse Hall of immorality*, was not allowed to explain the definition of “unnatural vice” for the jury. During this witness’ testimony, the judge interrupted questioning with, “The jury are men of the world and know. You can’t put such an indelicate question to a woman. I won’t allow it.”<sup>241</sup> As such, no discussion of women-loving women took place, and the British government was again able to label such discussion as dangerous and eliminate it from public discourse. Fox-Pitt was not sentenced to jail time, and Hall’s reputation suffered only slightly. Una Troubridge, safe in her cisheteronormative marriage, launched a campaign to convince the Society for Psychic Research to elect Hall to their ranks, which was ultimately successful. Still, there were members of the Society who believed Hall to be guilty of immorality, regardless of the court’s findings.<sup>242</sup> Her novels, *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself* and *The*

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<sup>240</sup> *The Times*, November 20, 1920, p. 11 quoted in Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 33.

<sup>241</sup> *Daily Mail*, November 20, 1920, 7-8 quoted in Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 34.

<sup>242</sup> Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 35.

*Well of Loneliness*, both written in the ensuing decade, and her continued relationship with Una Troubridge would prove these objections to her heteronormativity were not unfounded.

*Government Issued and Issues with Women-Loving Women*

Soon after Hall won the libel suit against Fox-Pittman, the topic of women's sexuality entered the esteemed halls of the British Parliament. The topic was first introduced on October 21, 1920, when Cecil Maurice Chapman appeared as a witness before the Joint Select Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Bill and introduced into Parliamentary records the phrase "gross indecency among women."<sup>243</sup> This was most likely not an attempt on Chapman's part to police the newfound freedoms of British women. Ten years earlier, the *Vote*, a suffragist newsletter, called Chapman, "one of the most important and convincing speakers to be had on any suffrage platform."<sup>244</sup> Chapman was a staunch feminist, and limited his testimony before the Joint Select Committee to indecent acts in which adult women preyed upon young girls.<sup>245</sup> However, although Chapman tried to differentiate between lesbianism and pedophilia, the House of Commons chose instead to begin the process of amending the Criminal Law Amendment Bill of 1920 to legislate against all sexual acts between women—including consenting adults.

On April 21, 1921, Viscountess Astor, the first woman Member of Parliament, entered the Bishop of London's Criminal Law Amendment Act into record by asking when it would be brought to discussion. Both she and the Lord Chancellor labeled this Act as "uncontroversial" and in high public opinion.<sup>246</sup> The conversation continued through August, at which time

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<sup>243</sup> UK Parliament, *Hansard: House of Commons*, 5<sup>th</sup> series, Volume 145 (1921) <https://hansard.parliament.uk/>; Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 37-45.

<sup>244</sup> Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 217-218.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>246</sup> "Criminal Law Amendment Bill." *Hansard: House of Commons*, Debate. 15 June 1921 vol 143 cc409-10. [https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1921/jun/15/criminal-law-amendment-bill#S5CV0143P0\\_19210615\\_HOC\\_193](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1921/jun/15/criminal-law-amendment-bill#S5CV0143P0_19210615_HOC_193)

Conservative MP Lieutenant Colonel Moore-Brabazon summarized the history of how Parliament could approach the topic of women-loving women:

The first is the death sentence. That has been tried in old times, and, though drastic, it does what is required—that is, stamp out. The second is look upon them frankly as lunatics, and lock them up for the rest of their lives. That is very satisfactory also. It gets rid of them. The third way is to leave them entirely alone, not notice them, not advertise them. That is the method that has been adopted in England for many hundred years.<sup>247</sup>

While Moore-Brabazon’s point was valid, in that English society had chosen to “leave them entirely alone, not notice them, not advertise them” when it came to women-loving women, the fact remained women-loving women existed, whether or not Parliament wanted to admit they were real. Arabella Kenealy’s 1920 book *Feminism and Sex Extinction* argued for societal intervention in the lives of female sexual inverts.<sup>248</sup> Kenealy explained the masculinization of women was detrimental to society because: “in addition to extinguishing the most beautiful and inspiring order of human qualities, this masculinising of women is burdening the Race and deteriorating type by producing an ever-increasing number of neurotic, emasculate men and boys.”<sup>249</sup> Kenealy went on to suggest these emasculated men then forced their wives to work to support the family.<sup>250</sup> For a society which prioritized gender roles and believed in protecting women, this idea would have insulted genteel mores. Kenealy’s argument supported the idea that female sexual inverts and masculine women both needed to be destroyed—for the sake of the future.

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<sup>247</sup> UK Parliament, *Hansard: House of Commons*, August 4, 1921, cols. 1802-1803).

<sup>248</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, (London: Quartet Books, 1991), 106.

<sup>249</sup> Arabella Kenealy, *Feminism and Sex Extinction*, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, Ltd., 1920), 177.

<sup>250</sup> Kenealy writes, “Marcel Prévost has said that when men find women competing with them in fields of Labour, to degrees injurious to masculine interests, they will turn and strike them in the face. There are indications to the contrary, however. Among decadent races and savages, the emasculate sons of deteriorate mothers assert their masculine authority otherwise. Far from combating their women’s right to work, they force them to work—and to work in support of the males!” (*Feminism and Sex Extinction*, 225).

By August 9, 1921, the House of Lords received news the House of Commons had agreed to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, with amendments.<sup>251</sup> While the first three amendments were easily agreed upon, the fourth led to discussion within the House of Lords.

This amendment read:

*Acts of indecency by females:* Any act of gross indecency between female persons shall be a misdemeanour, and punishable in the same manner as any such act committed by male persons under section eleven of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885.<sup>252</sup>

The first MP to comment on the amendment was James Harris, Earl of Malmesbury, who sat on the Joint Committee that helped draft the Criminal Law Amendment Bill of 1920. According to Malmesbury, “there was only a very brief reference to this disgusting subject throughout the whole of [the Joint Committee’s] proceedings.”<sup>253</sup> Instead, the amendment was created “not by a Committee of great lawyers or experts called to consider this matter, but at the instance of private members of the House of Commons.”<sup>254</sup> After suggesting this topic be introduced as its own law at the next session of Parliament, Malmesbury explains his own thoughts on acts of indecency by females:

Let me point out to your Lordships that in passing a clause of this sort you are going to do a great deal more harm than good. You are going enormously to increase the chance of blackmail without in the slightest degree decreasing the amount of this vice. I think your Lordships will bear me out when I say—and it requires some moral courage to discuss a subject of this sort—that the domestic habits of men and of women are entirely different. Women are by nature much more gregarious.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> “Criminal Law Amendment Bill,” *Hansard: House of Lords*, Debate, (43, c352, August 9, 1921) <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1921/aug/09/criminal-law-amendment-bill-hl>

<sup>252</sup> “Commons Amendment,” *Hansard: House of Lords*, Debate, (43, cc567-77, August 15, 1921) <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1921/aug/15/commons-amendment-2>

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*



Malmesbury suggested indecent acts between women would be harder to disprove because cisheteronormative women were more likely to engage in liminal behavior, such as sharing a bed. Recognizing many women would be accused of lesbianism without substantial evidence, and most likely aware of the disastrous impact Pemberton Billing's accusations had on Britain less than three years prior, Malmesbury questioned the foresight in creating such a law.

Malmesbury explained, "We all know that vice has been increasing partly owing to the nervous conditions following on the war, but I believe that these cases are best left to their own determination."<sup>256</sup> These "nervous conditions" could have included the masculinization of women's clothing after the war, the newfound independence of many single middle-class women, or the fears associated with the 1921 census and the "Surplus 2 Million," a label given to the 1,750,000 "surplus" single women counted by the 1921 Census that British society believed were doomed to spinsterhood because of the British soldiers who died during World War I.<sup>257</sup>

Despite these conditions, Malmesbury believed "all these unfortunate specimens of humanity exterminate themselves by the usual process, which we know has taken place in every nation through all the ages. The more you advertise vice by prohibiting it the more you will increase it."<sup>258</sup> Malmesbury's worldview is one in which female sexual inverts do not marry men, or procreate, before or after engaging in romantic or sexual relationships with other women. Documented cases including Una Troubridge (a wife and mother), Virginia Woolf (a wife), and Vita Sackville-West (a wife and mother) show this interpretation did not align with reality. Female sexual inverts existed, and they were marrying men and procreating as well.

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> For more on the Surplus Two Million, see Virginia Nicholson, *Singled Out: How Two Million Survived without Men after the First World War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>258</sup> "Commons Amendment," *Hansard: House of Lords*, August 15, 1921.

Following Malmesbury's motion to dismiss the amendment, Hamilton Cuffe, 5th Earl of Desart, seconded the motion. Desart was appalled that acts of indecency between women were even being discussed. He said: "I much regret that such a question has even been discussed. I may perhaps draw cold comfort from the realization that there are not many people who read the debates of either House. I am strongly of opinion that the mere discussion of subjects of this sort tends, in the minds of unbalanced people, of whom there are many, to create the idea of an offence of which the enormous majority of them have never even heard."<sup>259</sup> Parliament had avoided discussions of female sexual deviancy for so long, that the introduction of the topic alone seemed dangerous. By naming the danger, Members of Parliament were effectively admitting it existed and posed a threat to society.

Maud Allan and Radclyffe Hall were both forced to confront the concept of extortion during their trials. In Allan's trial, extortion took the form of Pemberton Billings' conspiracy theory that the Central Powers had a list of over 47,000 English people who were sexual inverters and could be manipulated by threatening to unveil their secret, taboo desires. Hall's brush with blackmail was more personal, as Fox-Pittman believed Hall's homosexuality could be used to blackmail Hall into rescinding her application to join the Society for Psychical Research. Although neither of these extortion attempts panned out, Desart believed this tactic would continue if women-loving women were recognized by the British government through an official prohibition on female homosexuality. According to Desart, "I believe that blackmail would not only be certain, but that it would inevitably be successful." After listening to these protests, the Lord Chancellor, Mr. F.E. Smith, First Earl of Birkenhead, argued most women did not even know homosexuality existed. Birkenhead claimed "the overwhelming majority of the women of

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<sup>259</sup> "Commons Amendment," *Hansard, House of Lords*, August 15, 1921.

this country have never heard of this thing at all. If you except a sophisticated society in a sophisticated city, I would be bold enough to say that of every thousand women, taken as a whole, 999 have never even heard a whisper of these practices.”<sup>260</sup> Among the innocent women who shared beds in small homes throughout the countryside, completely innocent and ignorant of homosexuality, Birkenhead was afraid government recognition of female homosexuality would lead to “the taint of this noxious and horrible suspicion...to be imparted by the Legislature itself, without one scintilla of evidence that there is any widespread practice of this kind of vice.”<sup>261</sup>

Birkenhead agreed with Desart: by recognizing homosexuality the legislature was giving credence and amplification to a vice that Parliament believed most of the population had probably never heard of. The session ended with the Bishop of London rescinding his motion to pass the amendment, and agreeing with the protests lodged by Malmesbury, Desart, and Birkenhead. The House of Lords chose to continue to avoid the topic of “acts of gross indecency between women,” in hopes that by avoiding the danger they could reduce its existence in society. Parliament allowed the bill to languish after it was returned to the House of Commons. It was reintroduced in July 1922, without the anti-lesbian addendum, and passed with an amendment allowing “reasonable cause” for men under the age of 23 who had sex with women under 21 years of age. Although no law was passed prohibiting sexual acts between women, the danger of lesbianism was still proscribed through the language permanently logged within Parliamentary record in which these acts were considered “polluting,” “disgusting,” and “harmful.”<sup>262</sup> The British government viewed female sexual inversion as a danger and chose to avoid it as much as possible in the early 1920s.

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

At the same time silence placed limits on the “proper” way for British women to fall in love, World War I also introduced new freedoms for women in the United Kingdom. These women were able to serve as nurses near the Front, take part in the Irish Rebellion, and perform duties relegated to men for hundreds of years. As women became more empowered and more accepted in the public sphere, the subject of women’s homosexuality became increasingly difficult for the British government to simultaneously police and avoid. While men’s homosexuality had been openly prosecuted for centuries, women’s homosexuality went unacknowledged. By keeping discussions out of public discourse, women-loving women were able to exist without prosecution but also without recognition. Was Queen Elizabeth I attracted to women? What about Queen Anne? The first major film production to recognize King Richard I’s homosexuality was *The Lion in Winter* (1968), whereas Queen Anne’s sexual orientation did not make it to the big screen until *The Favorite*, fifty years later. As World War I came to an end, women coming home began to question and confront this silence, leading to new oppression but, simultaneously, new recognition and role models, as well.

*The Well of Loneliness* justifies the new rights afforded British women after World War I through women’s contributions to the War Effort. The protagonist, Stephen Gordon, and her lover, Mary Llewellyn, both serve as ambulance drivers at the Front throughout the War, and the novel also depicts other women serving as nurses. During World War I, over 100,000 British women volunteered for non-combatant positions under the auspices of Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service and in Voluntary Aid Detachments. At home, an additional 27,000 women joined the Women’s Land Army, taking over jobs men had to vacate to serve as

soldiers.<sup>263</sup> Across the United Kingdom, women drove omnibuses, worked in factories, and learned skills previously denied them by the basis of gender. Having taken on and succeeded at men's work throughout the War, women believed they had earned men's rights and responsibilities in peacetime. For Hall's women-loving women protagonists, both of *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself* (1926) and *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), serving in World War I justified their right to existence.

The end of World War I meant the beginning of women's suffrage in both the United Kingdom and the United States. The 1918 Representation of the People Act and the 1928 Equal Franchise Act meant that within a decade of returning home, almost every British woman who served in World War I was able to vote, alongside her daughters, sisters, and mothers. That same year, Irish independence activist Constance Markievicz was elected to the United Kingdom Parliament as a representative of the Sinn Féin Party, the Irish independence party. Markievicz, a resolute revolutionary who was imprisoned at the time for her contributions to the Easter Rising of 1916, protested English control of Ireland by refusing to take her seat in Parliament. A year later, Lady Nancy Astor became the first woman to serve as a Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom. Although the title of "First Female MP" continues to be a point of contention in British history today, by 1919 this was a gender barrier that had finally been broken down—seven hundred years after the beginning of representative government in England.<sup>264</sup> Women, at least the privileged, finally had a seat, if only one, at the table.

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<sup>263</sup> "Nursing During the First World War," *British Red Cross*, Accessed December 1, 2020, [https://vad.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/Who%20we%20are/History%20and%20archives/Nursing%20uring%20the%20First%20World%20War.pdf](https://vad.redcross.org.uk/~/media/BritishRedCross/Documents/Who%20we%20are/History%20and%20archives/Nursing%20uring%20the%20First%20World%20War.pdf); "History of Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps," *The Museum of Military Medicine*, Accessed December 1, 2020, <https://museumofmilitarymedicine.org.uk/about/corps-history/history-of-queen-alexandras-royal-army-nursing-corps/>; and Bonnie White, *The Women's Land Army in First World War Britain*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 8.

<sup>264</sup> Dated from the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215. For more about the historical debate of Constance Markievicz versus Lady Nancy Astor, see: UK Parliament, Twitter Post, 1 December 2020, 7:31 am, <https://twitter.com/UKParliament/status/1333750453713203200>. For transparency, it is important to note that Lady Nancy Astor was an antisemitic lawmaker who voted in support of Adolf Hitler in the lead up to World War II ("Nazi" sprayed on Nancy

Markiewicz and Astor were upper-class women who leveraged their privilege and their financial resources to support the causes they cared about: in Markiewicz's case, Irish independence and in Astor's case, women's liberation. Throughout Europe, women of independent means were able to assert new independence and enter the public sphere. Although most private social clubs in England did not permit women until the 1980s, women's salons became popular evening destinations throughout England and Continent Europe. One of the most famous of these locations was the home of Natalie Barney, at 20 Rue Jacob in Paris. Radclyffe Hall did not write *The Well of Loneliness* in a vacuum. This novel was heavily influenced by the Parisian salons she visited throughout the 1920s with her longtime partner Una Troubridge. In these salons, the most famous of which belonged to Natalie Barney, "John," as Radclyffe Hall was familiarly known, and Troubridge met with other sexual inverts; discussed their lives, writings, and politics, and began to formulate a community for sexual inverts that existed both because of and beyond the theories presented by sexologists and psychoanalysts of the time.

Each Friday, from May to early July, Barney would host a salon, in which between 100 and 150 people would be in attendance. Throughout the week, she would also often hold dinner parties for between 50 to 75 guests, or smaller parties for intimate friends. Among her intimate friends and lovers, Barney counted Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Dolly Wilde, Djuna Barnes, Romaine Brooks, and Renee Vivien.<sup>265</sup> Multiple writers of the 1920s fictionalized Barney's house at 20 Rue Jacob, most notably for this research, by Hall and Barnes in *The Well of Loneliness* and *Nightwood*, respectively. Together, Hall and Barnes helped to create "a shared

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Astor MP statue in Plymouth," *BBC News*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-devon-53161535>), while Constance Markiewicz went on to serve in the Dáil Éireann and became the Ireland's Minister of Labour, one of the first women to serve in a cabinet position on the European continent ("Constance Markiewicz," *Women's Museum of Ireland*, Accessed December 1, 2020, <https://womensmuseumofireland.ie/articles/constance-markiewicz>).

<sup>265</sup> Gloria Feman Orenstein and Berthe Cleyregue, "The Salon of Natalie Clifford Barney: An Interview with Berthe Cleyregue," (*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 4.3, 1979: 486-487, <https://doi.org/10.1086/493633>), 486.

physical Parisian context for women's writing...in which their shared geographies evolve into a coded language." This new language "is a mapping power act that overthrow[s] previously exclusive phallogentric literary geographics and that reclaims physical geographies for the expression of female activities."<sup>266</sup> Karen Michele Cadora reinforces Hall's fictionalization of her real life: "As the first lesbian middlebrow novel, *The Well* was a book without literary precedent. Part of the challenge Hall faced was figuring out how to represent the heretofore unrepresentable. Working without literary models, Hall drew heavily from non-literary sources."<sup>267</sup> Amy Wells-Lynn argues that one of these sources was Hall's time in Paris, upon which Hall and Barnes created "a female language for their female community context, because their stories address sexuality and sex between, by, among and for women in a recast women-centered sexual economy..."<sup>268</sup> *The Well of Loneliness* mapped the reality of Natalie Barney's Friday salons and weekday dinner parties onto the fiction of Valérie Seymour's salons and parties—both provided a sense of community for female sexual inverts of the upper-middle class who escaped to Paris to evade the straightlaced cisheteronormative societal pressures of Britain and the United States.

In *The Well of Loneliness*, Valérie Seymour offers safe harbor for the sexual inverts who lived in Paris. Hall's depiction of the first of Valérie's salons focuses on the camaraderie of the evening: "Everyone seemed to know everyone else, the atmosphere was familiar and easy. People hailed each other like intimate friends, and quite soon they were being charming to Stephen, and equally charming and kind to Mary."<sup>269</sup> Hall goes on to call Valérie "a kind of

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<sup>266</sup> Amy Wells-Lynn, "The Intertextual, Sexually-Coded Rue Jacob: A Geocritical Approach to Djuna Barnes, Natalie Barney, and Radclyffe Hall," (*South Central Review*, 22.3, 2005, 78-112, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40039995>), 79.

<sup>267</sup> Karen Michele Cadora, "The Limits of Lesbiana: Race and Class in Twentieth Century Lesbian Genre Fiction," (*Stanford University*, 1999, <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/4144494>), 68.

<sup>268</sup> Amy Wells-Lynn, "The Intertextual, Sexually-Coded Rue Jacob," 82-83.

<sup>269</sup> Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 349.

lighthouse in a storm-swept ocean”<sup>270</sup> who cared for the sexual inverts and inspired them to try and overcome the hardships of their sexual proclivities. Despite this sense of safety and community, and their friendship that blossoms in chapter 51, Stephen and Valérie view sexual inversion differently. While Stephen sees inversion as leading to injustice and insult, Valérie believes that inverts need to learn how to “cultivate more pride, should learn to be proud of their isolation.”<sup>271</sup>

Barney believed much more strongly in the choice of lesbianism than either Hall, Stephen, or even Valérie. According to Sally Cline, Barney’s reputation “was secured by her emancipated ideas and the defiance with which she lived them.” Barney was openly homosexual, did not believe in monogamy, and knew almost every influential person in Paris.<sup>272</sup> While Stephen represented the congenital invert who had masculine traits and could not help but love women, Valérie, as a reflection of Barney, represented the feminist lesbian who embraced femininity and chose her lovers. In Barney and Valérie, femininity reduced the danger of lesbianism, because these women were not demonstrably different in physical attributes from their cisheteronormative counterparts. While they were still dangerous as contradictions within the system, these women did not exist in the liminal space between “male” and “female.” Natalie Barney was never a “Third Sex,” she was simply a woman who loved other women.

Femininity separated Hall and Barney. While Barney’s longtime—and perhaps greatest—lover, Romaine Brooks was “rather masculine,”<sup>273</sup> Barney herself seemed to disavow the idea

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>271</sup> Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 406.

<sup>272</sup> Cline, *Radclyffe Hall*, 194.

<sup>273</sup> Feman Orenstein and Cleyrergue, “The Salon of Natalie Clifford Barney,” 493. Cleyrergue recalled: “Ah, Romaine...we didn't tell her right away. We only told her about Romaine three months later. But all the same for days and days she would ask me, 'Berthe, why did my little Romaine die? Why? You know very well she's the only one I loved. She's the only one who counted for me. Why didn't she want to see me again?' Romaine stayed away for twenty-one months without seeing Miss Barney...Certainly if Gisele hadn't come along they would have spent the rest of their lives together.” (Feman Orenstein and Cleyrergue, p. 493) Brooks and Barney were together for 70 years.



that one must be masculine or misogynist to be a true invert.<sup>274</sup> Conversely, Hall seemed to develop a sense of masculine chauvinism, as evidenced by her interactions with Blanche Knopf. According to Edward de Grazia, “John liked Blanche Knopf personally, but found her business methods ‘unusual and tortuous’ owing ‘to the fact that she is a woman.’”<sup>275</sup> In a letter from Hall to Carl Brandt dated June 21, 1928, Hall writes: “I find it both difficult and tedious to deal with a woman...” and “in many cases it is better for women to keep out of business negotiations.”<sup>276</sup> Hall, who considered herself a member of the Third Sex, is blatantly misogynist in this letter, revealing internalized patriarchal assumptions about women. Barney most likely did not share these assumptions nor this misogyny, and *The Well of Loneliness* would have been a much different book had Barney written it, or had Valérie been its protagonist.

Although Barney may have been the most influential women-loving woman in interwar Paris, Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West were interwar England’s queer power couple. Both married to men, who seemed to have been supportive of the women’s relationship, these two women had a friendship that spanned two decades and turned into a physical romantic relationship at least between the years of 1925 and 1928. Although they discussed queer themes in their books and their relationship was well-known within the Bloomsbury Group’s inner circle, Woolf and Sackville-West also practiced reduction as a response to their sexual inversion by remaining married to their husbands and performing feminine gender identities in public. By reducing the intensity of the danger they presented to society, Woolf and Sackville-West were able to vacation together, write long love letters to one another, and Woolf was able to write

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<sup>274</sup> Feman Orenstein and Cleyrergue, “The Salon of Natalie Clifford Barney,” 495; Blanche Wiesen Cook, “‘Women Alone Stir My Imagination’: Lesbianism in the Cultural Tradition,” (*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 4.4, 1979, 718-739. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173368>), 734.

<sup>275</sup> Edward de Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius*, (New York: Constable, 1992), 175.

<sup>276</sup> Cline, *Radclyffe Hall*, 239.

*Orlando: A Biography*, which Sackville-West's son, Nigel Nicolson, called "the longest and most charming love letter in literature," written from Woolf to Sackville-West.<sup>277</sup>

However, *Orlando* was High Brow, modernist art, and any sexual deviancy was carefully shrouded in elegant prose unapproachable by the average reader. The Woolfs, along with other members of Bloomsbury, influenced literature and art throughout the Modernist Era, while the lesbian affair between Woolf and Sackville-West remained an open secret among the upper circles of British society. As with many other taboos of the time, homosexuality was acceptable for the upper classes, as long as it was hidden in polite society and kept out of the reach of the lower classes. Woolf pushed for feminism and *A Room of One's Own* for women in the interwar era, but neither she nor Sackville-West was willing to traverse *class* lines by printing middlebrow literature that addressed lesbian relationships. Radclyffe Hall chose to traverse class lines and offer a rendering of women-loving women life accessible to the literate masses, and it was this traversing of the class line which made *The Well of Loneliness* dangerous.

As it was Hall who wrote *The Well of Loneliness*, rather than the more feminine Barney, Woolf, or Sackville-West, the novel's protagonist, Stephen Gordon presented in a masculine fashion. The masculinization of women began towards the end of the Victorian Era, when middle class women of England and the United States began asserting independence. These "New Women" stood in opposition to the acceptable narrative arc of debutante, wife, and mother forced upon young women throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While the Victorian woman was self-sacrificing and dependent on her menfolk, the New Woman "pursues self-fulfillment and independence, often choosing to work for a living." The New Woman sought equality from her

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<sup>277</sup> Harry Blamires, *A Guide to Twentieth Century Literature in English*, (New York: Methuen, 1983), 307.

menfolk “seeking to eliminate the double standard that shaped the sexual mores of the time, and is in general much more frank about sexuality than the old woman.” As such, the New Woman often remained single her whole life, unable to find a man who could accommodate her demands. For the purposes of understanding the masculinization of women, it is important to note that the New Woman “is physically vigorous and energetic, preferring comfortable clothes to the restrictive garb usually worn by women of the era. She often has short hair, rides a bicycle, and smokes cigarettes—all considered quite daring for women at the turn of the century.”<sup>278</sup>

Before *Dead Lesbian Syndrome*, many fictional New Women faced their own deaths by the end of novels, “often by suicide, her unhappy end reflecting the fact that society was simply not yet ready to accommodate her new ways.”<sup>279</sup> The grown-up version of the American tomboy, New Women could not be role models in a society so focused on cisheteronormative marriage and children. While “normal” women characters were picking out wedding dresses in their twenties, New Women characters were being dressed in funeral shrouds. In reality, suicide rates among women under 25 in England and Wales remained relatively the same between 1911 and 1931, around 16-17 per million women, and then drops quickly in the mid-1930s, despite the global Great Depression. While unmarried young women characters were suicidal, their real-life equivalents seem more capable of living in cisheteronormative society.<sup>280</sup>

World War I greatly influenced England’s views on crossdressing in the early 20th century, as many English gentlewomen of the middle and upper classes were asked to wear masculine uniforms during the War. For four years, England asked its citizens to accept women wearing military jackets and breeches. “Whether the sight of uniformed women inspired

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<sup>278</sup> Gail Finney, *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism, and European Theater at the Turn of the Century*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989), 195-196.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>280</sup> Douglas Swinscow, "Some Suicide Statistics," *The British Medical Journal*, (1.4720, 1951, 1417-1423, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25375520>), 1417-1418.

begrudging acceptance or wholehearted support, one message became increasingly clear: Britons slow to accept the new sort of war girl were just old-fashioned.”<sup>281</sup> Fashion of the 1920s followed the masculinity of these wartime uniforms.<sup>282</sup> This begrudging acceptance during wartime opened the floodgates for women-loving women to wear suits, trousers, and masculine coats throughout the interwar era. Some women-loving women who presented as masculine-of-center during the interwar era include Gertrude Stein and Thelma Wood, two American ex-Patriots who were part of the European art scene and Barney’s saloons; Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, two European actresses who would make their way to Hollywood by the end of the 1920s; and Radclyffe Hall. As the “mannish lesbian” became more common throughout Europe at this time, Stephen Gordon came to serve as: “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.”<sup>283</sup> When the European Stephen traveled across the Atlantic and became a permanent figure in lesbian subcultures in the United States, she also took on the role of being a model *for* the “mannish lesbian” identity. Stephen’s actions, manners, and behavior were important in constructing the “butch” identity that continues today.

Masculine-of-center women-loving women acted as Stephen Gordon acted, both before and after the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*. Those who came before the novel provided the model *of* which Stephen was a symbol, while those who came after followed the model *for* which Stephen was a symbol. Mary Douglas believed ritual “comes first in formulating experience” and thus “modifies experience in so expressing it.”<sup>284</sup> As such, through acting as a lesbian would act and performing lesbian rituals, the actor is able to become a lesbian. Douglas

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<sup>281</sup> Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 66.

<sup>282</sup> See photos figures 2 & 3 in Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, pages 94-95.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 560-568.

<sup>284</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 65.

believed that every person has a conscious understanding of the social structures in which they act, and as such every decision a person seems “to dramatise the way we want to present our roles.”<sup>285</sup> For Hall, this dramatization existed both in her novels and in her daily life. Doan argues that Radclyffe Hall’s popularity throughout the trials of *The Well of Loneliness* cemented Hall’s own position as a symbol for lesbian identity, complimentary to the fictional Stephen Gordon. “After 1928 Hall’s fashioning of chic modernity, published in press reports everywhere, her daring in troubling the conventions of gender, and her powerful literary representation of the female sexual invert would coalesce into a ‘brilliantly precise image,’ the classic iconic type of mannish lesbian.”<sup>286</sup> By placing masculinity in a woman, butch lesbians, New Women, and military women forced society to think about masculinity in the abstract in much the same way.

Hall was not the first to initiate the conversation about same-sex attraction and masculinity in women; *The Well of Loneliness* served more as a culminating document than a jumping-off point for a nationwide conversation. Between Maud Allan’s case in spring of 1918 and the 1928 censorship trials of *The Well of Loneliness*, discussed in the next chapter, the British government had effectively evaded and silenced discussions about lesbianism. Over these ten years, three well-publicized trials discussed this taboo subject, “gross indecency in women” had entered parliamentary records, love between women was a minor theme in Virginia Woolf’s 1925 novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and major theme in Radclyffe Hall’s 1926 short story “Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself,” and same-sex partnerships became an open secret within upper-middle class communities. Although English society did not come face-to-face with masculine women and sexual inversion for the *first* time in confronting *The Well of Loneliness*; the series of events

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>286</sup> Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, xxiii.

beginning with the 1918 suffrage act suggests that conservative members of the government were hoping it would be the last.

*Earlier Forays into Dead Lesbian Syndrome*

As mentioned, *The Well of Loneliness* was not Hall's first foray into lesbian fiction. Two years before publishing *The Well of Loneliness*, Hall wrote a short novella about a woman war veteran entitled *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself*.<sup>287</sup> Like Stephen, Miss Ogilvy has a masculine physical appearance and has taken over the accounts for her family after the death of her father.<sup>288</sup> Miss Ogilvy, like Stephen, served in World War I, and bemoans the loss of freedom that comes with the end of the War. Hall writes: "Poor Miss Ogilvy sitting so glumly in the train with her manly trench boots and her forge-cap! Poor all the Miss Ogilvies back from the war with their tunics, their trench boots, and their childish illusions! Wars come and wars go but the world does not change: it will always forget an indebtedness which it thinks it expedient not to remember."<sup>289</sup>

Unable to rectify the divide between who she was during the War and who she was forced to become in peacetime, Miss Ogilvy longs for the freedom of man. She travels to a remote island off the coast of Devon, hoping that a vacation from her cisheteronormative spinster sisters will help her find her self-worth. Instead, during her after-meal cigarette, Miss Ogilvy has a vision in which she is an early human inhabitant of the island—a caveman, and the strongest of

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<sup>287</sup> Authors Note in *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself*: "Although Miss Ogilvy is a very different person from Stephen Gordon, yet those who have read *The Well of Loneliness* will find in the earlier part of the story the nucleus of those sections of my novel which deal with Stephen Gordon's childhood and girlhood, and with the noble and selfless work done by hundreds of sexually inverted women during the Great War: 1914-1918." (Radclyffe Hall, *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself*, (Endeavour Media Ltd., London: 2019, Kindle Edition), Location 18.)

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 45-99.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 130.

her tribe, complete with a beautiful wife.<sup>290</sup> In this vision, Ogilvy takes care of her wife, explaining, “All you have need of, I make.”<sup>291</sup> Stephen’s inability to provide for Mary Llewellyn is a major point of contention for Stephen, so the inclusion of Ogilvy-as-provider shows another overlap between Ogilvy and Stephen. The novella ends with Miss Ogilvy found dead in a cave on the island, with the reader left to presume that, during her vision, she had left the safety of her rooms and traveled to the cave in a psychotic haze.

Although *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself* was published in 1934, after *The Well of Loneliness*, this novella was written in July 1926, two years before the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*. As such, Miss Ogilvy was the first woman-loving woman Hall sacrificed to Dead Lesbian Syndrome. Her ability to live out her dream of becoming a provider for a woman came at the price of her life. Furthermore, the fact that Miss Ogilvy became a man in her vision, instead of simply a provider, suggests that Ogilvy was more a trans character than a women-loving woman. Because of the prevalence of the Third Sex narrative throughout the 1920s, differentiating between transmen and masculine-of-center lesbians in historical analysis becomes difficult. Unlike the Gustave character of *The Strange Disappearance of Eugene Comstock*, who self-identifies as preferring to live as a man, Miss Ogilvy does not directly address her gender identity. Either way, as a sexual invert, Miss Ogilvy represented a threat upon society—she wanted to take a job, a wife, and a life from a man. Unwilling or unable to confront patriarchal society through a feminist lens, Hall’s conservatism compelled her to kill off Ogilvy, as she was a danger to the carefully controlled order of society. In Stephen Gordon, Hall found the will to let her masculine sexual invert live, although unhappily. In Miss Ogilvy, Hall was not quite able to save her protagonist’s life.

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., Location 287-273.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., Location 317.

In her unpublished short story, “The Career of Mark Anthony Brakes,” Hall utilizes a Black male character to explore the obstacles and consequences of sexual taboos—in this case, intermarriage. Hall wrote this story before World War I, sometime in the early 1910s. Although Brakes disavows his Blackness and looks down upon other members of his race throughout the short story, his inherent Blackness causes the story to end in tragedy. When insulted by his white fiancée, Brakes violently lashes out at her. Recognizing that “You were born black and black you have always remained. You have murdered your own ideal,” Brakes takes his pistol and walks into the night, “with the purpose, we are to presume, of committing suicide.”<sup>292</sup>

If we are to take Brakes’ interracial love as a metaphor for sexual inversion, then his implied suicide is Hall’s first narrative of Dead Lesbian Syndrome. Jean Walton argues that Hall saw Brakes as “the perfect ‘obstreperous’ Negro in this story, perfect in the sense that, having recognized the danger he poses to the white world, he is prepared to do away with himself with his own revolver.”<sup>293</sup> Walton goes on to claim that Hall was not particularly interested in the problems created by the Jim Crow South or the Southern Rape Complex. Rather, Hall saw Brakes as an opportunity “to explore the disastrous implications of a sexual proclivity that refuses to be repressed.”<sup>294</sup> Una Troubridge once summarized “The Career of Mark Anthony Brakes” by explaining that the theme of this story was “the sudden and disastrous breakdown of civilization and self-control in an educated negro under the stress of sexual emotion.” According to Cadora, “[Troubridge’s] reference to the ‘breakdown of civilization’ recalls the scientific discourse of degeneracy that grouped homosexuals with People of Color as barriers to the white

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<sup>292</sup> Jean Walton, “‘I Want to Cross Over into Camp Ground’: Race and Inversion in *The Well of Loneliness*,” (ed. Doan and Passer, *Palatable Poison*, 277-299), 290.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.



western mythology of progress.”<sup>295</sup> As explained in Chapter One, sexual inversion was often seen as a manifestation of congenital degeneration in the white women-loving women. Knowing this, a Black man, who the Progressive Era eugenicist society has already labeled degenerate as compared to a white man, worked as the perfect ‘stand in’ for a sexual invert.

To explain how Hall graphed her study of sexual inversion onto a narrative about a Black American male lawyer, Walton calls upon the work of Toni Morrison and Morrison’s definition of American Africanism.<sup>296</sup> According to Morrison, American Africanism is the “denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people.”<sup>297</sup> From this definition, Morrison concludes: “As a disabling virus within American literary discourse, Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American Education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability.”<sup>298</sup>

Through this lens, “The Career of Mark Anthony Brakes” is not a fictional biography about a Black male American lawyer who fell in love with his white client—rather, it is a metaphor for the love and necessary tragedy of sexual inversion, a prototype for *The Well of Loneliness*. According to Una Troubridge’s *The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall*, Hall submitted short story along with others to publishers in 1913—before World War I. After World War I, and the birth of a visible women-loving women subculture throughout Europe in the interwar era, Hall found herself ready to write a novel of sexual inversion, and so “she would no longer need

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<sup>295</sup> Cadora, *The Limits of Lesbiana: Race and Class in Twentieth Century Lesbian Genre Fiction*, 50.

<sup>296</sup> Walton, “I Want to Cross Over into Camp Ground,” 286.

<sup>297</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*, (New York: Picador, 1993), 6.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

to publish her short story, especially since African Americans were speaking for themselves,” due to the birth of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>299</sup>

Although Black Americans were speaking for themselves, Hall includes a scene in *The Well of Loneliness*, where two Black American performers sing about the plight of the oppressed. According to Walton, “An obvious point of identification is being established here between the plight of black people and that of the listening inverts.”<sup>300</sup> This point of identification is oppression based on “a congenital defect of the body (racial, sexual).”<sup>301</sup> However, this point of identification does not work to inspire a sense of brotherhood between sexual inverts and Black Americans. Rather, Walton sees Hall’s use of Black performers as “appropriation [that] is necessary because the inverts apparently do not yet have...an expressive vehicle, for proclaiming their oppression.”<sup>302</sup> The spirituals that portray oppression and abuse by the system do not inspire the sexual inverts in attendance to change their views about race. Rather, sexual inverts appropriate this music to articulate their own struggle, disregarding the struggle of Black Americans, who created the music.

Although *The Well of Loneliness* does not have any Women of Color in it, Cadora believes “The category of the white ethnic is key to understanding the articulation of race and sexuality in *The Well*.”<sup>303</sup> None of the main sexual inverts are English—Stephen is Irish, Mary Llewellyn is Welsh, Jamie and Barbara are Scottish, Angela and Valérie Seymour are American, and Wanda is Polish. While today such ethnic diversity is whitewashed as “white,” the different nationalities and implied different religions would have been viewed much more closely in the late 1920s, when eugenics was at its height. Hall, whose mother was American and whose father

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<sup>299</sup> Walton, “I Want to Cross Over into Camp Ground,” 291.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>303</sup> Cadora, “The Limits of Lesbiana: Race and Class in Twentieth Century Lesbian Genre Fiction,” 51.

could trace his lineage back to both Charles II and Shakespeare, made the decision to distance her sexual inverts from pure English stock, perhaps another concession to public opinion in England.<sup>304</sup> Having no fictional model upon which to base *The Well of Loneliness*, Hall relied heavily on turn-of-the-century scientific and pseudoscientific research on homosexuality, much of which linked sexology, eugenics, and race together so that anyone not cisheteronormative and white was seen as a detriment to white progress.

### *Class Distinctions and Distortions in The Well of Loneliness*

The lower classes were also commonly seen as detrimental to white progress, and Hall's interpretation of class difference makes this evident throughout *The Well of Loneliness*. In her introduction to *Fashioning Sapphism*, Doan suggests that Hall is a member of the "expanding middle class between the wars" which straddled modernity and conservatism. According to Doan, these women were "sometimes deeply, and disturbingly, conservative in nature," and "frequently hostile to the project of feminism..."<sup>305</sup> Doan sets Hall's conservatism in contrast with the American writers of her time—Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barney, and Willa Cather—and with lesbianism depicted in France. According to Doan: "In London, even during the obscenity trial, mothers could with perfect equanimity inculcate upon their daughters the myth that lesbianism was not English: 'that sort of thing can carry on in Paris but certainly not here.'"<sup>306</sup>

Rebecca O'Rourke suggests that Stephen Gordon's idolization of her parents' marriage and her father's conservatism greatly impacted her decision to martyr herself on behalf of all sexual inverts. "Heterosexuality is at the root of Stephen Gordon's moral code...It is this that

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<sup>304</sup> Cline, *Radclyffe Hall*, 12.

<sup>305</sup> Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, xix.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*

underpins Stephen's manipulation of Mary, forcing her away, not on grounds of what is right or wrong, but of what is proper, what the world will sanction..."<sup>307</sup> Although *The Well of Loneliness* is a tragedy about two women in love, Hall's conservatism seeps into the pages, constructing a sexual inversion that is polite, policed, and apologetic. As such, Stephen is not a true reflection of the sexual inverts with whom Hall spent most of her time, or whom she would have read about in American newspapers or French novels. "Stephen Gordon is the perfect hero. She is noble, accomplished, wealthy, self-sacrificing, honourable. She has only one flaw—that she is a woman. Women are never heroes."<sup>308</sup> Stephen's "one flaw" is written as such by her creator, and oftentimes her sexual inversion stands at ends with everything else about her. Stephen is not a lesbian heroine because she is a lesbian, but rather despite her lesbianism. While Valérie strongly supports sexual inverts being proud of their sexual differences, Stephen is prepared to sacrifice her own happiness due to her humility in what she can provide Mary Llewellyn and her shame in not being able to provide social power or children as a man could.<sup>309</sup> Stephen Gordon is palatable because she is policed, acceptable because she is apologetic, and respectable because she is rich.

Mary Llewellyn, on the other hand, was none these things. Mary did not have any physical markers to denote her homosexuality. Upon realizing the cisheteronormative mainstream society would never accept her, "[Mary] seemed fanatically eager to proclaim her allegiance to Pat's miserable army. Deprived of the social intercourse which to her would have been both natural and welcome, she now strove to stand up to a hostile world by proving that she could get on without it."<sup>310</sup> A working-class Welsh woman with few family connections, Mary's relationship with Stephen was her way of moving up the social ladder. However, "Like many

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<sup>307</sup> Rebecca O'Rourke. *Reflecting on the Well of Loneliness*, (New York: Routledge, 1989), 6.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-56; Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, Book 5.

<sup>310</sup> Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 378.

other bourgeois writers, Hall romanticized cross-class romance, but she could not ultimately find it in herself to give [Angela or] Mary the class mobility associated with marriage.”<sup>311</sup> Without the ability to marry Mary or provide Mary with a child, Stephen declares to Valérie, “I can’t give her protection or happiness...”<sup>312</sup> In this way, Stephen loses to a man in much the same way scores of lesbian characters to follow lose—unable to provide a marriage or family for their partner, these women are forced to acquiesce to loneliness so their beloved can find fulfillment with a man. This is the central point of contention in *The Well of Loneliness*—to love one another, two women must sacrifice their place in the world; in order to secure a place in this world, sexual inverts must sacrifice their love.

For Stephen, there is much to sacrifice if she chooses to love Mary and give up her place in the world. Independently wealthy, Stephen leaves her beloved Morton because her mother cannot stand the sight of her inverted child. She also recognizes that her love for women would force her from the life her upbringing would have “naturally” concluded—a marriage to an *upper-class* man and children. According to Cadora:

Tracing the roots of love, Stephen finds that they all lead back to Morton, her beloved and palatial ancestral home with all the trappings of money, education, and leisure. Stephen tries to reconcile this instinctive knowledge with her first stirring of love for the housemaid she fails, not because Collins is a woman, but because she is a *working* woman. [emphasis added]<sup>313</sup>

While the examples of real-life lesbians discussed in this chapter all show intraclass relationships, Stephen Gordon’s love is primarily interclassed, with the focus on Collins, a maid, and Mary, who hails from a poor Welsh farming family. This creates a fictional obstacle that few of the women discussed in this chapter faced in real life. Hall and Troubridge, Woolf and

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<sup>311</sup> Cadora, “The Limits of Lesbiana,” 78.

<sup>312</sup> Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 433-434

<sup>313</sup> Cadora, “The Limits of Lesbiana,” 30.

Sackville-West, Barney and her many suitors, all of these real-life women were upper-middle class women who found partners within their own class. Even the less wealthy examples in this chapter, such as Djuna Barnes and Thelma Woods or Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, stayed within their own class. In the novel, if Mary stayed with Stephen instead of running to Martin's arms, she would have given up the socioeconomic security that comes with marriage. Although Mary seems prepared to make this sacrifice, ready to join the world of Parisian nightlife, Stephen is ashamed to let Mary take this course. Cadora believes that Stephen's distaste for the Parisian homosexual nightlife is rooted in classist elitism. Society expected members of the upper-middle class, including Stephen, to stay in their homes or venture out to dinner parties in equally lavish private abodes. Public socialization in bars and nightclubs was reserved for the working class.<sup>314</sup>

Born and raised by working-class relatives, Mary seems at ease in both the Parisian bars and Valérie's salons, but Stephen only accepts the salons as hospitable for her woman, and then she bemoans how even the private parties have drowned in alcoholism used by sexual inverts to escape the injustices of society.<sup>315</sup> In this way, Stephen concludes that she must force Mary to marry Martin. "By pushing Mary and Martin together, Stephen gets Mary out of the degrading working-class public social life and into the refined privacy of a middle-class home. The torment of breaking both of their hearts is made bearable by the conviction that she is 'saving' Mary."<sup>316</sup>

Mary's position as a working-class woman with few family connections was likely a conscious decision on Hall's part. According to Cadora, although sexologists perpetuated the idea that homosexuality was connected to class, this idea came from within culture—not science. During the interwar era, "Everyone who did not participate in the great white middle class

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>315</sup> Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, Chapter 51.

<sup>316</sup> Cadora, "The Limits of Lesbiana," 40.

narrative of progress was labeled ‘degenerate’—genetic throwbacks whose very existence threatened civilization...In this system of beliefs, lesbianism, widely labeled as a degenerate practice, ‘logically’ originates from the working class.”<sup>317</sup> With both Mary and Stephen, Hall tried to place white lesbians within a society that viewed the two as in opposition to one another—making it impossible for either Stephen (who is masculine and therefore physically Other) or Mary (a member of the working class) to achieve “the bland invisibility and privileged neutrality of the ‘just-white.’”<sup>318</sup>

Cadora’s research shows how Hall used class as a tool to make Mary Llewellyn an acceptable sexual invert because she was not a part of the “great white *middle class* narrative of progress.” W.R. Gordon’s 1928 review of *The Well of Loneliness* for the *Daily News and Westminster Gazette* shows how class allowed Stephen Gordon enough freedom and security as to render her trials and tribulations as an invert histrionic and inconsequential. W.R. Gordon explains that even with all of Hall’s experience as an invert and talent as a writer, she “cannot provide her heroine with any serious grievances against society. There is no trace of prosecution. She collected her dividends regularly. She lived as she pleased.” W.R. Gordon argues that “loneliness is the human lot,” and Stephen’s tragedy is a falsification of reality, turning “a woman in the grip of a vice” into a martyr.<sup>319</sup> W.R. Gordon’s review rhetorically asks its readers, what, exactly, does the wealthy sexual invert have to complain about? The answer, according to W.R. Gordon, is nothing.

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>319</sup> W.R. Gordon, “*Daily News and Westminster Gazette*, August 23, 1928” in Doan and Prosser, *Palatable Poison*, 66.

The 1920s was the decade of DH Lawrence, Sinclair Lewis, and F. Scott Fitzgerald; narratives focused on the financially secure were in vogue. Hall's mistake lies not in writing *about* the middle class, but in making her novel accessible *to* the middle class. Gillian Whitlock argues, "It was the appearance of this subject in a middle-brow novel in particular which was deemed 'obscene,' for this type of popular fiction could achieve the circulation and 'identification'" needed for a literary work to have power in society.<sup>320</sup> Unlike highbrow novels that included women-loving women, like *Ladies Almanack*, *Extraordinary Women*, and *Orlando*, Hall's novel sought to translate the scientific ideas of sexologists into discourse accessible to the general public. Cadora explains that Hall's goal was "to teach tolerance by translating medical knowledge for the public."<sup>321</sup>

Although Hall may have used *The Well of Loneliness* to introduce sexology conversations into middle-class households, her publisher, Jonathan Cape went to great pains to keep the book from too wide of a circulation. The book was published in a black binding and at a high price in hopes that the ideas within would be kept to a limited and appropriate circle of people.<sup>322</sup> In his response to Douglas' scathing review, Cape wrote, "The result... [of this] article can only be to nullify our most careful attempts to see that this book reaches the right class of reader. A wide and unnecessary advertisement have been given to this book, and all the curious will now want to read it...The smut hounds will be anxious to read it so that they may lift up their hands in indignation that such things can be allowed."<sup>323</sup> Originally published and circulated within circles frequented by Bloomsbury, Barney, and people of similar standing and tastes, *The Well of*

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<sup>320</sup> Gillian Whitlock, "'Everything Is out of Place': Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Literary Tradition." *Feminist Studies* (13.3, 1987: 554-582, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177881>), 559.

<sup>321</sup> Cadora, "The Limits of Lesbiana," 68

<sup>322</sup> Huw F. Clayton, "'A Frisky, Tiresome Colt?' Sir William Joynson-Hicks, the Home Office and the 'Roaring Twenties,' 1924-1929," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 2008), 121.

<sup>323</sup> Jonathan Cape, Letter to the Editor in the Daily Express, 20- August 1928. Quoted in Clayton, "A Frisky, Tiresome Colt?" 121-122



*Loneliness* was soon available in Harrod's Department Stores, and prospective readers were placed on waitlists at libraries.<sup>324</sup> Through *The Well of Loneliness*, Radclyffe Hall—an independently wealthy sexual invert who owned homes in England and France throughout the 1920s—wrote a book that served as a model *of* and a model *for* middle class and working class lesbians throughout the English speaker world; a group of people with whom the Conservative, upper-middle class Hall had very little in common.

### *Conclusion*

As much as Hall did not have a blueprint of lesbian fiction upon which to draw her novel, she did use her own life and the lives of sexual inverts she knew as models for the people, events, and conversations that constructed lesbian identity and subculture within *The Well of Loneliness*. Like many of the other 1920s novels that continue to find an audience today, Hall's work reflected the world in which she lived. Since its publication, the novel has been dangerously decontextualized by the timelessness of print. In this decontextualized state, *The Well of Loneliness* appears to have dictated the masculine dress, alcoholism, and serial monogamy rampant in lesbian communities to this day. In actuality, *The Well of Loneliness* reflected all of these elements that were already a part of the nascent lesbian subcultures of the United Kingdom and France by the late 1920s. Hall's novel was, in reality, a child of the zeitgeist: it perpetuated the conservatism of upper-class white sexual inverts, it continued conversations taking place in the press and in Parliament about sexual inversion, and it agreed with a society that believed "the only good lesbian is a dead lesbian."<sup>325</sup> Stephen Gordon's

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<sup>324</sup> Whitlock, "'Everything is Out of Place,'" 559.

<sup>325</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, (New York: Columbia Press, 2012, Kindle Edition), Note 20, Kindle Location 6955.

survival to the end of the novel was, in fact, the novel's only clear act of defiance. Stephen may be lonely and feel like she has just died, but this masculine sexual invert was able to live, which is more than could be said about Rosa/Gustave, Phæbe Dole, or even Alice Mitchell.

Hall wrote *The Well of Loneliness* while living in a society that allowed petty libel suits to seriously injure women's reputations without any proof of deviant behavior. This same society simultaneously refused to have any conversations about lesbianism and worked adamantly to keep knowledge of such deviancy away from the masses. Much of the political tensions of the immediate Post-World War I Era were rooted in the tug-o-war between women's newfound freedom through suffrage, expanded employment opportunities, and Progressivist philosophy, compounded by the societal expectation that women would return to their "proper place" as the men returned from war. The trials of Pemberton Billings and Fox-Pittman illustrate the dangers of being a women-loving woman, while the censorship of *Despised and Rejected* and the parliamentary discussions in this chapter show the lengths to which the British government would go to silence and sidestep the topic of lesbianism. Hall was not only asking society to accept women-loving women, but she was also opening a can of worms that her government had been actively trying to seal shut for a decade. To write a middlebrow novel that made lesbianism accessible to the masses in this cultural zeitgeist meant the walk a fine line between begging for acceptance and creating a case for the criminalization of lesbian acts.

Although Hall knew the risk she took in writing *The Well of Loneliness*, it would have been difficult to imagine that her novel would reach worldwide fame in the following years, or that it would serve as a keystone of lesbian subcultures throughout the anglophone world. This chapter illustrates the inherent flaws within Hall's magnum opus, specifically her conservative, cisheteronormative design to have lesbianism lead to tragedy. In writing *The Well of Loneliness*,

Hall was giving voice to “the love that dares not speak its name,” but she kept that voice palatable to society, in hopes it would be heard. Hall’s work utilized “self-pitying pathos on the verge of bathos” to elicit sympathy from an inhospitable cisheteronormative society, and in the process made numerous concessions to the demands of that society—none of the women-loving women get a happy ending, race and class delineations are kept status quo, and sexual inversion was portrayed as congenital, rooted in a masculinization of women both physically and mentally, and inevitably ending in tragedy.

*The Well of Loneliness* began as a reflection of lesbian subculture as Hall understood it to exist in her experiences. It was also a reflection of the sexology theories that Hall believed would help cisheteronormative society see sexual inverts as creatures to be pitied and accepted by society—not criminals to face punishment or deviants to be ostracized. Although much of the novel reflects Hall’s lived experiences, the tragic endings faced by many of the women-loving women characters stem from the commonly held belief among sexologists that sexual inversion was congenital and degenerative. Thus, Hall reinforced the faulty claims of pseudoscience, rather than offer up her own evidence—the realities of her love for Una, Natalie Barney’s love for women, or Virginia Woolf’s love for Vita Sackville-West—that proved women-loving women can be happy.

While lesbian fiction in subsequent decades did not often have the same agenda as *The Well of Loneliness*, as publishers were much more likely to market lesbian novels as pornography than as a plea for understanding, it did often follow Hall’s formula. Lesbian fiction was often an interclass tragedy in which the more masculine partner was a congenital lesbian with physical and mental masculinization and the more feminine partner was able to ‘return’ to men in the end. *The Well of Loneliness* was very much a reflection of its time, but its subsequent

fame, longevity, and canonical status as the first well-known anglophone lesbian novel decontextualized this work from the larger political and societal influences that dictated the terms of Dead Lesbian Syndrome. In Chapter Three, this research argues that the publicity, trials, and longevity of *The Well of Loneliness* worked together to increase the novel's toxicity and create the pathogen of Dead Lesbian Syndrome, to be passed on to lesbian fiction of the following decades.

### Chapter Three The Necessity of Tragedy

#### *Introduction*

Britain banned *The Well of Loneliness* almost immediately after publication. The book then lost its obscenity trial, which resulted in a ban lasting until 1948, five years after Hall's death.<sup>326</sup> Through the notoriety of these well-publicized trials, *The Well of Loneliness* earned the title of being the first anglophone lesbian novel in the world, even though Chapters One and Two prove novels featuring women-loving women existed for at least three decades before *The Well of Loneliness* debuted.<sup>327</sup> Still, Hall and her novel faced persecution for pioneering this new genre of fiction, with much of the persecution resulting from the taboo subject with which *The Well of Loneliness* chose to contend. Although powers within cisheteronormative society sought to prevent the popularity of *The Well of Loneliness*, women-loving women subcultures made this work a cornerstone of their cultural identity. Publications such as *Vice-Versa* heralded *The Well of Loneliness* as "the best known, and the most beautifully and comprehensively written" lesbian novel written before 1948.<sup>328</sup> Considering the lackluster reviews *The Well of Loneliness* received across the board when it was published, this high praise was more likely rooted in the fact that Hall's book was one of very few options available for interwar era lesbian fiction and not because *The Well of Loneliness* was particularly well-written or because it offered positive role models for women-loving women.

According to the theories of Mary Douglas, Radclyffe Hall and *The Well of Loneliness* created ambiguity and polluted cisheteronormative society by using sexual inversion and gender

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<sup>326</sup> Leslie A. Taylor. "'I Made Up My Mind to Get It': The American Trial of the Well of Loneliness, New York City, 1928-1929." (*Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 10.2, 2001, 250-286), doi: 10.1353/sex2001.0042), 253.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>328</sup> Lisa Ben, "'Well of Loneliness': Review of Well of Loneliness, by Radclyffe Hall," *Vice-Versa*, (July 1947, 3-11, <http://www.queermusicheritage.us/viceversa2.html>), 3.

nonconformity as themes. The novel needed to be dealt with as society deals with all ambiguity: through reduction, destruction, avoidance, or proscription. Utilizing Douglas's ideas, we can apply these responses to the ways in which British and American society addressed *The Well of Loneliness*, lesbianism, and women's sexuality throughout the 20th century. This chapter begins with the published reviews of *The Well of Loneliness* that rolled in throughout the summer of 1928. It is the positivity of these reviews that caused Jonathan Cape, Hall's publisher, to submit *The Well of Loneliness* to the British Government for approval. Drawing from trial transcripts, this chapter explores British attitudes towards lesbianism during the interwar era, and the tools they used to reduce the existence of lesbianism within the novel, destroy the possibility of spreading information about lesbianism by banning the novel, avoid discussions of how World War I influenced the growth of women-loving women communities, and proscribe lesbianism as innately dangerous and unwelcomed in society.

After looking at British trials of *The Well of Loneliness*, this chapter follows the novel across the Atlantic Ocean, to analyze the American reception of the novel. This chapter explores the immediate context of censorship of women-loving women fiction in the United States, including censorship trials for *Mademoiselle du Maupin* in 1922 and *The Captive* in 1927. While *The Well of Loneliness* lost its trials in Britain, the novel was found not guilty of obscenity in the United States and was permitted to circulate across the country. This chapter analyzes the American response to *The Well of Loneliness*, while also exploring the lesbian society Stephen Gordon entered through libraries, drugstores, and word of mouth. The chapter ends with evaluation of the role *The Well of Loneliness* played in perpetuating Dead Lesbian Syndrome, homophobia, and biphobia across the United States. By understanding the reception of *The Well of Loneliness* in both Britain and the United States, we can better understand why the techniques

Hall used to describe and address women-loving women were repeated by future writers of women-loving women fiction in the following decade.

### *Public Response to The Well*

Early responses to *The Well of Loneliness* are recorded in the form of book reviews in British newspapers throughout the summer of 1928. Hall's publisher, Jonathan Cape, attempted to curate who would read and review the book, in hopes that reviewers would overlook, accept, or sympathetically treat the sensitive themes of the novel. A man in his late 40s, Cape had worked in publishing since adolescence and served in World War I as a member of the Army Ordnance Department.<sup>329</sup> He paid Hall a £500 advance for her groundbreaking novel about women in the War and sent review copies "only to the serious newspapers and weekly journals; *Sunday Express* was not on the list."<sup>330</sup> Hall was prepared for negative backlash, as evidenced by her decision one summer evening in the lead up to publication to have Troubridge read aloud sections of *De Profundis*, a long poem written by Oscar Wilde while he was in jail for his decision to openly discuss his own homosexuality three decades earlier.<sup>331</sup> Despite Hall's preparations for martyrdom, early reviews came back positive, with most of the critique focused on the author's stylistic choices—not her taboo subject matter.

The *Saturday Review* published L.P. Hartley's review of *The Well of Loneliness* the same day the book became available for purchase. Hartley concludes his review, "But inflated and sentimental and diffuse as it sometimes is, one cannot deny the earnestness and sincerity which animate [the novel]." He claims that Hall's appeal for toleration for sexual inverts, "is a powerful

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<sup>329</sup> Michael S. Howard, *Jonathan Cape, Publisher*, (London, Jonathan Cape, 1971), 21.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>331</sup> Cline, *Radclyffe Hall*, 239; Diane Souhami, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall*, (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 271.

one, and it is supported by passages of great force and beauty.”<sup>332</sup> The *Times Literary Review* does not offer a positive review, claiming *The Well of Loneliness*, “fails as a work of art,” but also does not condemn this book as obscene.<sup>333</sup> Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf’s husband, reviewed *The Well of Loneliness* for *Nation & Athenaeum*, a publication well-read in Bloomsbury circles, on August 4, 1928. According to Woolf, “this book is a failure,” not because of its subject matter, but because, “after the death of Sir Philip the novel becomes a catalogue, almost a ragbag.”<sup>334</sup> Woolf suggested that the best parts of the novel arrive before Stephen even realizes she is a women-loving woman. In their reviews, both Hartley and Woolf reduced the danger of *The Well of Loneliness* by reviewing the book as a whole, instead of focusing on the sexual inversion aspects. Although both men found the book lacking, their negative assessments had nothing to do with the topic and everything to do with Hall’s writing. This hurt Hall’s ego, as discussed later in this chapter, but did not condemn lesbianism as dangerous or push for the elimination or avoidance of this novel.

While the *Times Literary Review* and Leonard Woolf both judge *The Well of Loneliness* on its artistic merits, Ida Alexa Ross Wylie of the *Sunday Times* and Arnold Bennet of the *Evening Standard* judged Hall on her ability to address “the figure of the abnormal woman.”<sup>335</sup> Wylie’s review proves prophetic, as she opens her review with, “The age-old quarrel between those who insist that life as a whole is not a fit subject for nice-minded people to write or think

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<sup>332</sup> L.P. Hartley, “*Saturday Review*, July 28, 1928”, in Doan and Passer, *Palatable Poison*, 51.

<sup>333</sup> “The presence of this commentary, however, points to the criticism which, with all our admiration for much of the detail, we feel compelled to express—namely, that this long novel, sincere, courageous, high-minded, and often beautifully expressed as it is, fails as a work of art through divided purposes. It is meant as a these and a challenge as well as an artistic creation.” (*Times Literary Supplement*, August 2, 1928. Doan, *Palatable Poison*, p. 51)

<sup>334</sup> Woolf concludes: “These are small points, but they show unmistakably a failure of the emotional impetus. It is the same emotional failure which is noticeable in Miss Hall’s characters. Her characters are interesting, carefully constructed, and individualized. And yet, disconcertingly they hardly seem to be persons. They appear to be the creations of the intellect and for the reader they had no emotional content. The consequence is that one does not feel the emotions appropriate to their tragedy or comedy.” (Leonard Woolf, “*Nation & Athenaeum*, August 4, 1928,” in Doan and Passer, *Palatable Poison*, 53-54).

<sup>335</sup> I.A.R. Wylie, “*Sunday Times*, August 5, 1928” in Doan and Passer, *Palatable Poison*, 55.



about and those who believe that most of our troubles spring from our refusal to look ourselves honestly in the face is certain to explode afresh over Radclyffe Hall's new novel."<sup>336</sup> Wylie suggests that the latter group, those who believe that we must "look ourselves honestly in the face," will win the argument. Her evidence is rooted in her belief that psychoanalysis has made society willing to "deal more gently with abnormality, since it has made us uncertain as to what the norm really is..." and her belief that Hall's psychology is rooted in fact and she is "an artist and a fine poet," whose skill and devoted religiosity has rid her novel, "of any shadow of offense."<sup>337</sup> Despite Wylie's optimism, *The Well of Loneliness* faced real obstacles to convincing the world of the legitimacy of women-loving women.

Arnold Bennett, a respected writer and critic, admits that he would not have read *The Well of Loneliness* had it not been for Cape's decision to advertise the novel with the line, "With a commentary by Havelock Ellis." Although Bennett finds the novel to be "disfigured by loose writing and marred by loose construction," he believes it to be "honest, convincing, and extremely courageous."<sup>338</sup> He seems to agree with Wylie that the book would serve as a psychoanalytical battleground, but he does not agree that *The Well of Loneliness* will be victorious. He predicts, "Nature has no prejudices, but human nature is less broadminded, and human nature, with its deep instinct for the protection of society, can put up a powerful defense of its own limitations."<sup>339</sup> Both Wylie and Bennet suggest that the avoidance which British

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid. Wylie's decision to write a review for *The Well of Loneliness* was far from unbiased. Not only had she taken female partners openly in the past, but she was also one of Hall's close friends. Like Barney, Wylie was of the belief that "lesbianism might entail problems but could be a guilt-free choice." Wylie was also active in Women's Suffrage, a subject Hall rarely discussed or found interest in. She was five years older than Hall, whom she befriended at some point in the early 1920s. According to Sally Cline, theirs was "a long and supportive friendship which proved of great professional benefit to John." (Cline, *Radclyffe Hall*, 172-173) Wylie's review of *The Well of Loneliness* in the *Sunday Times* was just one manifestation of the ways she supported and tried to educate Hall throughout their friendship.

<sup>338</sup> Arnold Bennet, "Evening Standard, August 9, 1928" in Doan and Passer, *Palatable Poison*, 56.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

society employed in combatting lesbianism thus far was coming to an end, and *The Well of Loneliness* would force society to stop avoiding this “danger” and decided how to confront it.

Although Cape did not send a review copy to James Douglas at the *Sunday Express*, by August 12th, Douglas had read the book and prepared a review for the following Sunday. According to Sally Cline, one of the foremost biographers of Radclyffe Hall, “His article was a disgusting display of sensational journalism. It was tubthumping and sexually titillating, carrying biblical overtones not unlike passages from *The Well of Loneliness*. But where Hall’s intentions had been sincere and sensitive, Douglas’ motives were mercenary and malicious.”<sup>340</sup> Throughout his eleven-year tenure as editor of the *Sunday Express*, from 1920 to 1931, Douglas worked with the team at the *Sunday Express*’ parent-paper, *The Daily Express*, to counteract the progress made by suffragists since the War. “For years readers were bombarded with dire predictions about the damaging effects of granting suffrage to such irresponsible, independent, and masculinized women and were entertained with numerous articles on issues relating to women, such as female sexuality, womanhood, and motherhood.”<sup>341</sup> When confronted with the possibility of women’s empowerment—both cisheteronormative and otherwise—Douglas and *The Daily Express* fought to proscribe and eliminate any form of progress towards acceptance and equality.

Within this context, Douglas’ review was not a *vox populi* of the British middle class, but rather another weapon against women who came of age during World War I and found in this war a case for their independence. Compared to the reviews that preceded it, Douglas’ attack is incongruent with the otherwise unanimous belief of the British literati that Hall’s *The Well of*

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<sup>340</sup> Cline, *Radclyffe Hall*, 243.

<sup>341</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: Volume 3: The Challenge of War, 1914-1916*. (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 1971), 128; Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 3.

*Loneliness* did not deserve censorship and was not obscene. Why, then, did Douglas succeed in his mission to eradicate lesbianism from middlebrow British fiction for almost two decades? Douglas' argument was a call to action. He argues, "Perhaps it is a blessing in disguise or a curse in disguise that this novel forces upon our society a disagreeable task which it has hitherto shirked, the task of cleansing itself from the leprosy of these lepers, and making the air clean and wholesome once more."<sup>342</sup> He, like Wylie and Bennet, saw *The Well of Loneliness* as a turning point for British society to move from avoidance to confrontation. Having failed to properly legislate against lesbianism in 1920 or 1921, the British people—that is, the government—now had another chance to address lesbianism and eliminate the dangers lesbianism poses on society. Douglas writes, "The contagion cannot be escaped. It pervades our social life."<sup>343</sup> Douglas recognized lesbianism as a danger that must be eliminated, thus choosing this form of reaction to the danger of masculine women and women-loving women. Had he chosen instead reduction or avoidance, he could have maintained the status quo of lesbianism existing as "that nameless vice between women," instead of bringing the sexology of the educated elite into the homes of middle-class *Sunday Express* readers.<sup>344</sup>

Douglas claims, "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."<sup>345</sup> This was the section of his review which contemporaneous commentators and writers criticized, Doan referenced in the title of her 2001 anthology on *The Well of Loneliness*, and which was remembered for a century as *the* reaction to lesbianism in 1928—despite Douglas standing almost completely alone in his moral outrage. His review concludes, "Fiction of this type is an

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<sup>342</sup> James Douglas, "A Book That Must Be Suppressed," (*Sunday Express*, August 19, 1928) in Doan and Passer, *Palatable Poison*, 37.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>344</sup> Noel Pemberton Billing, MP, in his private newspaper *Vigilante*, 16 Feb 1918, p.2 (Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p. 31)

<sup>345</sup> James Douglas, "A Book That Must Be Suppressed," 38.

injury to good literature. It makes the profession of literature fall into disrepute.”<sup>346</sup> According to Michael S. Howard, Jonathan Cape’s only biographer, “Jonathan was so angered, by this last paragraph in particular, that he rose to the bait.” Without conferring with Hall, Cape went the following morning to send a copy of *The Well of Loneliness* to the Home Secretary, Sir William Joynson-Hicks. Howard concedes, “It was an ill-considered act, but its uncharacteristic haste says much for its sincerity.”<sup>347</sup> Within 48 hours, Joynson-Hicks sent Cape a response, in which he demanded that the book cease publication and threatened prosecution if Cape continued to publish. His response was influenced by Sir Chartres Biron, the Bow Street magistrate who had already read *The Well of Loneliness* and informed Joynson-Hicks that he believed the book should be banned. Cape immediately ceased publication, but by this time over 5,000 books were already in circulation throughout England.<sup>348</sup>

Sale of *The Well of Loneliness* was *de facto* banned throughout Great Britain within one month of the novel’s publication. This was primarily the decision of two men—editor James Douglas and Home Secretary Sir William Joynson-Hicks—with little input or support from anyone else in the entirety of England.<sup>349</sup> Together, Douglas, Joynson-Hicks, and magistrate Sir Henry Chartres Biron created a censorship trifecta which could easily ban any book that fell into Douglas’ trap—a trap of which most people managed to steer clear. It was only because Cape, incensed by Douglas’ editorial, submitted the novel to Joynson-Hicks for approval that the Home Secretary had any power to censor *The Well of Loneliness* at all.

Once given the power, however, Douglas, Joynson-Hicks, and Biron worked together to ensure that Dead Lesbian Syndrome became the tool by which many subsequent writers self-

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Howard, *Jonathan Cape*, 105.

<sup>348</sup> Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 21 and Howard, *Jonathan Cape*, 106.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 21.

censored their forays into women-loving women fiction. According to Douglas' editorial, his Christian religion lay at the root of his crusade against *The Well of Loneliness*. Douglas writes: "If Christianity does not destroy this doctrine, then this doctrine will destroy it, together with the civilization it has built on the ruins of paganism."<sup>350</sup> According to Doan, Douglas was "an exemplary 'champion of muscular Christianity,'" which came from late-Victorian imperialism and pushed young men to be both spiritually and physically competent. This theology was rooted in the idea "Good character was supposed to arise from a strong will, which was in turn a sign of a healthy mind."<sup>351</sup> Douglas utilizes this theology in his editorial when he writes, "These moral derelicts are not cursed from their birth. Their downfall is caused by their own act and their own will. They are damned because they choose to be damned, not because they are doomed from the beginning."<sup>352</sup> Although Cline and others have accused Douglas of partaking in sensational journalism with this editorial and his subsequent work against Hall, Doan suggests that his religious fervor was longstanding, and his moral crusade rooted in his *genuine* Christianity.<sup>353</sup> The same could probably be said for Joynson-Hicks.

In his portrait of Joynson-Hicks, Howard paints a picture parallel to Senator Joseph McCarthy of the 1950s. "Treasurer of the Zenana Bible Mission, fervent—and successful—opponent of the Revised Prayer Book, Sir William saw a Communist under every bed... 'Morality' was a word at which his ears pricked up instantly, and he so far took it on himself to act as custodian of the public good that on this occasion [*The Well of Loneliness*] he overlooked the proper processes of law."<sup>354</sup> Joynson-Hicks was supported by the Home Office in his belief that the State "could and should intervene in order to keep society 'clean' - of sex,

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<sup>350</sup> Douglas, "A Book that Must Be Suppressed," 38.

<sup>351</sup> Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 16 & 206.

<sup>352</sup> Douglas, "A Book that Must Be Suppressed," 38.

<sup>353</sup> Cline, *Radclyffe Hall*, 13.

<sup>354</sup> Howard, *Jonathan Cape*, 105.

drugs, drink and Communism.”<sup>355</sup> While Doan describes Joynson-Hicks as the leader of a fringe group of social purists, Huw F. Clayton considers Joynson-Hicks and his accomplice Chartres Biron to be products of their time.<sup>356</sup> Although they were, ultimately, responsible for the banning of *The Well of Loneliness*, Clayton argues that any other Secretary and judge in office under the Conservative government of the 1920s would have reacted similarly once Cape submitted the book for review and then smuggled copies of the banned book in from Paris. “Nobody sufficiently part of the Establishment to become a judge or a magistrate was likely to either be sympathetic or to risk their reputations on this subject.”<sup>357</sup>

Although Douglas (in the case of *The Well of Loneliness* specifically) and Joynson-Hicks (in the case of censorship in interwar England abstractly) receive the majority of the blame, Sir Henry Chartres Biron was the one who made the decision to ban *The Well of Loneliness* on account of obscenity. Little is written about Sir Chartres Biron, but Arnold Bennett’s diary notes Chartres Biron attended lunch with James Douglas *after* Douglas’ editorial was printed, suggesting they were at least friendly.<sup>358</sup> As the one who made the final judgment on *The Well of Loneliness*, Biron proved to be as “Establishment” as Joynson-Hicks and Douglas. He had a proper Establishment upbringing: his father was a barrister and police magistrate, and Chartres Biron received his education at Eton and Trinity College. He followed in his father’s footsteps and in 1920 became the Chief Magistrate of the Metropolitan Police Courts.<sup>359</sup> His office, Bow Street Magistrates’ Court, was also an Establishment tool for censorship of feminism and

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<sup>355</sup> Huw F. Clayton, “A Frisky, Tiresome Colt?,” 37.

<sup>356</sup> Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 21.

<sup>357</sup> Clayton, “A Frisky, Tiresome Colt?,” 135.

<sup>358</sup> “After [Douglas’] editorial appeared, Bennett recalled, ‘I went alone to lunch at the Garrick [Club] and saw James Douglas and Chartres Biron together in the lounge, so I set violently on Jimmy at once about his attack on Radcliffe [sic] Hall’s sapphic novel...Biron defended Jimmy with real heat: so I went on attacking. I told Jimmy to come in and lunch with me.’” [Newman Flower, ed., *The Journal of Arnold Bennett, 1921-1928* (London, Cassell, 1933), 217 quoted in Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 22] The language in this diary entry suggests that Bennett knew Douglas quite well and felt strongly about *The Well of Loneliness*. Bennett does not seem to have known Biron, but this suggests that Douglas and Biron knew each other socially.

<sup>359</sup> “Obituary Sir Chartres Biron,” *The Times*, (London, January 29, 1940, 9), 9.

homosexuality—Oscar Wilde stood trial and was found guilty there in 1895 and suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst stood trial there for her first arrest in 1908.<sup>360</sup> This was also the court house which banned *Despised and Rejected* and found Pemberton Billing not guilty of libel against Maud Allan, as discussed in Chapter Two. From an Establishment perspective, it was the ideal place for *The Well of Loneliness*—and the threat of lesbianism, which seemed to encompass *both* homosexuality and feminism—to be labeled dangerous and destroyed.

### *The British Trials of The Well of Loneliness*

*The Well of Loneliness* forced the British government to address the topic of gross indecency between women—a subject they had staunchly avoided since the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1922. Cape sent *The Well of Loneliness* to Pegasus Press in Paris, where the book was subsequently published and then shipped to the United Kingdom. On October 4, 1928, British customs officials seized 250 copies of *The Well of Loneliness* at the border. They released the books two weeks later, as the Home Secretary tried to determine the best way to legally prosecute the novel, its author, and its publisher. On October 19, 1928, Cape was arrested and charged with violating the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, which barred books that could corrupt minds vulnerable to immoral influences. This Act and its addenda throughout the 19th century allowed for the police to seize “any obscene books, papers, writings, prints, drawings, or other representations” and then “except such of them as he or they may consider necessary to be

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<sup>360</sup> “‘Oscar Wilde at Bow Street’: Newspaper Coverage of the Oscar Wilde Trial,” *The British Library*, 2014, Accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/oscar-wilde-at-bow-street-newspaper-coverage-of-the-oscar-wilde-trial>; Karina Weller, “Everything You Need to Know About Suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst,” *RightsInfo*, July 15, 2019, Accessed June 3, 2021, <https://rightsinfo.org/emmeline-pankhurst-suffragettes/>.

preserved as evidence in some further proceeding, to be destroyed at the time of the expiration of the time herein-after allowed for lodging an appeal...<sup>361</sup>

While the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 does not define the word “obscene,” the topic is discussed in the introduction to this Act as recorded in Parliamentary records as “Sale of Poisons and Poisonous Publications—Question.” Sir John Campbell, Chief Justice of the Queen’s Bench, introduced this Act because he saw the sale of obscene literature as a poison to society. The minutes record: “...from a trial which had taken place before him on Saturday, he had learned with horror and alarm that a sale of poison more deadly than prussic acid, strychnine [*sic*], or arsenic—the sale of obscene publications and indecent books—was openly going on.”<sup>362</sup> According to record, Lord Campbell was concerned to see that “[i]t was not alone indecent books of a high price, which was a sort of check.”<sup>363</sup> The price of obscene materials became an important defense for *The Well of Loneliness*, as the market is seen time and again to act as a censor, protecting young and working-class readers, those seen to be most susceptible to vice, from gaining access to “obscene” fiction.

Norman Birkett and Herbert Metcalfe, the lawyers defending *The Well of Loneliness*, believed that the themes presented in the novel were too ambiguous and polluting for the cisheteronormative society to digest, and so they tried to reduce the ambiguity by pretending sexual inversion did not exist within the pages of the book. Instead of arguing for the acceptance of sexual inversion, the main thesis of Hall’s work, Birkett and Metcalfe argued that there was no sexual inversion in the book, and that “the relations between women described in the book

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<sup>361</sup> Great Britain. *The Statutes: Second Revised Edition. Volume IX: From the Session of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth to the Session of Twentieth and Twenty-First Years of Queen Victoria AD 1852-1857*. (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1857, <https://books.google.com/books?id=x19ZAAAAYAAJ>), 1110-1111

<sup>362</sup> “Sale of Poisons and Poisonous Publications—Question,” *Hansard: House of Lords*, Debate, 145.cc102-4, May 11, 1857, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1857/may/11/sale-of-poisons-and-poisonous>

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*



represented a normal friendship.”<sup>364</sup> Thus, the pollutant (sexual inversion) was reduced to the acceptable (female friendship) and the perceived danger was diminished. This went against everything Hall wanted to achieve with her novel, and she berated her lawyers for their reduction of the romance between Stephen Gordon and Mary Llewellyn.<sup>365</sup> Even with this betrayal, Birkett and Metcalfe were unable to save *The Well of Loneliness* from being ruled obscene, showing that the British cisheteronormative government now ranked lesbianism to be too great a threat to be reduced or avoided. Although the lawyers representing Hall and Cape appealed the case, the appellate court ruled *The Well of Loneliness* to be ““a disgusting book . . . prejudicial to the morals of the community.””<sup>366</sup> Hall’s book would remain banned in England for the next twenty years.

A major reason Britain banned *The Well of Loneliness* was the novel’s suggestion World War I had a decisive influence on women and their sexual morals. In the same year that *The Well of Loneliness* was published, Compton Mackenzie released *Extraordinary Women*, which satirized the idea that women either at the Front or left behind could find happiness and fulfillment with another woman. Although the Home Office contemplated prosecuting *Extraordinary Women*, its satirical nature and mockery of both sexual inversion and promiscuity made this book less of a threat than *The Well of Loneliness*’s earnest account of sexual inversion. Hall’s failure to condemn sexual inversion was the deciding factor in whether *The Well of Loneliness* would be considered obscene, but her first misstep was presenting World War I as a catalyst for lesbian experimentation and the cultivation of lesbian subcultures.<sup>367</sup> Britain wanted

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<sup>364</sup> Cline, *Radclyffe Hall*, 260; Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian,” 573.

<sup>365</sup> Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian,” 573.

<sup>366</sup> Taylor, ““I Made Up My Mind to Get It,”” 253.

<sup>367</sup> Celia Marshik, ““History’s ‘Abrupt Revenges’: Censoring War’s Perversions in *The Well of Loneliness* and *Sleeveless Errand*,”” (*Journal of Modern Literature*, 26.2, 2003. 145-159, doi: 10.1353/jml.2004.0019), 148.

to forget the radicalism of World War I and return to pre-War domesticity. The idea that the War permanently impacted the women who served as nurses and ambulance drivers was a polluting concept which presented a danger to British society.

According to Celia Marshik's research into the legal discussions that took place in 1928, the government chose not to censor *Extraordinary Women* because the satirical tone Mackenzie used to judge lesbian love as infantile and unsustainable meant that readers would not feel safe emulating the characters and their vices. *Extraordinary Women*, like *The Well of Loneliness*, was a middlebrow novel that was mostly accessible to the middle classes. However, as *Extraordinary Women* proscribed lesbianism by showing how love between women was unsustainable long term, this novel was permitted to pass through censorship. "Because *Extraordinary Women* made nasty fun at the expense of lesbians, it was allowed to circulate."<sup>368</sup> As Mackenzie described it, homosexuality was a wartime pursuit that became unviable once World War I ended. Furthermore, Mackenzie posited homosexuality as an idea introduced to an Englishwoman, Rory, while she was spending time on a Greek island. Thus, in *Extraordinary Women*, sexual inversion is an external danger to the British woman, one which can be avoided by not interacting with non-British women. Rosalba, the European who Rory once loved, had her danger as a gender-nonconforming lesbian reduced to near-destruction by the end of the novel. Mackenzie wrote, "[Rory] did not know that Rosalba would cease to be a precursor and that her boyishness would presently be blurred by myriads of post-war girls affecting boyishness. And, most mercifully, of all, she did not know that within a year or two Rosalba would shingle that bronze hair and by doing so become in appearance *a perfectly ordinary young woman*."<sup>369</sup> (emphasis added). While Rosalba was reduced to a "perfectly ordinary young woman," Rory

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>369</sup> Compton Mackenzie, *Extraordinary Women*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 238.

ends the book with a strange longing for tea. For much of her life, Rory did not drink tea, preferring Amer Pichon. However, "...as she and Daffodil luxuriously sipped their tea together, she realized in what a world flavoured by Amer Pichon Rosalba had been making her live all these months."<sup>370</sup> As such, not only does Mackenzie introduce sexual inversion as a danger pressing on the external boundaries of British society, but he also implies that a British woman's innate Britishness, symbolized by the desire for tea, could overpower the threat of homosexuality.

Like *The Well of Loneliness*, *Extraordinary Women* was initially published at a high price, beginning at one guinea. Furthermore, *Extraordinary Women* includes large blocks of text written in Italian and French. According to Mackenzie, "I wrote *Extraordinary Women* to be read by cosmopolitan men and women, and I saw no reason to write down to an insular public." Although he wrote the book for learned people, the tone was never to be taken seriously. While his contemporaries—D.H. Lawrence and Radclyffe Hall among them—were "largely devoted to a kind of crusade for earnest obscenity," Mackenzie believed "laughter is the sovereign cure for inhibitions, repressions, complexes, and other problems created by a muddled sex-life."<sup>371</sup> By turning homosexuality among women into a laughing matter and ending the novel with all women-loving women returning to status quo, Mackenzie reduced the threat of lesbianism and the impact of World War I on women. *Extraordinary Women* tells its readers homosexuality among women was a wartime experience and now the war is over, so we must return to our innate Britishness and put homosexuality away.

Mackenzie commented on *The Well of Loneliness* in the forward of the 1953 edition of *Ladies Almanack*. Therein, he expressed displeasure at James Douglas' crusade against *The Well*

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 8.

of *Loneliness* in *The Sunday Express*. According to Mackenzie, Douglas was a “prurient guardian of purity,” and it was Douglas who convinced Joynson-Hicks to bring in *The Well of Loneliness* on charges of obscenity. Mackenzie concludes, “In due course, *The Well of Loneliness* was suppressed and a dull book was made to seem exciting.”<sup>372</sup> Although Mackenzie seems to have found Hall’s work “dull,” he did offer to defend it on national radio during a debate on the BBC between himself and James Douglas. Although Douglas and the BBC initially agreed to the debate, “a few hours before he was due to appear James Douglas was conveniently unwell and the debate was cancelled.”<sup>373</sup> As with many members of the Bloomsbury Group, Mackenzie was willing to fight for *The Well of Loneliness*’ right to exist, regardless of the book’s literary merit.

While Mackenzie and Marshik believed *Extraordinary Women* evaded censorship because of its satirical tone, once England banned *The Well of Loneliness*, censorship at customs brought *Extraordinary Women* under scrutiny. In a letter from Sir Charles Flood, Head of Customs, to his superior, Winston Churchill, on October 9, 1928, Flood writes:

...if the subject [of female sexual inversion] can be permissably [sic] treated at all in a novel, it is difficult to see how it could be treated with more restraint. If, on the other hand, the subject is to be regarded as inadmissible, it will be difficult to know where to stop, and questions will at once arise whether similar action must be taken against other books, particularly Mr. Compton Mackenzie’s *Extraordinary Women*.<sup>374</sup>

Joynson-Hicks himself explained this by saying, “I did not go out in the highways and byways looking for books which I could destroy.”<sup>375</sup> Only books submitted to the Home Secretary for review could be officially banned in interwar England. Joynson-Hicks’ biographer, Huw F.

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<sup>372</sup> Mackenzie, *Extraordinary Women*, 7.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> Flood to Churchill, October 9, 1928. Quoted in Clayton, “A Frisky, Tiresome Colt?,” 125.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

Clayton, believes that main reason *Extraordinary Women* was not banned was the fact that no one submitted this book to Joynson-Hicks for review. Had Cape never submitted *The Well of Loneliness*, perhaps 1930s England could have created many women-loving women stories and plays, as the United States did in the decade following *The Well of Loneliness*. At the very least, Hall could have died believing her novel made a difference.

### *Lesbianism on Trial in the 1920s United States*

In the United Kingdom, precedent upon which Radclyffe Hall believed her book would lead to obscenity trials rested on the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde, noted homosexual, in 1895. In the United States, there were two important court cases that took place prior to 1928 which greatly impacted the outcome of the trials for obscenity that *The Well of Loneliness* was subjected to upon publication. The first is *Halsey vs. The New York Society* heard in the Court of Appeals of the State of New York in July 1922 and the second is the hearings to which *The Captive* was subjected in 1927, just a year before the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*. The latter judgment set the scene for *The Well of Loneliness* to fight legal battles. The former judgment was essential in empowering *The Well of Loneliness* to win.

Théophile Gautier wrote *Mademoiselle de Maupin* in 1836. By at least 1897, an English translation of this novel was available in the United States, published by George Barrie & Sons of Philadelphia. For the next twenty years, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*'s English translation freely circulated throughout the United States, until a copy of the novel was sold to John S. Sumner, Executive Secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. In November 1917, Sumner presented his newly purchased copy of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* to the New York Police Department, which quickly arrested Raymond D. Halsey, the bookstore clerk who sold

*Mademoiselle de Maupin* to Sumner. The first trial, *Halsey vs. New York Society for the Suppression of Vice*, took place in March 1920. In this trial, Halsey was found not guilty of violating New York Penal Code 1141, “Obscene Prints and Articles.”<sup>376</sup>

The “Obscene Prints and Articles” section of the New York Penal Code reads as follows:

“A person who sells, lends, gives away or shows, or offers to sell, lend, give away, or to show...any obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, indecent or disgusting book, magazine, pamphlet, newspaper, story paper...or any article or instrument of indecent or immoral use...is guilty of a misdemeanor, and, upon conviction, shall be sentenced to not less than ten days nor more than one year imprisonment or be fined not less than fifty dollars nor more than one thousand dollars or both fine and imprisonment for each offense.”<sup>377</sup>

Under this law, the words “obscene,” “lewd,” “lascivious,” “filthy,” “indecent,” and “disgusting” are not defined, a problem which continually perplexed the courts of New York throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. According to Halsey, the book was a well-recognized literary work in circulation for many years. The original case was dismissed due to lack of probable cause. In July 1922, the case was retried in the Court of Appeals, Judge J. Andrews presiding.<sup>378</sup>

In his decision, Andrews wrote, “Theophile Gautier is conceded to be among the greatest French writers of the nineteenth century.”<sup>379</sup> Not only was Gautier an esteemed author, Andrews explained, but *Mademoiselle de Maupin* was among the greatest French books written in the 19th century.<sup>380</sup> By including this information in his decision, Andrews created the first important precedent this case provided to help defend *The Well of Loneliness*—well-regarded, good

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<sup>376</sup> “John S. Sumner, Foe of Vice, Dies.” *New York Times*. June 22, 1971. (<https://www.nytimes.com/1971/06/22/archives/ibhn-sumner-foe-of-vicedes-waged-war-against-the-forces-of-evil.html>)

<sup>377</sup> Lewis R. Parker, editor. “The Code of Criminal Procedure of the State of New York” 18th edition edited by Amasa Parker (New York: The Banks Laws Publishing Company, 1918).

<sup>378</sup> *Halsey vs. New York Society*. Court of Appeals of the State of New York, July 12, 1922. (<https://casetext.com/case/halsey-v-ny-society>)

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>380</sup> Andrews wrote, “It has since become a part of French literature. No review of French writers of the last one hundred years fails to comment upon it. With the author’s felicitous style, it contains passages of purity and beauty.” (*Halsey vs. New York Society*).

literature deserves more latitude when it comes to licentious material. The second precedent was Andrews' insistence that the book be considered as a whole. He wrote, "No work may be judged from a selection of such paragraphs alone." According to Andrews, many books, "even the Bible" would fail the New York Penal Code 1141 if judged only by sections instead of holistically. *Mademoiselle de Maupin* was thus "the work of a great author, written in an admirable style," and it was important to note: "We know that a book merely obscene soon dies."<sup>381</sup> As such, Andrews' judgement set the precedent that books of high caliber and books in which there is a moral narrative arc should not be found obscene. This precedent empowered Defense Attorney Morris Ernst to successfully argue against the obscenity charge for *The Well of Loneliness* seven years later.

*Mademoiselle de Maupin* was not the only obscene French literary work that set precedents in New York City for arbitrating lesbian storylines. In 1927, Edouard Bourdet's play *The Captive* also faced a censorship trial in New York City. Edouard Bourdet did not have the same literary reputation as his countryman Gautier. *The Captive* (French: *La Prisonniere*) debuted in Paris in March 1926, and success led to productions in Berlin, Vienna, and then New York, where it previewed in September 1926 at the Empire Theater on Broadway.<sup>382</sup> The play received an effusively positive review from J. Atkins Brooks, one of the premiere theater critics of the early 20th century. From his review, we learn that Helen Menken, who later became President of the American Theater Wing, and Basil Rathbone, famous for his portrayal of Sherlock Holmes, were the stars of this play. Brooks claimed, regardless of the expectations for

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> "The Captive Quits, But New Producer with Defy Police." *New York Times*. February 17, 1927.

this play, “the quality of the performance and the treatment of the theme have cleared the air like a northwestern breeze.”<sup>383</sup>

Brooks went on to explain the play as the portrayal of “a well-bred young lady who has become involved in an abnormal relationship with another woman.” While the other woman allows “doom [to] swim[s] over the play like a thick black cloud,” Madame d’Aiguines “never appears on the stage.” Lesbianism is discussed, but never shown. It is such a terrible vice that the seductive partner in the play cannot even show her face on stage. Meanwhile, Brooks commended Menken’s performance as the seduced victim Irene de Montcel: “Miss Menken represents her as highly nervous, distraught, desperate, and she is almost crumpled from the pain of her affliction.”<sup>384</sup>

Before making its Broadway debut, *The Captive* underwent review from the Theater Board in New York City. Bourdet was interviewed about this review as he was boarding his boat to visit New York in November 1926. According to *The New York Times*, Bourdet’s response was, “I had always been optimistic that an official decision would be favorable. It’s a moral play, treated from a moral point of view, and we have all heard of such cases as exist in the play.”<sup>385</sup> Living in Paris during the 1920s, Bourdet was most likely at least aware of the existence of women such as Radclyffe Hall, Natalie Barney, and Gertrude Stein. According to *The New York Times*, “In speaking of the mannish dress now the fashion among women in Paris and other large cities, M. Bourdet said he did not like masculine women.”<sup>386</sup> While this does not confirm Bourdet’s homophobia, as there were plenty of women-loving women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>383</sup> J. Brooks Atkins, “Trenchant Tragedy: 'The Captive' from the French, in a Terse, Austere Performance--Mr. Hopkins Goes in for Opera,” *New York Times*. October 10, 1926.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>385</sup> “More or Less in the Spotlight: The Adapters of 'The Captive'--Introducing Lottice Howell, Rolph Murphy, and Dorothy McNulty,” *New York Times*. October 24, 1926.

<sup>386</sup> “More or Less in the Spotlight,” *New York Times*, October 24, 1926.



who did not dress in mannish attire—Virginia Woolf and Natalie Barney among them—such a statement suggests that Bourdet did not want Irene and Madame d’Aiguiers reunion to be a happy one. In his review, Atkins repeatedly mentioned that the play was a tragedy, and the play ends with the dissolution of Irene’s marriage and the knowledge that, even though Irene returns to her, Madame d’Aiguiers will soon die.<sup>387</sup>

Despite Bourdet’s claim that the play was “treated from a moral point of view,” it was brought up on charges of obscenity in February 1927. The Froiman Company soon after withdrew the play, and Menken and other actors involved promised the judge they would not act in any future productions of *The Captive*. Before making this promise, Menken “stood up, hesitated for a moment and said in a low voice: ‘I want to say that I don’t think this play is immoral.’”<sup>388</sup> Although four actors, including Rathborne, were supposed to meet with the judge the following Friday because they did not make the promise to never act in *The Captive* again, the play’s withdrawal and subsequent inability to find a new venue led to its quick disappearance from Broadway by the end of the month.

This was the zeitgeist into which *The Well of Loneliness* arrived in the United States in December 1928. Although originally courted by Knopf Publishing, once the British trial took place, Alfred Knopf informed Hall it ““would be most wise to keep the book entirely out of the American market. No American publisher could now handle it except as pornography.””<sup>389</sup> However, Hall found a new firm, Covici-Friede, which had some experience dealing with censorship and which was willing to print *The Well of Loneliness*, despite an all-but-certain legal

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<sup>387</sup> Bourdet, Edouard. *The Captive*. New York: Wildside Press, 1927.

<sup>388</sup> “‘The Captive’ Quits,” *New York Times*, 17 February 1927.

<sup>389</sup> Taylor, “‘I Made Up My Mind to Get It,’” 255.

battle. The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, under the leadership of John S. Sumner, declared *The Well of Loneliness* to be obscene on January 11, 1929, and accused the publishers of violating Article 106, Section 1141, which penalized ““A person who sells . . . or has in his possession with intent to sell . . . any obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, indecent or disgusting book.””<sup>390</sup>

Within the first month of publication, Covici-Friede sold 20,000 copies of *The Well of Loneliness*, and within the first year they sold 100,000 copies of the book, pushing it towards the top of *The New York Times*’ Bestseller List.<sup>391</sup> As the book sold for \$5.00, which was twice the regular price for novels at this time, Defense Attorney Morris Ernst was able to use the high price of the book to argue against the idea that the novel constituted pornography. Furthermore, *The Well of Loneliness* was on sale in most of the bookstores in New York and available in many public libraries as well, ostensibly something that a pornographic book would not have been able to achieve.<sup>392</sup> Ernst was able to show that in context there was nothing polluting about *The Well of Loneliness*. Taking Mary Douglas’ aforementioned cow and pig example, all pornography is unacceptable because it is *not*-moral. If *The Well of Loneliness* is moral, inasmuch as the immoral protagonist is punished and the seduced woman is able to return to a life of heteronormativity, then it cannot be pornography. This type of inverted deductive reasoning echoed the precedents set forth in the *Mademoiselle de Maupin* trial—if an obscene novel (pig) was inherently *not*-moral, and *Mademoiselle de Maupin* was a morality tale with a moral ending (cow), then *Mademoiselle de Maupin* could not be obscene, even if it addressed topics that fell under obscenity laws.

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 258-270.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 262-270.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 279.

Instead of trying to deny the homosexuality inherent in *The Well of Loneliness*, Ernst tried to minimize the danger of this novel by comparing it with *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. Having successfully won its case against the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* did so despite graphic descriptions of homosexual romance and sexuality in the later chapters of the book.<sup>393</sup> Ernst's argument rested on the idea that *The Well of Loneliness* did not include any scenes of explicit sexuality. To successfully present the chasteness of this novel, Ernst did not mention any of the scenes that could have suggested sexual relations between Stephen Gordon and another woman, such as when Stephen kissed Angela, her first love, on the mouth; when Stephen and Mary spent the night in the same bed; or when the narrator described Mary's appreciation of Stephen's masculine physical form.<sup>394</sup>

Hyman Bushel was the presiding judge for the New York Seventh District Magistrate's Court in February 1929, when the case was first brought to trial in *People v. Friede*. Bushel's job was to determine if the court could dismiss the charges against Friede and *The Well of Loneliness* for violating the obscenity Article 106, Section 1141. Bushel ruled that the case could not be dismissed. He presented judgment that aligned with the Progressive interpretation of the law growing in the United States in the 1920s. In his ruling, Bushel described *The Well of Loneliness* as "a novel dealing with the childhood and early womanhood of a female invert" outlining:

the queer attraction of the child to the maid in the household; her affairs with one Angela Crosby, a normally sexed, but unhappily married woman, causing further dissension between the latter and her husband; her jealousy of another man who later debauched this married woman, and her despair, in being supplanted by him in Angela's affections, are vividly portrayed.<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Taylor, "I Made Up My Mind to Get It," 272-273.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 276-277.

<sup>395</sup> *People v. Friede*. 133 Misc. 611, (N.Y. Misc. 1929), <https://casetext.com/people-v-friede>.

In his judgment, Bushel pays attention to the ways in which Stephen disrupts or serves as a potentiality to disrupt heterosexuality. First, she has a “queer attraction” to Collins, who is happily conducting an affair with a male member of the staff. Second, her attraction to Angela Crosby causes “further dissension between the latter and her husband.” Finally, Stephen loses Angela to Antrim, who “supplant[s]” her as Angela’s lover.<sup>396</sup> Bushel’s language suggests that Stephen is a threat to cisheteronormative men because her attraction is to women who are already spoken for by men. Following the theory of Dead Lesbian Syndrome and Mary Douglas’ theory on danger, Stephen must be eliminated because she threatens cisheteronormative society by creating competition for the men in her chosen partners’ lives.

Bushel furthered this argument as he concludes his summary of *The Well of Loneliness*. “The book culminates with an extended elaboration upon her intimate relations with a normal young girl, who becomes a helpless subject of her perverted influence and passion, and pictures the struggle for this girl’s affections between this invert and a man from whose normal advances she herself had previously recoiled, because of her own perverted nature.”<sup>397</sup> Not only are Mary’s own inversion and agency completely dismissed, but Stephen is seen as “struggl[ing]” with Martin for Mary’s love. In this way, Bushel paints Stephen as a threat to both the men who wish to marry “normal” young girls and the young girls who can become “helpless subject[s] of [her] perverted influence.”<sup>398</sup> From Bushel’s judgement, one thing becomes clear: lesbians should be avoided at all costs, as they pose an inherent danger to heterosexual partnerships everywhere.

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

Although these first two passages from Bushel's judgement only *imply* a violent and predatory personality of sexual inverts, Bushel later *confirms* that he sees female sexual inverts as predators. He writes, "The book can have no moral value since it seeks to justify the right of a pervert to prey upon normal members of a community and to uphold such relationship as noble and lofty."<sup>399</sup> [emphasis added] Legal historian Kim Emery explains "Bushel based his judgement against the publishers not in the novel's language, but in his estimation of the possible effects."<sup>400</sup> This becomes evident when Bushel writes,

The theme of the novel is not only anti-social and offensive to public morals and decency, but the method in which it is developed, in its highly emotional way attracting and focusing attention upon perverted ideas and unnatural vices and seeking to justify and idealize them, is strongly calculated to corrupt and debase those members of the community who would be susceptible to its immoral influence.<sup>401</sup>

As with the British trials, Bushel draws from *Regina v. Hicklin*, in which the test for obscenity is designed as "whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave or corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences and who might come into contact with it."<sup>402</sup> Even with a moral ending, *The Well of Loneliness* did not make Stephen Gordon out to be a villain, and so Bushel's fear that the novel could "deprave or corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences" allowed him to rule against Friede and the novel.

Bushel also draws upon a recent "amendment to the Penal Law, making it a misdemeanor to prepare, advertise or present any drama, play, etc., dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy or sex perversion." He cites this new amendment as "Laws of 1927, chap. 690." This new amendment was passed months after the arrests related to *The Captive* and provided Bushel with

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> Kim Emery "Well Meaning: Pragmatism, Lesbianism, and the U.S. Obscenity Trial," in Doan and Prosser, *Palatable Poison*, (355-371), 361.

<sup>401</sup> *People v. Friede*, 1929.

<sup>402</sup> Emery in *Palatable Poison*, 361.

legal precedent to show that since a play dealing with “the subject of sex degeneracy or sex perversion” went against the public policy of New York then so, too, would a novel on such subjects. Drawing from the case of *The Captive, Liveright v. Waldorf Theatres Corporation* (220 A.D. 182), Bushel cites Judge MacAvoy’s judgement: “it cannot be said dogmatically that the morals of youth, or even of adults, would not be affected by presenting a theme of the character here exhibited.”<sup>403</sup>

According to Emery, Bushel’s judgement illustrates that *The Well of Loneliness* could incite sexual degeneracy in youth and adults and could also “contribute to a change in conditions conducive to lesbian existence” by threatening to “recast the terms through which homosexuality was conceived—and historically condemned.”<sup>404</sup> [original emphasis] In short, this book would not only convince individuals to explore homosexuality; it could also make society more tolerant of homosexuality within culture. Bushel feared both the seduction of *individuals* into a life of vice and the corruption of culture *on a societal level* through tolerant popular media. As such, Bushel ruled that the charges could not be dismissed, and sent the case to the Court of Special Sessions, which ruled in favor of *The Well of Loneliness* in April 1929.

According to the Court of Special Sessions, *The Well of Loneliness* was not written in an obscene manner, and thus was not guilty of violating Article 106, Section 1141 of the New York Penal Code. In their ruling, the Court decided: “The book in question deals with a delicate social problem, which, in itself, cannot be said to be in violation of the law unless it is written in such a manner as to make it obscene...this is a criminal prosecution, and as judges of facts and the law, we are not called upon, nor is it within our province, to recommend or advise against the reading

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<sup>403</sup> *Liverwright v. Waldorf Theaters Corporation*. Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of New York, First Department, April 8, 1927, (<https://casetext.com/case/liveright-v-waldorf-theatres-corporation>)

<sup>404</sup> Emery in *Palatable Poison*, 366.

of any book.”<sup>405</sup> Emery explains that this judgement placed the onus of the possibility of corruption on individual readers, not on society; this ruling was at odds with Bushel’s interpretation of the role of law in society.

The Court of Special Sessions reinforced the idea that lesbianism was “an insoluble, innate, individual trait, fundamentally unrelated to social conditions and historical circumstance.”<sup>406</sup> This ruling reaffirmed the idea that sexual inversion was an individual problem, not a societal problem.<sup>407</sup> While this judgement was very different from the one put forth by McAvoy just a year and a half earlier, it did help to solidify the idea that sexual inversion was innate and congenital—not something that, as Bushel suggests, could be influenced by society. Furthermore, the judges of the Court of Special Sessions did not address the idea that societal mores could be changed by *The Well of Loneliness*, instead washing their hands of the question of whether the book should be read. While Bushel hoped to eliminate the threat posed by *The Well of Loneliness* through destruction of the book, the Court of Special Sessions chose instead to let the novel exist as innocent until proven guilty, allowing *The Well of Loneliness* to influence the identities of generations of lesbians, and influence how cisheteronormative society viewed these women.

Less than a month later, *The Well of Loneliness* was brought to trial again, this time for supposedly violating customs policies.<sup>408</sup> Customs Court Chief Justice Isaac F. Fisher concluded that *The Well of Loneliness* did not contain “one word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph which

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Emery in *Palatable Poison*, 368

<sup>407</sup> Emery writes, ““It is unfortunately characteristic of the era that this separation was carried out with such success and so little self-consciousness; as the pragmatic institutions of progressive jurisprudence hardened into the positivistic technology of legal realism, the ‘individual’ conceived by law was increasingly alienated from the network of semiotic relations that sustains subjectivity.” (p. 368)

<sup>408</sup> “Customs Seeks to Bar ‘Well of Loneliness,’” *The New York Times*, May 16, 1929.

could be truthfully pointed out as ‘offensive to modesty.’”<sup>409</sup> Thus, by July 1929, one year after its first publication in Britain, *The Well of Loneliness* had won two-thirds of its obscenity trials. This record meant the book was effectively banned in its home country but became a staple of lesbian fiction in the United States within just a few months of its publication.

### *Construction of Lesbian Symbolism*

Emilie Durkheim, a father in the field of cultural anthropology, believed society is best categorized through external signs or symbols. Symbol creates ritual, and through ritual, culture is constructed. Durkheim believed ritual preceded understanding, so that, in relation to this topic, acting like a lesbian would precede understanding that you are a lesbian.<sup>410</sup> Almost a century later, Clifford Geertz used Durkheim’s theory to construct his own understanding of how symbols and models function in society. Geertz believed culture is articulated through “the flow of behavior—or, more precisely, social action.”<sup>411</sup> Social action therefore created models, both *of* the social action and *for* the social action. Models *of* the social action express and explain the social action after it has taken place, whereas models *for* the social action act as guidelines or blueprints for the social action prior to it taking place. Cultural models, such as fictional stories, serve both purposes, as they give meaning and guidance to social action while at the same time the models are shaped by the social action as well.<sup>412</sup> Both cisheteronormative society and women-loving women subcultures utilized *The Well of Loneliness* as a dual model for

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<sup>409</sup> “‘Well of Loneliness’ Held Not Offensive; Customs Court Reverses the Collector’s Ruling, Admitting Book of Radclyffe Hall,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 1929.

<sup>410</sup> Emilie Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Joseph Ward Swain, trans., (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD., 1964, Web, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/41360/41360-h/41360-h.htm>).

<sup>411</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 17.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.



lesbianism—it served as both a model *of* what lesbians were and how they acted as well as a blueprint *for* what a lesbian *should* be and how a lesbian *should* act.

In 1928, Radclyffe Hall wrote a story based on the lives of the women in her world: upper middle-class and working-class white British, American, and French literary women; *The Well of Loneliness* offered a fictionalized model *of* their lives, actions, dress, and behavior. Once the book was brought to trial, however, it was found guilty of being obscene and having the ability to corrupt vulnerable young women, thus making it a possible model *for* sexual inversion as well.<sup>413</sup> As such, *The Well of Loneliness* and the sexual inverts described therein became a symbol within heteronormative society that persisted throughout the twentieth century.

In Faderman’s research, *The Well of Loneliness* was a strong force in exposing the existence of female sexual inverts to the cisheteronormative United States society, and as such, it served as an authority on sexual inversion in women. According to Faderman, after *The Well of Loneliness* was published in the United States:

[L]ove between women assumed the image of mannishness rather than the many other images it may have taken, such as exotic, childlike mysterious beauty suggested often in French literature, or the gentle, nurturing epitome of femaleness suggested in nineteenth-and-early-twentieth-century depictions of romantic friendship in American life and literature.<sup>414</sup>

Faderman went on to explain that masculinity and lesbianism became intrinsically intertwined within the psyche of the cisheteronormative society in the United State, so that “it was believed that only a masculine woman could be the genuine article.”<sup>415</sup> As Chapter One explores novels about three other fictional women-loving women who take on masculine characteristics in 1895

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<sup>413</sup> Laura L. Doan, “Topsy-Turvydom: Gender Inversion, Sapphism, and the Great War,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, (12.4, 2006: 517-542, doi: 10.1215/10642684-2006-001), 534; Taylor, “I Made Up My Mind to Get It,” 253.

<sup>414</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*, (New York: Columbia Press, 1991), 57.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*

and Bourdet appears to have disliked masculine women as early as 1927, it is likely that this stigma already existed in many people's imaginations. However, *The Well of Loneliness* continues to be published in the United States today. *The Captive* never did return to Broadway, and the three novels based on Alice Mitchell's life are no longer in print. The longevity of *The Well of Loneliness* has made it a viable scapegoat for all the homophobic sins of the Progressive Era, even though these first few chapters prove Hall was not alone in fictionalizing women-loving women.

Although *The Well of Loneliness* may have been the first introduction to lesbianism for many cisheteronormative readers, women-loving women already existed and were forming communities by the time the novel was published or widely available. For women-loving women in Britain, the book's ban came almost as quickly as its publication, and British women-loving women subcultures, which began to form in World War I, continued to construct themselves with little help from Radclyffe Hall or Stephen Gordon. In the United States, women-loving women subcultures were nascent in many areas. Emerging in working class communities in cities including Buffalo, Harlem, Manhattan, and Los Angeles, little is known about these communities until the 1930s. Although women-loving women subcultures in the United States were still in their early stages when the novel was published, women who were romantically and sexually attracted to other women existed across the country. However, before these women could be studied as sexual inverts and, later, lesbians, there had to be "the redefinition of homosexuality from a matter of individual pathology to a cultural construct."<sup>416</sup> In order for this transition to take place something had to empower communication between the individual women-loving woman and a larger community. Anthropology suggests that understanding the

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<sup>416</sup> Kath Weston, "Lesbian/Gay Studies in the House of Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, (22, 1993: 339-367, DOI: 10.1146/annurev.an.22.100193.002011), 341.

history of the individual pathology will allow us to understand “how such apparently unprecedented categories of selfhood are in fact shaped by specific historical contexts.”<sup>417</sup> *The Well of Loneliness*, coupled with both World Wars, can be seen as a catalyst that changed female sexual inversion, the scientific pathology, into lesbianism, the cultural construct.<sup>418</sup>

Shirley Willer, who was born in 1922 and came of age during World War II, read *The Well of Loneliness* as a young adult. According to Willer, “When I finished reading *The Well*, I started looking up words in the dictionary and the encyclopedia. I didn’t find very pleasant descriptions...”<sup>419</sup> This is an account of the early separation between science and culture, where *The Well of Loneliness* was able to offer a sense of identity and dignity to replace the unpleasant descriptions of sexual inversion available in dictionaries, encyclopedias, and medical books. Barbara Gittings, ten years Willer’s junior, felt the same way when she was in college. Choosing to look at textbooks and psychological studies first, Gittings found that these descriptions, “didn’t match who she felt herself to be.” Gittings preferred the gay and lesbian fiction she found in secondhand bookstores, such as *The Well of Loneliness*, to the clinical descriptions of sexual inversion found in textbooks and studies.<sup>420</sup> Gittings’ account showed that Willer’s differentiation between science and culture was not an isolated phenomenon, but instead a shared part of the transition between individual and collective queer women identity. The Buffalo Oral History Project, focused on collecting the oral histories of women-loving women who lived in Buffalo, NY during the first half of the twentieth century, concluded that *The Well of Loneliness*

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<sup>417</sup> Tom Boellstorff, “Queer Studies in the House of Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, (36, 2007: 17-35, DOI: 10.1146/annurev.anthro.36.081406.09442), 23.

<sup>418</sup> Weston, “Lesbian/Gay Studies in the House of Anthropology,” 343.

<sup>419</sup> Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), 82.

<sup>420</sup> Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 12-13; Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian,” 559.

was read by women-loving women from all social classes in the United States soon after its publication.<sup>421</sup>

One of the communities influenced by the popularity and content of *The Well of Loneliness* was Salt Lake City's Mormon population. An early 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnologist, Mildred Berryman, believed *The Well of Loneliness* overturned decades of benign neglect by Church Elders on the topic of homosexuality and forced the Church of Latter-Day Saints to contend with and categorize homosexuality. According to Berryman, the Church began to classify as homosexual "every woman who wore a suit and was seen in the company of a girl companion more than once, and every man who had curly hair and might have a little more than feminine walk or a flair for bright colored ties."<sup>422</sup> Almost all of the women in her study agreed that *The Well of Loneliness* caused more harm than good in their community.<sup>423</sup> Berryman's sociological research, supported by historical research, suggests that this shift in attitudes towards homosexuals pressured many of Utah's "self-identified lesbians" to enter into heterosexual relationships and marriages.<sup>424</sup>

Berryman's research was written in 1938, when she was about 40 years old, and focused on the lives of 25 self-identified lesbians living in or near Salt Lake City in the 1920s and 1930s. Bonnie Bullough was the daughter of Berryman's final woman lover and received Berryman's manuscript in the mail after Berryman's death. Bonnie and her husband Vern Bullough interpret Berryman's research to prove that she agreed with Havelock Ellis' interpretation of homosexuality as biological, not pathological, and with his idea that true inverts would have

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<sup>421</sup> Joanne E. Passet, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Gay and Lesbian Books in Midwestern Public Libraries, 1900–1969," (*Library Trends* 60.4, 2012: 749–64. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2012.0010>.) 762.

<sup>422</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics Among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 219.

<sup>423</sup> Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, "Lesbianism in the 1920s and 1930s: A Newfound Study," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, (2.4, 1977, 895-904, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173219>), 897.

<sup>424</sup> Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics*, 432.

masculine qualities.<sup>425</sup> As Cadora illustrates, society in the early twentieth century believed homosexuality was degenerative and antithetical to white middle-class progress. Berryman tried to undermine this belief by reporting that all the women in her study were “good untainted middle class genteel people” from white American backgrounds.<sup>426</sup>

D. Michael Quinn’s research into Berryman’s study suggests that the interwar era was a turning point in creating homophobia in the Mormon church. Still, even without official and overt disavowal, queer Mormons felt societal pressure to reduce the danger they placed on society by removing themselves as a threat. Berryman’s study notes that 3 of the 25 women-loving women included in her survey had attempted to take their own lives at least once.<sup>427</sup> Despite this suicidal ideation and the negative reactions to *The Well of Loneliness*, the women in this survey remained positive about their homosexuality. One 37-year-old person explained that they “would not be happy in any other kind of relationship than homosexual, [and] wouldn’t change if [they] could unless it were possible to become wholly masculine physically.”<sup>428</sup> While this person appears to have been more transgender than homosexual, a 20-year-old woman said, “The only way I’d want to change would be to have a man’s privilege and marry some girl I could love and [then] take care of her.”<sup>429</sup> Although these responses are positive, a 23-year-old nurse interviewed by Berryman explained that homosexuals were heavily influenced by society:

I think in the beginning, the average homosexual is pure of mind and thought, their ideas and ideals are pure. But, when they awaken to the attitude of conventional society, they go haywire and take refuge in drink, drugs, and loose habits of living.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Bullough and Bullough, “Lesbianism in the 1920s and 1930s,” 898.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*, 899.

<sup>427</sup> Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics*, 201.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*

This sentiment reflects almost perfectly Stephen’s argument in *The Well of Loneliness* when she decides to give Mary Llewellyn up to Martin instead of forcing Mary to continue to be a part of the Parisian bar scene. Mary, who passed for cisheteronormative and could have existed among polite society had she not been linked to Stephen, abandoned any hope of appropriate or proper friends after being slighted for her sexual preference. “Deprived of the social intercourse which to her would have been both natural and welcome, she now strove to stand up to a hostile world by proving that she could get on without it.”<sup>431</sup> Many of the people in Berryman’s study were open about their homosexuality with friends.<sup>432</sup> Quinn’s research shows that there were multiple examples of the Church of Latter Day Saints supporting homosexuality among women in the early 20th century. Kate Thomas was so open about her homosexuality that the Latter Day Saints *Young Women’s Journal* published Thomas’ women-loving women love poetry, “which used the word gay, while she was residing in Greenwich Village, where gay meant homosexual,” in 1903.<sup>433</sup> In 1919, Latter Day Saints publication *Children’s Friend* recounted the first meeting of two women, in which one of the women, “looked up and saw a most beautiful woman...”<sup>434</sup>

Quinn’s research proves that the Church of Latter Day Saints did not have a homophobic agenda any earlier than homophobia entered mainstream society in the 1920s, and Mormons may have been more accepting than their fellow Americans throughout the 19th and early 20th

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<sup>431</sup> “The spirit of adventure that had taken her to France, the pluck that had steadied her while in the Unit, the emotional, hot-headed nature of the Celt, these things must now work together in Mary to produce a state of great restlessness, a pitiful revolt against life’s injustice. The blow struck by a weak and thoughtless hand had been even more deadly than Stephen had imagined; more deadly to them both, for that glancing blow coming at a time of apparent success, had torn from them every shred of illusion. Stephen, who could see that the girl was fretting, would be seized with a kind of sick apprehension, a sick misery at her own powerlessness to provide a more normal and complete existence. So many innocent recreations, so many harmless social pleasures must Mary forego for the sake of their union—and she still young, still well under thirty. And now Stephen came face to face with the gulf that lies between warning and realization—all her painful warnings about the world had not served to lessen the blow when it fell, had not served to make it more tolerable to Mary. Deeply humiliated Stephen would feel, when she thought of Mary’s exile from Morton, when she thought of the insults this girl must endure because of her loyalty and her faith—all that Mary was losing that belonged to her youth, would rise up at this time to accuse and scourge Stephen.” (Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 378-379).

<sup>432</sup> Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics*, 223.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-232.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

centuries.<sup>435</sup> It was not until the military entered Utah during World War II that hard limits between homosexual and heterosexual formed, and the romantic friendships of the nineteenth century ended for good.<sup>436</sup> Quinn concludes, “Despite its many peculiarities, nineteenth-century Mormon culture was thoroughly American in its same-sex dynamics.”<sup>437</sup> *The Well of Loneliness* was a watershed novel that introduced a new conversation to Mormon society, and forced them to speak about “the love that dares not speak its name.” Looking at this microcosm of societal movement from relatively benign neglect to confrontational criminalization of women-loving women, the Mormon example offers further proof that homosexuality amongst women was slowly gaining traction as a concept known to the average anglophone person on both sides of the Atlantic. Court cases meant to silence *The Well of Loneliness* and other fictional—and real, in the case of Alice Mitchell—women-loving women in fact backfired and became the very reason the average person learned about the existence of women-loving women.

*But Stephen Didn't Die: Dead Lesbian Syndrome in The Well of Loneliness*

Analyzing the extent to which *The Well of Loneliness* assisted in the construction of positive lesbian identities during the first four decades of its publication is difficult because of the negative perspective with which the novel looked at lesbian life. Outside of Stephen and Mary, the other two women-loving women most emphasized in *The Well of Loneliness* are Scottish lovers Barbara and Jamie. Towards the end of the novel, Jamie must watch as her beloved Barbara slowly dies of tuberculosis, after which Jamie commits suicide. The death of Barbara, suicide of Jamie, and failure of Stephen to compare to a man meant that the women-

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<sup>435</sup> “If pioneer Mormon leaders had a hierarchy of sexual sins, then they viewed sodomy as far less serious than adultery, incest, bestiality, or fornication.” (Ibid., 272)

<sup>436</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., 401.

loving women in this novel did not find happy endings. Barbara and Jamie, like Mary, had no filial ties in this novel, having forsaken their families for each other prior to meeting Stephen and Mary. Thus, Hall effectively isolated all her sexual inverts from their families. When Barbara dies, Jamie bemoans two elements of their relationship:

1. "...the life of hardship and exile that had sapped Barbara's strength and weakened her spirit" and "the cruel dispensation of fate that had forced them to leave their home in the Highlands"<sup>438</sup>
2. The fact that Jamie could not mourn Barbara openly. "I can't mourn her without bringing shame on her name..."<sup>439</sup>

Radclyffe Hall dealt with her women-loving women characters the way society dictated: Jamie and Barbara were destroyed by death, Stephen was reduced as a threat so Martin could win Mary, and Mary rejected and avoided her sapphic desires upon finding out that Stephen had committed adultery. However, both James Douglas and Bushel did not believe the women-loving women characters in *The Well of Loneliness* were properly neutralized as threats to society. As analyzed earlier, Bushel's judgment noted: "The book can have no moral value since it seeks *to justify the right* of a pervert to prey upon normal members of a community and to uphold such relationship *as noble and lofty*."<sup>440</sup> The words emphasized in this sentence illustrate the problem with Hall's novel. Although fate effectively punished Barbara for being a lesbian by killing her through illness, both she and Jamie are portrayed as upstanding members of society who *did not deserve* to be punished in this way. Furthermore, while Stephen martyred her own heart so Mary could lead a normal life, this sacrifice is seen as a noble justification for why sexual inversion should be permitted. The British government permitted Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women* to circulate because the narrator's tone was one of dismissal and sardonic outrage that a

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<sup>438</sup> Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 401.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>440</sup> Friede v. *The People*, 1929.



woman could ever love another woman more than she could love a man. *The Well of Loneliness* was censored because the narrator's tone was one of sympathetic compassion, and the book suggested that sexual inverts were born inverted and therefore should have the same rights as all of God's other creations.<sup>441</sup>

The fact that women-loving women were the main characters of this novel and that within the novel there existed a community of women-loving women showed "resistance to heterosexual conformity was a real possibility. This resistance was manifested in a number of ways, especially in finding and meeting others..."<sup>442</sup> At a time when many women attracted to their own sex were isolated from one another and did not believe that women like them existed, *The Well of Loneliness* proved there were other women in the world who felt as they did. Even as women-loving women subcultures were slowly constructed in big cities such as Los Angeles and New York, for many women it was not until the Stonewall Riots in 1969 that lesbian life came out into the open. Thus, novels such as *The Well of Loneliness*, which depicted women-loving women community and friendship, were important in constructing a self-identity in those who could not be part of a larger women-loving women subculture.<sup>443</sup>

*The Well of Loneliness* was the first anglophone novel to kill two lesbian characters and leave a third desolate. However, these deaths were not included in prosecution of the novel in either England or the United States. The early victims of an epidemic are rarely ever correctly diagnosed. It was only after the death toll began to add up that Dead Lesbian Syndrome became diagnosable. Hall helped women-loving women on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean find the language to articulate their nascent sexual identities, and death became a key element of this

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<sup>441</sup> Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 436-437.

<sup>442</sup> D. Merilee Clunis, Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen, Pat A. Freeman, and Nancy Nystrom, *Lives of Lesbian Elders: Looking Back, Looking Forward*, (New York: Haworth Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>443</sup> Monica Bachman, "'Someone like Debby': (De)Constructing a Lesbian Community of Readers," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, (6.3, 2000: 377-388, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/glq/summary/v006/6.3bachmann.html>), 378.

language. The end of *The Well of Loneliness* casts the loss of Mary as a form of death for Stephen. The stage is set when Martin tells Stephen, "...life with you is spiritually killing Mary."<sup>444</sup> Stephen decides to fight for Mary, using the same weapon Puddle has urged her to turn throughout the novel—her pen. Hall writes, "with every word she wrote, she was bleeding!"<sup>445</sup> When Valérie Seymour learns of Stephen's plan to force Mary to choose Martin, Valérie is appalled. She implores Stephen, "For God's sake keep the girl, and get what happiness you can out of life." Stephen refuses, and Valérie accepts with "Being what you are, I suppose you can't—" which sounds like the beginning of a disavowal of happy endings for all sexual inverts. In reality, Valérie's belief in Stephen's inability to have a happy ending has nothing to do with Stephen's sexuality. Valérie concludes that sentence by condemning Stephen with "you were made for a martyr!"<sup>446</sup> For Stephen, losing Mary was a form of martyrdom. Exploring Stephen's inner thoughts, Hall writes: "But who was it that brushed that silence aside? Not Stephen Gordon...oh, no, surely not...Stephen Gordon was dead; she had died that night. 'A l'heure de notre mort...' Many people had spoken those prophetic words quite a short time ago—perhaps they had been thinking of Stephen Gordon."<sup>447</sup> Although she does not physically die in *The Well of Loneliness*, Stephen Gordon's trajectory is the same as if she had been a victim of Dead Lesbian Syndrome. While this syndrome claimed Barbara and Jamie's lives within the confines of 500 pages, Stephen is forced to suffer longer than the novel itself, waiting for her final martyrdom.

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<sup>444</sup> Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 425.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, 428.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

### *Conclusion*

Within the larger context of cisheteronormative society, *The Well of Loneliness* assumed the role of monster. While both the author and the news coverage hoped to inspire pity for the sexual inverts depicted in the novel, judges in both Britain and the United States saw this novel as able to corrupt its readers and its subject matter immoral and dangerous. To defend *The Well of Loneliness* in all three of its censorship trials, the lawyers chose to reduce or avoid the lesbian themes in the novel, thus making it more acceptable by cisheteronormative society but greatly insulting the dignity of the novel, Radclyffe Hall, and nascent women-loving women subcultures on both sides of the Atlantic. The trials of *The Well of Loneliness* pushed the governments of Britain and the United States to finally confront an issue they had been sidestepping for decades: the existence of women-loving women and their role in a cisheteronormative, patriarchal, white supremacist society. Even though *The Well of Loneliness* won both of its American trials, the overruling sentiment of these cases suggested the tragedy of the novel was its saving grace. Ernst was able to defend *The Well of Loneliness* because of the lack of graphic romance or sexuality between Stephen and Mary and the cisheteronormative endgame of Mary ending up with Martin.

While *The Well of Loneliness* was a seminal work for the construction of lesbian identity both in the cisheteronormative society and the lesbian subculture, this novel is also one of the earliest victims of Dead Lesbian Syndrome. Partnered with Hall's earlier works "The Career of Mark Anthony Brakes" (1914) and *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself* (1926) and the three novels from 1895, *The Well of Loneliness* reifies the concepts that fiction focused on women-loving women must end in tragedy; death is an appropriate way to neutralize the threat of lesbianism to heteronormative society, and the masculine invert is more dangerous to cisheteronormative society than the feminine women-loving woman. While the research proves Hall was not the first

to introduce Dead Lesbian Syndrome into lesbian literature, her role as one of the scientists who created this deadly virus is difficult to ignore. While Carhart, Hatch, and Wilkins Freeman were addressing a contemporary issue through fiction with very little exposition on the morality of women-loving women, Hall saw her novel as a weapon against bigotry. However, while *The Well of Loneliness* may have been the sword that sliced open the shroud of silence surrounding lesbianism in the 1920s, it was also a double-edged dagger that infected scores of fictional works with the disease of Dead Lesbian Syndrome for generations to follow.

## Chapter Four Companionate marriage and the Lesbian Parasite

### *Introduction: From Deviant to Desirable*

Despite the extravagance of the 1920s, negative forces lurked in the shadows of its decadence. Eugenicist ideologies kept Black and Indigenous People of Color, religious minorities, alternatively abled, neurodivergent, and indigent people out of sight throughout the 1920s. With the stock market crash, the veneer of success used to paint over societal problems began to crack. Economic instability threw into stark relief the inequalities between genders, races, physical and mental ability, and classes, and problematized the patriarchal hierarchy of the Victorian Era. Fearing that economic deficit would cause societal decline, popular media became a part of the government's plan to reinforce the capitalist necessity of a cisheteronormative family. Laws passed across the country solidified racial and sexual boundaries, while reinforcing white supremacist patriarchal normality through government assistance programs, increased policing, and media focused on upholding and uplifting these ideals. The lesbian fiction written during this decade closely reflects the fears of a society on the edge of collapse and portrays the lesbian as undesirable and untenable, in hopes of steering women away from a life wholly independent of men and devoid of children.

The 1930s were a catastrophe for almost everyone. At the height of the Great Depression, unemployment rose to nearly 25% of the employable American population.<sup>448</sup> Throughout the 1930s, women fared better than men in employment, with women having an unemployment rate of 4.7% as opposed to men's 7.1% in 1930 and ending the decade with an unemployment rate of 13.6% as opposed to men's 15.4%. Although gender segregation in jobs continued throughout

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<sup>448</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force, Employment, and Unemployment, 1929-39: Estimating Methods," (Accessed April 3, 2020), <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1948/article/pdf/labor-force-employment-and-unemployment-1929-39-estimating-methods.pdf>

the Great Depression, these different rates threatened masculine ideals while also providing white women with an increased sense of independence. For Black women and other Women of Color, who spent much of the first three decades of the 20th century employed at much higher rates than white women, unemployment hit hard, with the percentage of working women in the Black community dropping from 43.3 % in 1930 to 37.6% in 1940.<sup>449</sup> Still, they suffered less, percentagewise, than men of all races. These statistics left men, especially white men who were unused to having their wives contribute anything to the family income, feeling emasculated, and forced society to reimagine the boundaries and substance of masculinity.

The crux of the argument in this chapter rests on the new market for lesbian literature that emerged from the perfect storm of the social and economic independence of the New Woman, the legal win of *The Well of Loneliness*, and the loosening of the separate spheres mentality as the Great Depression forced an increasing number of working-class and middle-class women to look for jobs. As women began to assert economic independence from men, lesbian fiction found audiences both with women who wanted to learn more about the lesbian lifestyle and men who wanted to see the “lesbian threat” destroyed by the end of the novel. This chapter begins by analyzing lesbian literature as survival literature—written works that allowed marginalized communities *representation*, as long as the representation included *consequences* for marginalized peoples who tried to center themselves and enter mainstream society.

Often, 1930s lesbian novels served as Public Service Announcements, warning women away from the lifestyle. Beginning with two British novels published early in the decade, Geoffrey Moss’s *That Other Love* and G. Sheila Donisthorpe’s *Loveliest of Friends* (1931), this

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<sup>449</sup> Ruth Milkman, “Women’s Work and Economic Crisis Revisited: Comparing the Great Recession and the Great Depression” in *On Gender, Labor, and Inequality*, (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.5406/j.ctt18j8wg9.16>), 47-78.

chapter explores how both heterosexual and queer writers of the 1930s placed lesbianism at odds with the growing movement of “companionate marriage.” Drawing from Christina Simmons’ 1979 essay, “Companionate marriage and the Lesbian Threat,” this chapter argues that lesbian novels portrayed lesbianism as negative and unnatural to urge women to find husbands and become mothers, perpetuating the capitalist patriarchy even as women became breadwinners and the cracks of capitalism became clear. The battle between the “companionate marriage” and the “lesbian threat” spanned the entirety of 1930s lesbian fiction from Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) to Gale Wilhelm’s *Torchlight to Valhalla* (1937). *Pity for Women*, Helen Anderson’s 1937 novel, builds upon this tension and offers a critique of capitalism, further explored by John D’Emilio’s 1983 essay “Capitalism and the Gay Identity.” Together, Anderson and D’Emilio explain why and how the lesbian was seen as a pariah, destined to overthrow capitalism if not immediately destroyed.

Throughout this chapter, we circle back to the role capitalism and bourgeoisie mores played in reinforcing patriarchal marriage norms while pushing back against the growing lesbian visibility of the interwar era. After analyzing the ways in which capitalism prevented and pushed back against the concept of women-loving women and homosocial women’s existences independent of men, this chapter explores the ways in which respectability politics of the Black middle class prevented Black women writers from openly expressing homosexual desire in books about Black women. Focused primarily on Larsen’s *Passing*, this chapter spotlights the constraints placed upon Black middle-class writers to portray Black middle-class women as “respectable” in order to push the “racial uplift” agenda. In their own way, the Black bourgeoisie

believed they could win the right to exist as equals to white society by being respectable.<sup>450</sup> This chapter problematizes that idea by looking at ways in which women-loving women tried, and failed, to win the right to exist both in fiction and within their own communities. In their failure, women-loving women often turned to destructive behaviors that effectively reduced or eliminated the “lesbian threat” in the real world. Although there is little evidence to support the idea that Dead Lesbian Syndrome caused women-loving women to turn to vice, the negative portrayals of women-loving women that permeated all depictions of these women in popular culture did little to mitigate the shame and depression the protagonists’ real-life counterparts experienced.

Chapter Four connects the ideals of Dead Lesbian Syndrome with the disparate realities of capitalism, companionate marriage, and the Great Depression. Understanding how these three elements of the 1930s reinforced one another creates a more comprehensive picture of how and why Dead Lesbian Syndrome continued throughout this decade. Through this analysis, we can address how and why Dead Lesbian Syndrome thrived in the 1930s and look at different approaches to both reinforcing and destroying this deadly plague. We can also better understand how Dead Lesbian Syndrome provided survival literature for women-loving women desperate to know they were not alone in their homosexual desires while simultaneously reinforcing negative stereotypes about women-loving women that did little to mitigate the vices these women turned to throughout the twentieth century.

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<sup>450</sup> Respectability was seen as both a way to access proximity to whiteness and as a protective measure against the constant threat of rape Black women face. See Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs*, (14.4, Summer 1989, 912-920).



*Survival Literature and Lesbian Isolation*

Before analyzing the individual works of fiction created in the 1930s and the general zeitgeist of this decade, it is important that we look at how fiction can replace physical community when such a thing is out of reach. Beginning with the well-publicized trials of Alice Mitchell and *The Well of Loneliness*, women-loving women stories created and continue to create “imagined communities” among their readers, especially women-loving women.<sup>451</sup> Often born into cisheteronormative family units and raised without role models who share their sexual identities, women-loving women are forced to build identity and find community in isolation, an obstacle which is most easily overcome through Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities. Research shows imagined communities are “particularly attractive to stigmatized minorities because one can participate without leaving the comfort and security of one’s home.”<sup>452</sup> Imagined communities were most appealing to middle-class women-loving women, who were literate and could therefore access these communities and feared revealing their sapphic tendencies if they went to lesbian bars in the major cities or were seen openly pursuing a same-sex relationship. To retain both the delimitation line between the middle class and the working class and the respectability of the middle class, more affluent women-loving women turned to communities they could build through fiction.<sup>453</sup>

Lesbian fiction revealed to isolated women-loving women the “succession of plurals” that served as the cornerstone for Anderson’s imagined communities. The protagonists were never suggested to be representative of all living women-loving women. Still, the women-loving

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<sup>451</sup>Karen Michele Cadora explained the connections between Benedict Anderson’s conceptualization of “imagined communities” and the importance of books in the lesbian community in her 1999 dissertation, “The Limits of Lesbiana: Race and Class in Twentieth Century Lesbian Genre Fiction.” (PhD Diss. *Stanford University*, 1999). Cadora argues, as “the idea that cheap, popular editions can create and mobilize reading publics for both profit and politics is a useful one for understanding why books are at the core of modern lesbian identity” (2).

<sup>452</sup> Cadora, “The Limits of Lesbiana,” 3.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

woman protagonist or villain of each novel represents “the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside.”<sup>454</sup> The sociological landscape is the world of the women-loving woman, which is “clearly bounded” through language and secrets: who knows about the same-sex desire? how is same-sex desire navigated by the women-loving women characters? how do their sexualities influence the way they move through the world? By never claiming the protagonist is representative of all women-loving women, the writer ensures the creation of “sociological solidity” through the “succession of plurals.” Anderson explains, “They are never imagined as *typical* of this or that society. Each...is magically alone.”<sup>455</sup> The specificity of the novels helped to create a sense of universality and connectedness through representation “in their simultaneous, separate existence.”<sup>456</sup> Shared similarities with fictional women-loving women allowed real life women-loving women of the 1930s to construct identities, partnerships, and, eventually, communities. At the same time, the succession of plurals, as the lesbian couple is often the only one in the novel (or the only one that survives), reinforces the idea that the lesbian existence is an endless well of loneliness.

Many women-loving women of the 1930s, including couples, often felt as if they were the only woman or couple undergoing this experience in the whole world. Sociologist Linda McCarthy has linked this sense of isolation to modern queer narratives as well. She explains:

In the early stages of identity development, some gays and lesbians feel as if they are the only gay or lesbian person in the world; others know that gays and lesbians must be out there somewhere, but feel alone in their community. Usually, efforts are

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<sup>454</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2016), 30.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*

made by the individual to find like others, and a search for community begins.<sup>457</sup>

This sense of isolation was compounded by lack of access to representations of women-loving women in popular culture. While fictional and real-life urban, upper-class lesbians like Stephen Gordon and Radclyffe Hall could access information about sexual inversion and the third sex, middle-class and working-class women knew little about homosexuality. One such example is Beverly, a working-class New Zealand-native who moved to New South Wales as a young woman in the 1930s and “experienced passionate feelings for other women without possessing any awareness of a broader cultural context of homosexuality.”<sup>458</sup> Beverly explained how far removed she was from the concept of a lesbian community when she arrived in Australia:

...this woman said to me, ‘Do you know you’re a homosexual?’ I said ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’...she stood in front of me in her flat, put her hands on my shoulders, and...she explained things. And I knew then, well, I’d never heard of homosexuality, never. Didn’t know what it was.<sup>459</sup>

Women who were coming to terms with non-heterosexual thoughts during the Great Depression felt isolated, lived outside of a community, and did not have the language to articulate their predilections. Lesbian fiction, available in corner stores and pharmacies across class, race, and geographic divides, soon became a way to find a language to describe their desires. In countries where such books were banned, such as Australia where Beverly lived, the confusion and sense of isolation continued for at least another generation.

Joan Nestle used the term “survival literature” to classify the lesbian novels that created these imagined communities and provided language to describe lesbian desire. These novels

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<sup>457</sup> Linda McCarthy, “Poppies in a Wheat Field: Exploring the Lives of Rural Lesbians,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, (39.1, October 18, 2008, 75-94, doi: 10.1300/J082v39n01\_05.

<sup>458</sup> Rebecca Jennings, *Unnamed Desires: A Sydney Lesbian History*, (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2015), 3.

<sup>459</sup> Jennings, *Unnamed Desires*, 6.

“allowed lesbian communities to form despite societal and cultural pressures for gay women to remain closeted.” Survival literature empowered fictional lesbians to serve “as a conduit through which isolated lesbians could ‘find themselves’ and access some form of lesbian community.”<sup>460</sup> At a time when isolation and negative societal feedback fostered alcoholism and suicide among women-loving women, survival literature offered these marginalized women a lifeboat in a sea of uncertainty and shame.

Sarah Louise Stratton believes a major shortcoming of Gale Wilhelm’s *We Too Are Drifting* (1935) is the loss of women-loving women community. “The lesbian community present in *The Well of Loneliness* disappears. Instead, we find the protagonist, Jan Morale, the only ‘true’ lesbian in the story, isolated from any larger community.”<sup>461</sup> Stratton goes on to note that *Torchlight to Valhalla* is also missing any sense of women-loving women community, although the protagonist, Morgen, does not come out until the end of the novel, so she, feasibly, did not have time to find a community. This same sense of isolation for the women-loving woman is evident in many of the novels discussed herein, including *That Other Love* and *Hell Cat* by Idabel Williams (1934), where only one lesbian couple or a singular women-loving woman character exists within the pages. Other novels, such as *Loveliest of Friends* and *Pity for Women*, show that other women-loving women exist, but only in the form of the protagonists or her lover’s ex-girlfriends. Stephen Gordon complained about the rejection she and Mary faced from polite society and bemoaned the community of sexual inverts they found at the Parisian homosexual bars, but women-loving women protagonists of the 1930s did not even have this

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<sup>460</sup> Sarah Louise Stratton, “More than throw-away fiction: investigating lesbian pulp fiction through the lens of a lesbian textual community,” (*University of Birmingham*, 2018), 4-7. This dissertation focuses almost entirely on novels from the 1950s and 1960s, but the concepts can be applied to the novels of the 1930s as well.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

lowbrow homosexual bar community. Within the pages of their respective novels, these women had no one—outside of their love interest—who shared their sexual identities.

This sense of isolation problematizes the use of lesbian fiction of the 1930s as survival literature. While the singular lesbian or the singular lesbian couple follows the recipe for imagined communities as set forth by Anderson, the isolation reinforced the idea that lesbians are alone and, in embracing one's own lesbianism, one would sacrifice any hope of finding community. In this way, most of the lesbian novels of the 1930s failed to adhere to Stratton's definition of survival literature, which should have "acted as a conduit through which isolated lesbians could 'find themselves' and access some form of lesbian community."<sup>462</sup>

#### *Companionate marriage and Separate Spheres*

While they may not have formed close bonds with other women, many of the women-loving women characters created in the 1930s participated in both platonic and romantic relationships with men. For some of these women, these relationships included marriage. During the 1930s, men and women were taught that the ideal partnership was a companionate marriage. "Companionate marriage," introduced during the interwar era, centered the ideas that women, like men, had sexual urges that needed to be fulfilled and that men and women should work harder to build relationships rooted in love and companionship. In 1979, Christina Simmons explored this concept in the canonical essay, "Companionate marriage and the Lesbian Threat," published in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*. Simmons explains the decline of organized feminism after white women achieved suffrage in the United States and the United Kingdom led to the "dissemination of such an intensely heterosexual vision of personal life. In the absence of

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<sup>462</sup> Stratton, "More than Throw Away Fiction," 4.

a powerful feminist voice, exponents of companionate marriage tempered the liberating potential of new sexual ideas and judged women's sexuality acceptable only insofar as its energy was channeled into marriage and the service of men."<sup>463</sup> These ideas were popularized throughout the interwar era in psychology and sociology articles and by the 1927 book *Companionate marriage* by Judge Ben Lindsey.<sup>464</sup>

While the psychiatrists of the turn of the century labeled sexually engaged women psychopaths and forced them to undergo therapeutic "cures," by the 1920s, the Sexual Revolution began to influence the middle class. "Hypersexual" women, those who were interested in their own pleasure as well as their husbands, became much more common, and sexual interest was no longer viewed as a degenerative, insidious element of the working class. As such, psychiatrists stopped trying to "cure" hypersexual women, and instead encouraged men and women to create marriages that included mutual and reciprocal pleasure. Now, women were *expected* to have sexual interest in men. Women who experienced sexual attraction—at least, cisheteronormative sexual attraction—transformed from deviant to "the very criterion of normality" in a few short decades.<sup>465</sup> Now, frigidity and disinterest were the markers of problematic women in society, marking women-loving and asexual women as undesirable and in need of psychiatric help. Many of the fictional portrayals of women who disrupted cisheteronormative marriages include visits to a psychiatric ward or a therapist within the novel or play.

Fictional portrayals of women-loving women that dealt directly with married women include *Loveliest of Friends* by G. Sheila Donisthorpe (1931), *The Children's Hour* by Lillian

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<sup>463</sup> Christina Simmons, "Companionate marriage and the Lesbian Threat," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* (4.3, Autumn 1979, p. 54-59, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346150>), 58.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>465</sup> Lunbeck, "A New Generation of Women," 537-538.

Hellman (1934), and *Queer Patterns* by Lilyan Brock (1935). In *Loveliest of Friends*, Audrey and John have been married for some time before Audrey begins an extramarital affair with the lesbian villain, Kim. The love affair between the two women is shown to be so toxic that Audrey attempts suicide twice. When John comes to collect Audrey from the psychiatric hospital she went to after the second attempt, he tells her he wants to move forward with her: “The past is over. You’ve got to put it right away from you. It’s finished.”<sup>466</sup> But Audrey rejects this demand, saying “No—not finished. I’m in love with her still—it’ll never be finished.”<sup>467</sup> This is the same argument put forth by Irène De Montcel in *The Captive* when she fails to stay faithful to her marriage and instead returns to her dying lover Madame d'Aiguines. In the end, unable to continue to live with her husband but not knowing where Kim is, Audrey gets on a train to an unknown destination and decides she will never return.<sup>468</sup> The reader, then, is not meant to feel sympathy for anyone other than John, the good husband who is willing to continue to live with and love his unhinged wife, but who is jilted because of the poison of lesbianism, even after the homosexual relationship between his wife and another woman has ended.

While Audrey initially returns to John in *Loveliest of Friends*, Sheila divorces her husband Philip when she falls in love with the woman writer Nicoli in the very first chapter of *Queer Patterns* by Lilyan Brock (1935). Although there are fault lines early in the relationship between Philip and Sheila, Sheila still says yes to an engagement and follows through with the wedding. On her wedding night, she finds she is unable to become aroused and her inner voice protests sexual intercourse.<sup>469</sup> Cameron Duder provides insight into women’s relationship with their own sexualities in *Awfully Devoted Women: Lesbian Lives in Canada, 1900-65*, writing

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>469</sup> “Philip was so thoughtful of her, she reflected. Why-why couldn’t she return in some slight degree the deeper emotions he felt for her?” (Brock, *Queer Patterns*, 5-9).

“For some women, then, whatever gains there might have been in more open relationships with women were dramatically outweighed by the potential losses, and they kept their sexuality very much private.”<sup>470</sup> Sheila recognizes there was something shameful about her repulsion of Philip, and so she keeps quiet on their wedding night and allows him to consummate their marriage. In this way, Sheila is a model of the lesbian behavior Duder witnessed in Canada, while also serving as a model for the women reading *Queer Patterns* who may be tempted to engage in homosexual behavior. *Queer Patterns* instructed these women to marry and find happiness with their marriages, as Sheila’s decision to leave her husband created a chain of events that eventually resulted in her untimely death.

Sheila’s desire to return both Philip’s affection and his arousal are elements of a companionate marriage. According to Simmons, those who supported the concept of companionate marriage found lesbianism to be “an ‘irrational’ psychological cause for behavior which subtly challenged male sexual dominance within marriage.”<sup>471</sup> Sheila, a character living in the 1930s in the urban metropolises of Chicago and then New York, most likely would have been aware of the concept of companionate marriage and the idea lesbianism was “an irrational psychosis.” As such, when Sheila chose to give up her marriage with Philip to be with Nicoli, she recognized she was giving up the advantages, both personal and societal, of a companionate marriage.

Sheila and Nicoli met while working together on an upcoming play. Companionate marriage acknowledges women’s sexual desire is equal to men’s sexual desire and questions the concept of “separate spheres” for men and women. Recognizing that male homosexuals have existed for centuries, the women’s sphere was now seen as “potentially threatening and divisive,

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<sup>470</sup> Duder, *Awfully Devoted Women*, 6.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.



for it directed women's sexual and economic power away from the heterosexual establishment."<sup>472</sup> Spending too much time with other women, in the context of working on a play or attending women-only social functions, was believed to lead a woman to perverted sexual thoughts, in which the woman turned to another of the same sex for sexual pleasure. Simmons confirms this in her essay, claiming: "From another perspective, one might say the defenders of marriage were afraid that if psychological compatibility had become a major criterion for good relationships, then two women might sometimes find happiness more easily than a woman and a man."<sup>473</sup>

While both *Loveliest of Friends* and *Queer Patterns* were blatantly about women-loving women, labeling *The Children's Hour* as a "lesbian play" may be ambitious. While the fear of lesbianism is central to the play's plot, there is no lesbian relationship in the play. Written by New York socialite Lillian Hellman in 1934, the play centers on two friends, Martha and Karen, who start a young women's boarding school after graduating college. Karen is engaged to a doctor named Joe, who is also the cousin of one of Karen and Martha's students, Mary. Mary, a student who is both manipulative and self-righteous, accuses her teachers of lesbianism after she is punished for disrespect. Mary manipulates one of her classmates into corroborating the lie, and by the end of the following day, all the young women have left the school. The teachers, once able to ascertain the cause of their school's sudden failure, sue Mary's grandmother for libel. However, their key witness, Martha's aunt, does not appear when subpoenaed, and the teachers lose the case.

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<sup>472</sup> Mary Titus, "Murdering the Lesbian: Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* (10.2, Autumn 1991, 215-232, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464015>), 215.

<sup>473</sup> Simmons, "Companionate marriage and the Lesbian Threat," 56.

In Act II, we find Karen and Martha living together in the empty school, depressed and afraid to leave their home. Joe arrives to inform them that he has found a new job in a rural area out west, where they can start over. Martha encourages Karen and Joe to leave together, but Joe insists Martha join them. When Martha steps out, Karen confronts Joe about his own doubts of her faithfulness, claiming he, too, believes the accusations of homosexuality between Karen and Martha. Karen insists Joe end their engagement and tells Martha of the news once he is gone. At that point, Martha confesses that the accusations may be true, on her part, as she believes she is in love with Karen. Bereft, Martha commits suicide that evening, moments before Mary's grandmother arrives to beg forgiveness—Mary has confessed she lied.

In *The Children's Hour*, Martha and Karen rebel against the insistence they marry young and start families by instead living together in a homosocial environment—an all-girls' boarding school—and holding each other as their closest friend. Simmons argued the separate spheres of man and woman also fostered inequality and, consequently, women pushed back against the societal gender norms of the interwar era, demanding more freedom economically, socially, and, as per the new mores of the day, sexually. Although there is proof of women resisting the male-dominated world of the 1930s through independent living arrangements and the more masculine, less restrictive dress styles of this era, Simmons does not believe *actual* resistance was necessary. She explains: "Whether female resistance to heterosexual relationships actually occurred or not, the recognition of sexual inequality engendered in the culture a male *fear* of resistance, often expressed as a fear of lesbianism."<sup>474</sup> *Loveliest of Friends, The Children's Hour, and Queer Patterns* played directly into this fear.

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid., 55.

According to Victor Turner's theory of monsters, the lesbian is a monster because she is a woman with the same sexual thoughts and inclination as a man. During a prayer, Sheila's lesbian love interest, Nicoli asks God, "why in His otherwise perfect universe He had created women such as herself, with the impulses and desires of men and the bodies of women."<sup>475</sup> After finding and falling in love with the woman writer Nicoli, Sheila returns to Phillip and tells him, "...I'm sorry, genuinely sorry to hurt you—but our lives together must come to an end—we can't go on—my life and my love belong to...Nicoli. In her I have found what I know now I have been looking for without realizing what it was I really wanted."<sup>476</sup> This fictional conversation reinforces Simmons' claims that men feared their women would find more companionate relationships with other women. To eliminate the monstrous threat of lesbianism, a type of ambiguity that problematized the boundaries between man and woman, Brock chose to destroy not only Sheila, but also Nicoli and the novel's other lesbian character, Jo Trent, as well. Hellman also destroys the character who confesses to being a lesbian, almost immediately after the confession took place. Martha tells Karen she may have been attracted to her, then goes upstairs to shoot herself. Some of her final words to Karen are, "Oh, I feel so God-damned sick and dirty—I can't stand it anymore." The space between this declaration and Martha's suicide is ten sentences.<sup>477</sup>

*Loveliest of Friends* has a much more ambiguous ending, with Kim returning to her husband, Audrey getting on an unnamed train, and the other women-loving women characters kept alive. Donisthorpe chose to leave the threat of the lesbian monster omnipresent and pervasive. Any woman could be Kim or Nicoli; any wife could be Audrey or Sheila. Your

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<sup>475</sup> Bock, *Queer Patterns*, 33.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>477</sup> Lillian Hellman, *The Children's Hour*, (New York: Dramatists Play Services Inc, 1981), 69-70.

fiancée's best friend could be a threat to your marriage, as in the case of Karen and Martha. By the 1930s, sexologists, psychologists, and other educated men became increasingly aware of the realities of homosexual inclinations among women. Havelock Ellis found out his own wife had erotic desires for another woman, implying that even middle-class women could be so inclined. As sexology and psychology studies moved beyond the psychiatric hospital and prison, the borders between "good women" and "sex deviants" began to blur. "If both prostitutes and lesbians were hypersexual but not all hypersexual women were prostitutes or lesbians, then any woman was potentially a sex deviant."<sup>478</sup> In fact, ongoing research and the precarious economy of the Great Depression showed "Prostitutes and lesbians were no longer the Other, a foil against which the middle class could pose their own virtue (be it economic or sexual). Instead, any woman—wife, mother, sister, or daughter—might seek out the brothel (so to speak), another woman, or both to gratify her desire, rendering her husband sexually and, if she made money doing it, economically impotent."<sup>479</sup> John from *Loveliest of Friends*, Joe from *The Children's Hour*, Philip from *Queer Patterns*, and many other men in real life faced the reality that as women became more financially independent, they had little reason to remain in cisheteronormative marriages if they were sexually and romantically attracted to women.

### *Capitalism and Depression*

Although there was a growing fear that masculine women-loving women could "steal" good women from their husbands, the 1930s saw the early steps of separation between sexual and gender identities. A woman who dressed, acted, and worked as a man did not pose an

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<sup>478</sup> Heather Lee Miller, "Sexologists Examine Lesbians and Prostitutes in the United States, 1840-1940," *NWSA Journal*, (12.3, Autumn 2000, 67-91, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316763>), 77.

<sup>479</sup> Miller, "Sexologists Examine Lesbians," 77.

immediate threat, as there was the chance that she was crossdressing for economic gain. When Sammy Williams died in December 1908 after a long life as a lumberjack and camp cook in Montana, first his undertaker and then society was shocked to learn Williams was Assigned Female at Birth. In the *Idaho Statesman*, an editorial suggested Williams assumed the persona of a man because of the economic benefits. Examining the lives of women, especially those out West, the editor wrote: “Bound down as they are by social, domestic and other restrictions, it is . . . a marvel that more women have not adopted the course of ‘Sammy’ Williams...It is a great deal quicker and more successful a process than any equal suffrage law that was ever framed.”<sup>480</sup> Analyzing this article and others about Sammy Williams, Peter Boag notes that newspapers covered passing stories throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with most of these articles supporting the *Idaho Statesman’s* argument: people Assigned Female at Birth could make more money if they assumed a masculine appearance and passed as men. These articles divorced a woman’s masculine appearance or passing as a man from any romantic or sexual desire for another woman. Boag offers multiple examples of the economic benefits of “passing” as men for people Assigned Female at Birth. Black Civil War veteran William Cathy (formerly Cathy Williams) was able to find steady work throughout the War and was only discovered after a fifth hospital stay, when Cathy was discharged. Mrs. Georgie McRay, a white woman from Pennsylvania, would wear men’s clothing in order to ride the railroads west in search of adventure. She was married to a man during this time, and there is no evidence to suggest she had relationships with women. For Bessie Martini, a woman who dressed as a man and worked in the boating industry in San Francisco in 1915, assuming a male persona meant she did not have to turn to sex work to support herself. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century newspapers framed stories of

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<sup>480</sup> “Handicapped by Sex,” *Idaho Statesman*, (December 21, 1908, p. 4), quoted in Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2011. Web.

passing around the idea that assuming the appearance and persona of a man was about economic opportunity and had little to do with a person's sexual desires.<sup>481</sup>

Furthermore, companionate marriages, and the restrictions society imposed to keep women from falling in love with other women, were very much a middle-class phenomenon. The middle class recognized "passing" as a phenomenon of the working class, and so both "passing" and marriages between passing women and their feminine wives were "justified as part of an economic strategy for survival. As a man, a woman would have access to more and better paying jobs. These women saw themselves, not necessarily as men trapped in women's bodies, as some European sexologists were beginning to say, but rather as women in masquerade, seeking increased independence and higher wages."<sup>482</sup> It was not until women began to find economic independence that allowed them to provide a life for their partner, and the non-working women began partnering with these working women, that men became afraid of the woman with a "man's job" who wore pants and smoked cigars.

Kingsley Davis was a sociologist who wrote extensively about family dynamics and economics in the interwar era and beyond. Davis earned his PhD from Harvard in 1933 and eventually went on to chair the Sociology Department at University of California, Berkeley.<sup>483</sup> In his 1936 essay "Jealousy and Sexual Property," published in *Social Forces*, Davis argues that romantic relationships between people can and should be viewed through the lens of a property relationship, if only because humankind has not thought up another lens through which to view

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<sup>481</sup> Boag, *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*, 33-36. It should be noted that Boag argues the media's emphasis on "women passing as men for economic benefit" was part of a large-scale erasure of the more nuanced and complicated ways FTM individuals lived and loved on the western frontier.

<sup>482</sup> Lindquist, "Images of Alice, 41.

<sup>483</sup> "Kingsley Davis," National Academy of Science. Accessed 26 July 2020. <http://www.nasonline.org/member-directory/deceased-members/56466.html>

or analyze romance.<sup>484</sup> According to Davis, “There is competition for possession, a feeling of ownership on the part of the successful competitor, a ‘hands-off’ attitude on the part of the public, and a general resentment against anyone who endeavors to break up the relationship by ‘stealing’ the object.”<sup>485</sup> In this type of competition, there are three players: the man, the woman, and the trespasser; and there are two outcomes. If the woman wants the trespasser, she must risk angering the man she is with and the society who supports their partnership. If the woman wants the man or is afraid of public opinion, she must risk angering the trespasser. Many times, however, it is neither the man nor the trespasser, but society, which determines the outcome of a love triangle.

Looking at the triangle between Sheila, Phillip, and Nicoli, Sheila is the woman, Phillip is the man, and Nicoli is the trespasser. By choosing Nicoli, Sheila must face the societal ostracism faced by all divorced women and the moral outrage faced by women-loving women in the 1930s. According to Davis, “If the love-object (Sheila) yields to a member of a distinctly inferior social class (Nicoli, by way of being a woman and a lesbian), jealousy (on the part of Phillip) will turn into moral outrage, even if the lover himself has no claim on the love-object.”<sup>486</sup> Although Phillip was forgiving towards Sheila, society was not.

This concept was also explored in the 1937 novel *Pity for Women* by Helen Anderson. *Pity for Women* (1937) shows the difficulties faced by both cisheteronormative and queer characters throughout the 1930s. Early-on, the novel addresses the Americanized version of the

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<sup>484</sup> Kingsley Davis, “Jealousy and Sexual Property,” *Social Forces*, (14.3, March 1936, 395-405, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2571278>), 396.

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>486</sup> Davis offers the example of an interracial couple: “It is inconceivable, for this reason, that a Negro could be the rival of a southern white man for the hand of a white girl. The white man would have him lynched. Southern society does not permit Negroes as a class to compete for the affection of white girls. It is almost equally inconceivable that a white man could be a Negro’s rival for the hand of a colored girl. The Negro has rather too much advantage in the likelihood of social ostracism for the white man, or too little advantage in that the white man, if immune to the ostracism, can take the property by force” (“Jealousy and Sexual Property,” 401). This is yet another instance in which miscegenation and lesbianism go hand-in-hand with regards to sexual taboos of the interwar era.

British concept of the “Surplus Two Million,” or the idea that there were two million British women who would not marry because of the number of men who died in World War I.<sup>487</sup> In *Pity for Women*, Miss Wilson says, “Now there are five women to every three men in the United States...Not enough to go around...”<sup>488</sup> This disparity in the man-to-woman ratio manifests in suicide and abortion throughout the novel. Readers learn early about Tilly Beeker, whose room has been empty since “she got turned down by her boyfriend and hung herself in the shower room!”<sup>489</sup>

The need for one of these “surplus” woman to find one of the “few” men available in the interwar era also resulted in increased power inequality between men and women on the dating scene. On a date, the protagonist, Ann, is told by the man she is seeing, “I’ll never give a woman something again until she gives me something. I don’t trust women anymore.” William, the date, then proceeds to attempt to rape Ann.<sup>490</sup> Later in the book, Ann finds out that Katherine, another boarder at Ann’s boarding house, was rejected by her boyfriend after she had an abortion. Katherine had gotten the abortion under the impression it was the only way to keep her boyfriend happy. Ann “wanted revenge on Charles, she wanted to defend Katherine, and before she fell asleep, organized an army of women to fight against men and their love and their lies.”<sup>491</sup> Despite Ann’s righteous anger and the support of the other boarders, the rejected Katherine committed suicide by drinking a bottle of ammonia.<sup>492</sup> The suicides of both Tilly and Katherine in this novel suggest that Davis’ understanding of romantic relationships as property aligns with the sexual and relationship mores of the 1930s—a valuable woman knew how to get and keep a

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<sup>487</sup> Virginia Nicholson explores the idea of the “Surplus Two Million” in her book *Singled Out: How Two Million British Women Survived Without Men After the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>488</sup> Helen Anderson, *Pity for Women*, (New York: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, Inc., 1937), 22.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-28.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.



man; if the man chose to leave, then the woman lost value to society. In a capitalist society ruled by supply and demand, there was an over-supply of women and a low demand for them, due to the number of young men lost during the War. If a woman lost a good man and was nearing the age of spinsterhood, usually around thirty years old, then she faced a life forgotten on the shelf. Suicide, it seems, was not seen as a bad alternative to life as a lonely spinster.

Ann's boyfriend David is a wholesome, all-American man who hopes to marry Ann and give her the American Dream. This all comes to an end when Ann falls in love with Judith. The narrator records, "'I like him but it doesn't mean anything.' Ann whispered, and tears filled the rims of her eyes. It was like dying to say this."<sup>493</sup> David felt this sense of death as well. Noticing that Ann "was immovable and cold as any absent thing. He knew something was wrong. It was almost like watching a child die before it knew or had seen anything that life could give to it."<sup>494</sup> In this way, Judith becomes a seductive monster, luring Ann away from the cisheteronormative path she was on and towards the life of lesbianism. This process of stealing Ann away from men also deprives David of the woman he was hoping to marry. Although Judith is never shown in a wholly negative light, the fact that a good man is being deprived of a good woman is enough to illustrate the monstrous nature of lesbianism.

The triangle of Judith, Ann, and David aligns with that described by Davis: David is the man who has been hurt, Ann is the woman who has left, and Judith is the trespasser. The novel suggests that society sided with David, as Ann, who left her boyfriend (an acceptable choice) to pursue Judith ("a member of a distinctly inferior social class," in this case, a homosexual), feels ostracized. She exclaims to Judith, "I am not made for the slaughter. Hold me. Hold me, my

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<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

Judith. When the destruction? When the holocaust?”<sup>495</sup> Ann, having left a good man and turned to lesbianism, appears to be awaiting her punishment. This punishment eventually arrives, and Ann goes insane on the final page of the novel.<sup>496</sup>

Ann’s friend, Elizabeth, accuses Judith of being abnormal. Judith responds, “It’s this society we live in that’s abnormal!”<sup>497</sup> A few moments later, Judith, like Stephen Gordon before her, vows to protect her beloved. Elizabeth immediately responds: “You can’t...You can’t even protect yourself.”<sup>498</sup> During the Great Depression, one of the key attacks that Judith cannot be sure to protect Ann from is financial instability. Recognizing this, Judith concludes that it is financial uncertainty that pushes women into cisheteronormative marriages:

Financial uncertainty! Ah, that’s a fine disease of human nature we have to bear, and women most of all. And greed, there’s another! There the reason for our human ills, our suicides, our agonies, and no one will ever be able to prove that it is love or any of its devious flights that cause so much twisting of the mind and body, until that one thing is cured!<sup>499</sup>

That “one thing” is financial uncertainty, suggesting Judith believes it is the economy, and not love, which caused Tilly and Katherine to commit suicide when their boyfriends rejected them. For Judith, marriage is not about companionship or love, it is about women finding the financial stability needed to survive. In a world where there are not enough men to go around, middle-class women found suicide favorable to a life of impoverished spinsterhood. In this monologue, Judith is a vehicle through which the author can speak directly to her audience, imploring them to recognize the hazards of compulsory heteronormativity—by placing all one’s hope on the

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<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

financial certainty of marriage, women are damning themselves to a life of restless agony, and a love that cannot provide for itself.

For the women in *Pity for Women*, the family unit was unavailable as a safety net for financial stability. Each of the women introduced in the boarding house appears to be isolated from her family, with little reference made to parents or siblings. This sense of isolated independence was, according to John D'Emilio, a part of the homosexual experience. D'Emilio connects the rise of homosexuality with the supremacy of capitalism in his canonical essay, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," first published in 1983. Therein, D'Emilio explains that the instability of capitalism, manifested as the Great Depression, was caused by the deconstruction of the family unit as economically independent from other family units, as exists in an agrarian society. As men began to leave the family to earn wages, the unit morphed into an interdependent structure, in which men earned the money and women cared for the home and family. Furthermore, an industrialized way of life required fewer children, as children were no longer seen as farm laborers who supported the family economically, but as extra mouths to feed and bodies to clothe that drained the family economically. Large birth rates went from necessary to undesirable in the turn from the nineteenth to twentieth century.

Although procreation was no longer necessary, sexual intercourse was still seen as important in marriage. Thus, for the first time in centuries, society accepted that sex could be performed without the intention of procreating. D'Emilio argues that it was capitalism's ability to divest the household of its economic independence and divorce sexuality from procreation that empowered people attracted to the same sex to live outside of a family unit and embrace a sexual expression that could not create children. Homosexuality and lesbian communities "could evolve

because capitalism allowed individuals to survive beyond the confines of the family.”<sup>500</sup>

Although not expressly articulated in this essay, D’Emilio’s argument also explains why homosexual men were able to build communities much earlier than homosexual women, as capitalism empowered men to enter the public sphere as bachelors long before it empowered women to do the same.

At the same time women are looking for financial stability, they are also seen as property. Explaining her homosexuality, *Pity for Women*’s Judith calls herself a “thief in society,” one for whom, “no lawyer could find words to defend.”<sup>501</sup> In this statement, the “property” she is stealing is a woman. According to D’Emilio, once women were also able to become wage earners, beginning in the interwar era, the family unit took on new meaning. “But for those people who felt the brunt of these changes, the family took on new significance as an affective unit, an institution that produced not goods by emotional satisfaction and happiness. By the 1920s among the white middle class, the ideology surrounding the family described it as the means through which men and women formed satisfying, mutual enhancing relationships and created an environment that nurtured children.”<sup>502</sup> Under this premise, women were necessary for men to find “emotional satisfaction and happiness,” like a bar of chocolate or a good bottle of vodka. Without a woman, men would be unable to find the emotional support and validation that companionate marriage promised, and Judith was a thief for taking a good woman off the market.

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<sup>500</sup> John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, & Sharon Thompson, eds. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983, 100-113), 101-104.

<sup>501</sup> Anderson, *Pity for Women*, 150.

<sup>502</sup> D’Emilio, “Capitalism and the Gay Identity,” 103.

D'Emilio argues capitalism alone is responsible for the destruction of the foundations of the family unit.<sup>503</sup> In *Pity for Women*, Judith rails against the societal narrative that women can only find financial certainty in a cisheteronormative marriage and nuclear family, because she herself was able to become financially independent without a man. D'Emilio shows that by the 1930s, Judith's financial independence and the possibility other women could follow in her footsteps was a societal reality that the capitalist narrative refused to accept. Capitalism continued to erode the necessity of family life throughout the interwar era, especially as the Great Depression destroyed the popular myth that marriage would guarantee security and stability for both middle class partners. There was no realistic reason for men and women to enter marriage, so capitalism needed to create a fictive narrative that convinced men and women to stay together long enough to create children and produce the next generation of laborers.

“On the other hand,” D'Emilio explains, “the ideology of capitalist society has enshrined the family as the source of love, affection, and emotional security, the place where our need for stable, intimate human relationships is satisfied.”<sup>504</sup> Those who do not enter a cisheteronormative marriage with plans to create a nuclear family are thus rendered lonely (as per *The Well of Loneliness*) or pitiful (as per *Pity for Women*). As homosexuals and feminists rejected the standards of the companionate marriage and nuclear family, “they have become the scapegoats for the social instability of the system,” while capitalism is able to perpetuate the idea that nuclear family units are necessary even as this socioeconomic system continues to destabilize the foundation of the nuclear family.<sup>505</sup>

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<sup>503</sup> D'Emilio argues: “On the one hand, as I argued earlier, capitalism has gradually undermined the material basis of the nuclear family by taking away the economic functions that cemented the ties between family members.” (108) As the nuclear family was constructed on a material basis (though the destruction of a homosocial military environment in the ancient world and the rise of serfdom reliant on independence and interdependence in farming), undermining the material basis is akin to undermining the entire foundation.

<sup>504</sup> D'Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” 108.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

The cisheteronormative marriage and nuclear family were thus elevated to a level of “ideological preeminence,” which D’Emilio believes, “guarantees that capitalist society will reproduce not just children, but heterosexism and homophobia. In the most profound sense, capitalism is the problem.”<sup>506</sup> Judith concurs with this conclusion, explaining that it is our greed that will be our undoing, especially for young, single women, as she is addressing Ann’s young, single roommate Elizabeth in this monologue. In this way, Judith offers up an argument to society that lesbians should be allowed to exist as humans, not as monsters, because there is no economic necessity for men and women to live together, especially when there is a high enough birth rate to provide workers for the next generation. At the same time, Judith was wracked with internalized homophobia because her existence was so far outside the acceptable capitalist narrative of cisheteronormative, nuclear family life. Even though she knew this fiction to be a lie, she could not fully escape from its damnation. In trying to find happiness in spite of her disavowal of capitalism, Judith is ultimately punished when her girlfriend goes insane right before reciting her marriage vows.<sup>507</sup>

### *Racial Progress and Passing*

Although the ideas of companionate marriage were espoused in books across the country, the concept mostly pertained to the white middle class. For the working classes of all races and for the growing Black middle class, the ideas of companionate marriage took longer to permeate society. One reason for this delay may have been the Great Migration of Black Americans from the South to northern cities including Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and New York, which separated young Black workers along gender lines. It was much easier for Black women to find

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<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>507</sup> Anderson, *Pity for Women*, 267.

domestic work in the cities, where they could serve as laundresses, maids, and caretakers for the white people who lived nearby. Black men found more opportunity in agricultural work, far away from the cities. This led to a disparity between the number of men and the number of women in many Black urban neighborhoods of the interwar era, compounding the perceived “shortage of good men” among working class white people caused by World War I and described in *Pity for Women*. In 1930, there were almost 14,000 more Black women living in New York City than Black men.<sup>508</sup> The “surplus” Black women created increased concern about homosexuality among Black communities, especially in the North, where newcomers were not always accepted or welcomed.<sup>509</sup>

At the same time, women across racial divides were searching desperately for work as the Great Depression settled in throughout 1929 in to the 1930s. Although Black women could find domestic work, pay was better for men, who worked in factories and on farms where they could make higher wages. “Passing” as men allowed women to make men’s wages and, if they wanted to, marry other women. Those women who worked as domestic servants made up for economic hardships by moving in with other single women. Left without men in homosocial boarding houses, interwar Black women communities were granted “a measure of tolerance for homosexual relationships” given the context of the Sexual Revolution, the Great Migration, and the Great Depression.<sup>510</sup> Still, while many in the community were willing to avert their eyes from two unmarried Black women who lived together well-past the appropriate age to find a man and marry, the concept of homosexuality and “passing” as men “did not support the ideology of

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<sup>508</sup> Ira Rosenwaik, *Population History of New York City* (Syracuse, NY, 1972), 189–91. Quoted in Cookie Woolner, “Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl”: African American Women, Same-Sex Desire, and Violence in the Urban North, 1920–1929,” *The Journal of African American History*, (100.3, “Gendering the Carceral State: African American Women, History, and the Criminal Justice System,” Summer 2015, 406–427, <https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.100.3.0406>), 410.

<sup>509</sup> Woolner, “Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl,” 410.

<sup>510</sup> Freedman, “The Prison Lesbian,” 398.

respectability, which was a crucial component of racial uplift that placed great emphasis on proper deportment in hopes of achieving equal treatment from whites.”<sup>511</sup>

The concept of ‘a politics of respectability’ commonly referred to now as ‘respectability politics,’ was first coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, published in 1993.<sup>512</sup> This concept articulated a well-known element of the racial uplift movement supported by the Black bourgeoisie of the early twentieth century. Brooks Higginbotham explains a politics of respectability “equated public behavior with individual self-respect and with the advancement of African Americans as a group.”<sup>513</sup> In a perversion of Emma Lazarus’ decree “Until we are all free, we are none of us free,” respectability politics suggested that *all* Black Americans had to be ‘respectable,’ that is, adhere to white middle class social mores and morality standards, in order for *any* Black American to achieve equal citizenship in the United States. According to Brooks Higginbotham, the Black bourgeoisie’s “repeated condemnation of nonconformity indicated the significance they attached to individual behavior in the collective imaging of [B]lack people.”<sup>514</sup> However, while unwed mothers or cohabitating unmarried couples were clear violations of respectability politics, it was much more difficult to prove, and therefore police, homosexual relationships between women. For example, many boarding houses prevented male guests to visit women in their bedrooms, in hopes of preventing both sex work and unwed motherhood from occurring in the boardinghouse. However, there were few rules preventing women from

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<sup>511</sup> Woolner, “Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl,” 413–414.

<sup>512</sup> For more information about respectability politics and the role of middle-class Black reformers and Club women on policing the sexuality, womanhood, and motherhood of middle-class and working-class Black women, see Cheryl D. Hicks, “‘Bright and Good Looking Colored Girl’: Black Women’s Sexuality and ‘Harmful Intimacy’ in Early-Twentieth-Century New York,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, (18.3, September 2009, 418–456); Nadra Nittle, “A Magical Black Narrative,” *Toni Morrison’s Spiritual Vision*, (Minneapolis: 1517 Media Fortress Press, 2021); and Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

<sup>513</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1994), 21.

<sup>514</sup> Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 180.



visiting other women in their bedrooms. In this way, “cultural norms based on ideas about ‘respectability’ generally overlooked the possibility of a same-sex relationship, creating space for it to flourish.”<sup>515</sup> Still, by the late 1920s those enforcing respectability politics were hard at work finding ways to prevent homosexual behavior between women. In February 1929, Edgar M. Grey published an article entitled “Are Women Lovers Harmful?” in the Harlem *Inter-State Tattler*, which was focused on Black entertainment and society news.<sup>516</sup> Published in the middle of *The Well of Loneliness*’ American trial, it is unlikely that Grey had a different book in mind when he wrote this article. According to Grey,

...most of the women who are lady lovers developed the habit, either from association with persons who were addicted to the practice, or deliberately in search of a substitute for a man. The habit and practices were developed either by imitation, or from a desire to explore some new sexual region in search of a thrill. In many cases, women who have been fooled by men revert to this habit of loving other women, in order to salve their feelings, and get even, as it were, with the sex of the man who had wronged them.<sup>517</sup>

Grey’s article and the growing influence of respectability politics culminated in a societal zeitgeist in many Black communities in which homosexuality between women was seen as a choice—and the wrong one.

It was into this zeitgeist that Nella Larsen birthed her second novel, *Passing*, in April 1929. Although there was no overt lesbianism discussed in the book, the novel’s protagonist Irene Redfield spends the entirety of the novel thinking about, engaging with, avoiding, and being angry with her childhood friend Clare Kendry. Both Irene and Clare could “pass” as white women, which Irene took advantage of sparingly to enjoy the comforts of a high-society hotel,

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<sup>515</sup> Woolner, “Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl,” 415.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

<sup>517</sup> Edgar M. Grey, “Are Women Lovers Harmful?” *Inter-State Tattler*, February 15, 1929, 3.

but which Clare used to marry a white European and escape the difficult childhood she had as a Black girl in Chicago. When they meet as adult women at the Drayton, a whites-only hotel in Chicago, Clare makes her way back into Irene's life, desperate to be a part of the bourgeoisie Black community Irene rules over as a doctor's wife. The novel ends with Irene realizing Clare is having an affair with Irene's husband.

In the beginning of the novel, while shopping for her young son, Irene likens the boy to his father in her head. "Like his father. For ever wanting something that he couldn't have."<sup>518</sup> The allusion, as the reader learns later, is to Mr. Redfield's desire to move out of the United States, preferably to South America. However, by the end of the novel it becomes clear that the young Redfield boy may *also* inherit his desire for "something that he couldn't have" from his mother. Irene spends the entirety of the novel thinking about Clare, only to find out in the end that Clare was seducing Irene's husband. It becomes obvious early in the novel that Irene believes Clare is beautiful. Upon becoming reacquainted with Clare, Irene thinks to herself, "She's really almost too good-looking."<sup>519</sup> Later, Irene thinks that Clare as "A tempting mouth."<sup>520</sup> After Clare convinces Irene to do something she does not want to do, Irene asks herself, "What was it about Clare's voice that was so appealing, so very seductive?"<sup>521</sup> Throughout the novel, Irene notices and remarks on Clare's beauty, establishing at least a recognition of Clare's seductive powers, if not outright acceptance of the fact that Clare has seduced her way into Irene's life.

The central point of *Passing* is Clare's decision early in life to pass as a white woman and marry a white man who does not know she is half Black. Clare's husband is so ignorant of his

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<sup>518</sup> Nella Larsen, *Passing*, (North Chelmsford, Massachusetts: Courier Corporation, 2012), 22.

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

wife's racial background that he even gives her a nickname derived from the n-word and based on the fact that "she's gettin darker and darker" as she ages.<sup>522</sup> However, as much as Clare is passing as a white woman, it appears at least Irene (but perhaps also Clare) is passing as a heterosexual as well. Irene is increasingly ashamed that her husband is unhappy and increasingly afraid that Clare may be found out as Black by Clare's white husband. *Passing* becomes a psychological thriller as both women work to contain themselves and adhere to the strict limits placed upon them as wives and mothers. "Yet, their attempts to live up to a fictionalized ideal of femininity increases their sense of failure and self-blame as they find it impossible to conform themselves continually to such an image. Moreover, according to Larsen, the more women of mixed ethnicity invest in mulatto female stereotypes, the more they blame each other for and exonerate men from ethnic and sexual betrayal."<sup>523</sup> Together, Clare and Irene transgress the limits society has placed upon them: they are both Black women who visit whites-only establishments, Clare leaves her white community and goes out on the town in Black society with the Redfields, and, the final transgression, the married Clare seduces Irene's husband. In the beginning of the novel, Irene looks down upon Clare and blames her for betraying the Black community by marrying a white man, in turn exonerating Clare's father for his daughter's distrust of the Black community because of the violence he inflicted upon her at a young age. At the end of the novel, instead of blaming her husband for the affair, Irene exonerates the man and places the blame for sexual betrayal on Clare. Respectability politics forced both women to contain their desires: Clare's desire to be a part of the Black community and Irene's desire for Clare.

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<sup>522</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>523</sup> H. Jordan Landry, "Seeing Black Women Anew through Lesbian Desire in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, (60.1, 2006, 25-52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4143877>), 26.

Right after Irene learns of the affair, Irene contemplates the concept of security. “Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained?”<sup>524</sup> Was “some wild ecstasy” a moment of sexual indulgence with Clare? Deborah A. McDowell addresses Larsen’s unwillingness to engage with any portrayal of a Black woman’s sexual desire—let alone a Black woman’s *homosexual* desire—in her 1986 introduction to *Quicksand and Passing*. This introduction is often referred to as “Black Female Sexuality in *Passing*” and has become canonical in the study of Black lesbian history. According to McDowell, Larsen, and fellow Black women writers of the Harlem Renaissance such as Zora Neale Hurston and Jessie Fauset, avoided the topic of Black women’s sexuality because of the pervasive belief that Black women had “wanton, insatiable desires.”<sup>525</sup> Respectability politics of the era insisted Black women embrace timidity, modesty, and the purity culture of the Victorian Era. While Black women musicians of the interwar era eschewed this ideology, Black women writers seemed to accept the limits placed upon them by the bourgeoisie club women of the time.<sup>526</sup> Class differences may have impacted the two forms of entertainment: novels were mostly created by the middle and upper classes to be consumed by the middle and upper classes, while Blues concerts and music performances were often created by the working class to be consumed by the working class. Whereas *Passing* cost \$2.00 a book when it was published, tickets to see Ma Rainey perform often cost less than 25 cents.<sup>527</sup> While Chapter Five shows censorship was *more* prevalent in

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<sup>524</sup> Larsen, *Passing*, 103.

<sup>525</sup> Deborah E. McDowell, “Introduction.” *Passing and Quicksand*, Nella Larsen, ix-xxxv (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), xii.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>527</sup> According to the Community Arts Music Association of Santa Barbara (CAMA), they were charging \$0.25 to \$1.00 per tickets for their upper-class music recitals, suggesting that Blues concerts were much cheaper. “1919/20s” CAMA, May 19, 2016, Accessed September 25, 2021, <https://camasb.org/2016/05/19/1920s/>. Novel price listed in *New York Times* review (“Beyond the Color Line,” *The New York Times*, (April 28, 1929, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1929/04/28/issue.html>), 14).

movies because they were created by the middle and upper classes for the impressionable masses, music was a “working man’s” creation and thus could be bawdier, sexier, and tabooer than novels created for the genteel middle classes.<sup>528</sup> At the same time, Carol Batker warns against creating definite boundaries between middle-class and working-class Black women of the interwar era. “Each discourse struggled with class issues and with legitimating black female sexuality in a racist context which positioned African American women as libidinous.”<sup>529</sup>

Compounding the different audiences for which novels and songs were written, they were also written to portray different audiences. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Gladys Bentley and other non-cisheteronormative Blues singers of the interwar and postwar Eras were primarily writing about working class life. At first, these songs were written for working class crowds, but the performers’ success soon launched them and their music into the upper classes. The songs portrayed working-class Black women in a way that was both expected and palatable for upper-class white audiences—hypersexual, on the margins of society, and down on their luck.<sup>530</sup> For Nella Larsen, both she and her audience were members of the growing Black middle class and expected middle-class Black characters and situations that narrated their experiences. McDowell suggests, “We might say that Larsen wanted to tell the story of the [B]lack woman with sexual desires, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish [B]lack women as respectable in [B]lack middle class terms. The latter desire committed her to exploring [B]lack female sexuality obliquely and, inevitably, to permitting it only within the context of marriage, despite the

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<sup>528</sup> For more about Black queer women performers during the Harlem Renaissance, see Patricia Yaeger, “Editor’s Note: Bulldagger Sings the Blues,” *PMLA*, (124.3, May 2009, 721-726) and Kim Gallon, “‘No Tears for Alden’: Black Female Impersonators as ‘Outsiders Within’ in the ‘Baltimore Afro-American,’” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, (27.3, September 2018, 367-394).

<sup>529</sup> Carol Batker, “‘Love Me Like I Like to Be’: The Sexual Politics of Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God*, the Classic Blues, and the Black Women’s Club Movement,” *African American Review*, (32.2, Summer 1998, 199-213), 200.

<sup>530</sup> Batker explains, “These songs privileged working- over middle-class experience, but at the same time they reinforced the opposition which positioned working-class women as overly sexual. As duCille has argued, the lyrics of sexual desire both situated African American women as sexual subjects and as oversexed in an historical moment when primitivism was selling well.” (Batker, “‘Love Me Like I Want to Be,’” 202).

strangling effect of the choice both on her characters and on her narratives.”<sup>531</sup> This is especially true because none of the marriages in Larsen’s two 1920s novels seem happy. Clare’s husband may love her, but he repeatedly calls her “Nig” in reference to her dark skin and she regularly lies to him and lets him believe she is fully white. Irene enjoys the societal aspects of being the wife of Dr. Redfield but is annoyed by his restlessness while he is annoyed by her unwillingness to leave New York. In Larsen’s first novel, *Quicksand*, which does not have lesbian themes, the protagonist, Helga, ends the novel hating her husband, dreaming of freedom, and pregnant with her fifth child.<sup>532</sup> Larsen’s portrayals of marriage are discomfiting, unromantic, and monotonously hellish. Even without the lesbian undercurrents, her writing contradicts the burgeoning concept of Companionate marriage and racial uplift. She transgressed so many of the societal boundaries around proper and respectable middle-class Black women, and yet, she could not transgress that of sexual identity.

In the end, Clare must die in *Passing* for the same reason that Helga must remain married to man she hates in *Quicksand*. “However much Larsen criticizes the repressive standards of sexual morality upheld by the [B]lack middle class, finally she cannot escape those values.”<sup>533</sup> Larsen was trapped by the confines of her middle-class respectability in much the same way that Radclyffe Hall was trapped by the confines of her upper-class bigotry. Although Hall belittles the small-mindedness of other upper-middle class people throughout *The Well of Loneliness*, in the end she allows their provincial views to prevail. Although Larsen parodies and mocks the Black bourgeoisie with her portrayal of the Negro Welfare League and the white crowds they solicit for “racial uplift,” in the end she allows their desire for middle class Black nuclear

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<sup>531</sup> McDowell, “Introduction,” xvi.

<sup>532</sup> Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1928), 299-302.

<sup>533</sup> McDowell, “Introduction,” xxii.

families to prevail.<sup>534</sup> Neither could allow the taboo life to succeed at the end of their novels, because doing so would put too much pressure on the status quo from which they prospered. Furthermore, the concept of marriage had to be protected at all costs. Helga's fifth unwanted pregnancy, on the tail end of the health scare she faced after giving birth to her fourth unwanted child, forced her to remain married to her husband. Clare's death the same evening Irene learned of her husband's affair meant Irene and Dr. Redfield never had to discuss his—or both of their—feelings for Clare.

In McDowell's analysis of *Passing*, Irene pushes Clare from the window, causing Clare's death. For McDowell, this is a "psychological suicide" for Irene, in which she murders her homosexual feelings for Clare, a death transference similar to that which transformed Jo March into Mrs. Josephine Bahr in *Little Women*, as discussed in Chapter One.<sup>535</sup> In this death transference, Irene is able to kill her feelings for Clare and her anger and sense of betrayal towards her husband by pushing Clare out the window. Clare, which Irene has painted as her antithesis, becomes "both the embodiment and the object of the sexual feelings Irene banishes" by murdering her.<sup>536</sup> McDowell explains that the decision to kill Clare empowers Larsen "to punish the very values the novel implicitly affirms," that is, female friendship, homosexual desire, and women's agency" and "to honor the value system the text implicitly satirizes," that is, the concept of racial uplift and playing by the rules of respectability politics.<sup>537</sup> Homosexual desire, therefore, is shown as tragic and antithetical to racial uplift. Therefore, Clare must be killed in order to maintain the status quo of Irene's intraracial and cisheteronormative marriage, which is the center point of both the racial uplift ideology and respectability politics.

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<sup>534</sup> Ibid., xxv.

<sup>535</sup> Ibid., xxix.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid., xxix.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., xxx-xxxi.

*Passing* was not the only novel of the Harlem Renaissance to spotlight the importance of female friendships to Black women. However, it does exemplify the belief throughout Harlem Renaissance novels written by Black women that cisheteronormative marriage had to be a part of a Black woman's narrative. Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* also spotlighted the importance of homosocial connections that empowered women to build their own lives, while also connecting these women to men through marriage. However, none of these novels were overt with their exploration of homosexual desire between women in the interwar era. Male homosexual themes were permitted and published during the Harlem Renaissance, most notably in the work of Richard Bruce Nugent, who published "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," in the first issue of *Fire!!*, a literary magazine he and other writers of the Harlem Renaissance created in 1926. Both the readers of and advertisers in *Fire!!* were predominantly middle-class Black people who "could communicate any displeasure quite forcefully to the editors."<sup>538</sup> And yet, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," though "[w]ritten from an explicitly homoerotic perspective, complete with bedroom scenes," did not even receive enough criticism to get the magazine banned in Boston, historically the most censorious region of the United States.<sup>539</sup>

Instead, it was both misogyny and colorism which directly impacted the possibility of Black women portraying sapphic homosexuality in their novels. "[E]arly 20th-century literary discourse blames assimilation on mulatto women's pursuit of freedom from gender and sexual strictures. Thus, mulatto women must regulate their gender and sexuality for ethnic pride to burgeon, and their failure to do so spells a threat to the continuation of African-American

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<sup>538</sup> Thomas H. Wirth, "Introduction," *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, Richard Bruce Nugent, 1-62 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



culture.”<sup>540</sup> Scapegoated as the reason for both assimilation and Black America’s inability to achieve citizenship parity with white America, Black women—especially mixed race Black women—were forced to reduce the threat they posed to society by containing their non-cisheteronormative sexualities and marrying a Black man. Larsen the writer, and Irene and Clare the fictional characters, police themselves to uphold Black femininity and reject judgement from outside forces that reify racial uplift and respectability politics.<sup>541</sup> Forced to choose between writing openly about homosexual desire between Black women and reenforcing the racial uplift politics of the day, Larsen chose to stand with the mores of her social class and kill the lesbian threat embodied by Clare Kendry.<sup>542</sup>

### *The Right to Exist*

The psychological breakdowns faced by many fictional lesbians were often written as punishments for these women who dared to abandon cisheteronormative men in exchange for a same-sex relationship with another woman. Donisthorpe’s *Loveliest of Friends* and *Nightwood* (1936) by Djuna Barnes are perhaps the most obvious of these punitive narratives. *Loveliest of Friends* is, above all else, a bogeyman, the monster story that parents of the 1930s could tell their teenage daughters to prevent them from indulging in same-sex desires. The main character, Audrey, serves as a warning to all women thinking of turning to another woman for

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<sup>540</sup> Landry, “Seeing Black Women Anew,” 25-26.

<sup>541</sup> Landry writes, “In Larsen’s work, women of mixed ethnicity fear being defined by other African Americans as race traitors if they resist sexual and gender norms. Yet, their attempts to live up to a fictionalized ideal of femininity increases their sense of failure and self-blame as they find it impossible to conform themselves continually to such an image.” (Landry, “Seeing Black Women Anew,” 26)

<sup>542</sup> For further explanation of the overlap between lesbian sexual desire, assimilation into white America, and the role *Passing* played in both dismantling and reifying these ideas, please see Landry’s “Seeing Black Women Anew through Lesbian Desire in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*.”

companionship, while Audrey's lover, Kim, is shown as a monster and murderer. The narrator explains the similarities between different narratives of women-loving women:

For the drug that is deathless—a woman's love for a woman—had left in her very entrails its root. She would bear the sufferings inflicted on all emotionally exploited weaklings. A few may survive such relationships, the drinking, the intrigues, the excitements, the physical malpractices that at first lend a forced kind of vitality and then sap it up, undermining the whole system in a gradual physical and spiritual decay.<sup>543</sup>

Donisthorpe goes on to write:

This, then, is the product of lesbianism. This the result of dipping the fingers of vice into a sex-welter whose deadly force crucifies a slow, eternal bleeding. And yet, there are those who hug as a martyrdom these sadistic habits, who clamour for the recognition of the sinister group who practise them, those crooked, twisted freaks of Nature who stagnate in dark and muddy waters, and who are so choked with the weeds of viciousness and selfish lust that, drained of all pity, they regard their victims as mere stepping-stones to their future pleasure...<sup>544</sup>

Based on both the timing and the language of Donisthorpe's monster story, the author was speaking directly to the ideas brought forth in *The Well of Loneliness* two years earlier. Valérie Seymour calls Stephen Gordon a martyr twice in *The Well of Loneliness*, and there is a copious amount of religious imagery similar to that brought forth in Donisthorpe's crucifixion imagery. While Hall pleads for acceptance, Donisthorpe warns of the danger of lesbianism, one of the four techniques Douglas set forth as the way society deals with ambiguity. Although this was a bit after-the-fact, as Hall had already stood trial for her book and faced public judgement in the well-read *Sunday Express*, the popularity of *Loveliest of Friends* shows that the conversation of lesbianism was now one of acceptance versus avoidance, embracing versus destroying.

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<sup>543</sup> Sheila G. Donisthorpe, *Loveliest of Friends*, (New York: Berkley Books, 1931), 139.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

While for Hall, the victims were those congenital sexual inverts who could not help their attraction to women and often resented it, Donisthorpe positioned congenital lesbians as monsters who preyed on the emotionally weak. This aligns with the various state governments in the United States, which were now emphasizing legal deterrents to homosexuality rooted in protecting the young and the vulnerable, most obviously New York's new law against "impairing the morals of minors."<sup>545</sup> The emotionally underdeveloped could fall prey to the monstrosity that was the lesbian, causing the degradation of happy marriages, lustful licentious behavior by upstanding young women, and even suicide attempts. *Loveliest of Friends* is stalwart in its labeling of lesbianism as dangerous and its crusade for the destruction of lesbianism in society.

Djuna Barnes' canonical work *Nightwood* was published in 1935 by Faber and Faber in London and came to the United States by way of Harcourt Publishing in 1937. This novel, which Barnes called "my life with Thelma," was largely autobiographical and focused on Barnes' relationship with fellow American expatriate Thelma Wood. Although this relationship was well-known amongst their friends, the wider public was unaware of the lesbian relationship between the well-known journalist (Barnes) and the unknown silverpoint artist (Wood).<sup>546</sup> This novel was also rooted in the concept of karmic insanity for women-loving women characters. Although autobiographical in some respects, *Nightwood* ends with Robin Vote, the character based on Wood, going insane, while the real Thelma Wood maintained her sanity even after her relationship with Barnes fell apart. Literally, Robin's insanity is a punishment for her alcoholism and infidelity while she was in a relationship with Nora Flood, the character based on Barnes. In

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<sup>545</sup> Eskridge, *Gaylaw*, 41.

<sup>546</sup> Djuna Barnes, letter to Emily Coleman, 14 December 1935, Emily Holmes Coleman Papers, Special Collections, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware. Quoted in Cheryl J. Plumb, "Introduction," in Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood: The Original Version and Related Drafts*, Cheryl J. Plumb, ed., vii-xxvi, (Normal, IL: Dackley Archive Press, 1995), vii.

describing her relationship with Wood, Barnes' friend Emily Coleman recorded: "Djuna believes her to be a wonderful wild creature, with much evil in her, but all that evil is romanticized."<sup>547</sup>

Robin leaves Nora for another woman, named Jenny, in the penultimate chapter of *Nightwood*. In the final chapter, "The Possessed," Robin leaves her home with Jenny and ventures into the woods, walking until she reaches Nora's property. After getting down on all fours and attacking Nora's dog, Robin begins "barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching."<sup>548</sup> Robin and the dog tussle with one another, and the story ends with Robin falling to the ground, crying, while the dog looks on with bloodshot eyes. Robin, it appears, has lost her mind and given in to the animal inside her.

The Jenny character in *Nightwood* is modelled after Barnes' real-life rival for Wood's affections, Henriette McCrea Metcalf, who started a relationship with Wood in 1928. Metcalf, older than Barnes (who was already a decade older than Wood), caused an irreparable rift between Barnes and Wood, the latter of whom moved to New York shortly after. Metcalf took care of Wood, which Wood appreciated but, in an undated letter to Barnes, Wood explains:

...But I can't be rude as Henriette is such a silly little goodhearted female I feel so sorry for her... Any way I would rather be with you than have all the money in the world and I wish we were in the country together [*sic*] with many fires and stacks of books and then a big chicken dinner and we'd play cards and take such good care of you...<sup>549</sup>

In short, the relationship between Thelma Wood and Djuna Barnes may have been parasitic and unhealthy, but there is no documentation of Wood going insane the way Robin did in *Nightwood*.

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<sup>547</sup> Emily Coleman, *Emily Coleman's diaries*, 209-210. Quoted in Phillip Herring, "Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood: The Vengeance of 'Nightwood,'" *Journal of Modern Literature*, (18.1, Winter, 1992, 5-18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831544>), 11.

<sup>548</sup> Barnes, *Nightwood*, 139.

<sup>549</sup> Herring, "Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood," 14

The question then becomes, why did Robin go back to Nora and then go insane while Wood abandoned Barnes and remained a sane, unfaithful alcoholic? According to Amy Wells-Lynn, Robin's insanity is rooted in Barnes' inability to properly articulate the language of love between two women. Speaking directly about Robin Vote in *Nightwood*, Wells-Lynn explains, "When a woman cannot claim a common female context or language, she herself hits a reading/writing block, the consequences of which can be fatal, ending in suicide or madness..."<sup>550</sup> Although Robin goes insane and Wood does not, Barnes and Nora appear to feel similarly about their lovers. Nora exclaims: "Love is death, come upon with passion; I know, that is why love is wisdom. I love her as one condemned to it."<sup>551</sup> In the same conversation, Nora later concludes that if she were to leave Robin, Robin would say, "You have got to stay with me or I can't live."<sup>552</sup> In her literary world, Barnes was able to serve justice to the alcoholic, unfaithful Robin by making these words true and forcing Robin to go insane. Unlike *Loveliest of Friends*, in which Audrey's insanity and suicide attempts serve as a public warning to other women not to turn to lesbianism, *Nightwood* is an act of private revenge against Thelma Wood.<sup>553</sup> Unfortunately, without this context, the two novels share the same conclusion: being in a lesbian relationship is toxic and will lead to insanity.

In 1990, Hank O'Neal published a memoir about the time he spent with Djuna Barnes at the end of her life. Entitled "*Life is Painful, Nasty & Short...In My Case It Has Only Been*

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<sup>550</sup> Amy Wells-Lynn, "The Intertextual, Sexually-Coded Rue Jacob: A Geocritical Approach to Djuna Barnes, Natalie Barney, and Radclyffe Hall" in *South Central Review*, (22.3, Natalie Barney and Her Circle (Fall, 2005), pp. 78-112), 82.

<sup>551</sup> Barnes, *Nightwood*, 115.

<sup>552</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>553</sup> Phillip Herring writes, "It does not diminish the great artistic achievement of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* to say that the novel was also revenge: the writing helped Barnes to purge herself of the anger and disappointment at the failure of her relationship with Thelma Wood. Barnes denied this, but the spirit of revenge or satire motivated all of her best work, which usually targeted her family. Robin (one of Djuna's pet names for Thelma was "Bird") is essentially an enticingly mysterious sensation-seeker who lacks direction, is torn between animal lust and spiritual longing, and who seems indifferent to the pain that her infidelities cause others." (16) Barnes denied these accusations in an underhanded way, writing to Emily Coleman: "I really love her, but I know her now, she should be damned glad for *Nightwood*, and to what I made her, instead she's sulking, and won't" (17). Phillip Herring, "Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood: The Vengeance of "Nightwood"" in *Journal of Modern Literature*, (18.1, Winter, 1992, 5-18).

*Painful & Nasty*,” this book contains allegations that Barnes was herself deeply homophobic. According to O’Neal, “*Nightwood* came up again (on October 6, 1978). After the book was released, everyone thought she was a lesbian; she claims if she’d known that would happen, she would never have written it.”<sup>554</sup> Considering that Donisthorpe wrote a novel in 1931 about lesbianism and did not immediately get labeled a lesbian, this is probably not entirely historically accurate, but Barnes’ linkage between the book and her label of “lesbian,” does seem to have created a dislike for both the novel and lesbianism in Barnes’ later years. Although she never denied her love for Wood, Barnes continued to attack women-loving women in her conversations with O’Neal, calling them “so boring” and “foolish, mawkish lesbians.”<sup>555</sup>

According to O’Neal, Barnes compartmentalized her love for Wood and her hatred for lesbians. “She loved Thelma Wood, but that didn’t make her a lesbian—it didn’t mean anything except she loved Thelma.”<sup>556</sup> She also repeatedly told O’Neal that “I don’t want to make a lot of little lesbians.”<sup>557</sup> Wells-Lynn may have been correct in her assessment that women writers in the 1930s did not have the language to write the women’s experience, but if O’Neal’s analysis is true, then Barnes would not have written a happy ending, nor even an autobiographical one, even had she had the tools to do so. Her homophobia was absolute, except for the blind spot of Thelma Wood, and she had no interest in serving as a positive blueprint for future lesbians, despite the subsequent canonization of *Nightwood*. As autobiographical as the novel may have been, Barnes was out for revenge, and following the narrative arc of Dead Lesbian Syndrome, replete with alcoholism and infidelity customary to lesbian fiction, was an effective way to punish the wayward Wood.

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<sup>554</sup> Hank O’Neal, “*Life is Painful, Nasty & Short...In My Case It Has Only Been Painful & Nasty*,” *Djuna Barnes, 1978-1981*, (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 27.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*, 32,40.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

Although *Loveliest of Friends* engages in direct conversation with *The Well of Loneliness* and *Nightwood* was written by a woman who ran in the same social circles as Radclyffe Hall, it was Gale Wilhelm's first novel *We Too are Drifting* that faced the greatest comparison to *The Well of Loneliness*. While both Wilhelm and Hall's books dealt with lesbianism, loss, and tragedy, a major difference between the *We Too are Drifting* and *The Well of Loneliness* was the portrayal of masculinity. Hall's characters were biologically determined and scientifically formed. Stephen Gordon was a man trapped in a woman's body, and thus easily recognizable as one of Victor Turner's monsters. By taking masculinity (a) which had always been paired with the male (b) and pairing masculinity instead with a female (x), Hall had followed the Law of Dissociation by Varying Concomitants and created a monster that could not fit into society.<sup>558</sup> Monsters, recognized as danger, could then be destroyed, as they were no longer seen as human. Conversely, Wilhelm's women-loving women characters were ambiguous and androgynous, both masculine *and* feminine, to the point that they blurred the line between monster and human.

Wilhelm's women-loving women characters function under an *a priori* right to existence, prompting readers to accept real women-loving women's right to the existence as well.<sup>559</sup> By not suggesting that women-loving women characters should be reduced, destroyed, avoided by heterosexuals, or labeled dangerous, Wilhelm, for all intents and purposes, erases the taboo nature of lesbianism while allowing lesbianism to exist as an acceptable reality. Readers are not, as they were in *The Well of Loneliness*, prompted to question the morality or right of existence of

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<sup>558</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 105.

<sup>559</sup> Chase Dimock, "Crafting Hermaphroditism: Gale Wilhelm's lesbian modernism in *We Too Are Drifting*," in *College Literature*, (vol. 41, no. 3, 2014, p. 45-68, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1551709972>), 46.

the lesbian. It is assumed that this morality and right of existence has already been agreed upon before the reader even opened the book.

These characters are obvious pollutants, as they transgress internal boundaries by loving women, exist in the margins between male and female, and break down the gender binary. But these characters were also obviously women, unlike Stephen Gordon, and clearly did not want to marry a man, unlike Mary Llewellyn. Stephen could be reduced to a monster and labeled as dangerous, and Mary could be reduced to a wife and rendered harmless to society once she stopped transgressing the internal boundary and returned to loving men. Wilhelm instead embraces “a vision of ambiguity and performativity where gender becomes fluid and contextual instead of essential and predetermined.”<sup>560</sup> None of the characters can be reduced to either an “invert” or one of Turner’s monsters, nor does Jan ever reduce her lesbianism and return to a cisheteronormative lifestyle. By crafting sympathetic, gender creative, and healthy same-sex loving characters, Wilhelm questions both the degeneracy and the congenital nature of lesbianism. Loving women is not a psychological malformation that deserves pity or a scientific anomaly to be studied, it is, instead, an *a priori* reality that the characters of *We Too Are Drifting* take for granted.

Perhaps unknowingly, Wilhelm addressed many of the pollutants described by Mary Douglas: danger from transgressing the internal boundaries of society, danger in the margins of the boundaries delineated by society, and danger from internal contradiction within society. Chase Dimock believes that it was through crafting Jan as a hermaphrodite (in the classical sense, not as biologically intersex) that Wilhelm was able to address these pollutants by pointing out the inherent societal flaws that made such transgressions possible. Writing at a time when

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<sup>560</sup> Dimock, "Crafting Hermaphroditism," in *College Literature*, 57.



there was little distinction between the gender and sexuality spectra, Wilhelm deconstructed the idea that the Third Sex was one of Turner's (ax) monsters, a masculine woman. Instead, Wilhelm saw women-loving women as people who had equal measures of both genders, existing comfortably between man and woman, and performing each gender based on context, not biological determinism. This is made evident in the first few pages, when Jan is introduced using feminine pronouns but then Kletkin, her closest friend, refers to her as "fellow."<sup>561</sup> Wilhelm articulates this dichotomy most perfectly in her brief description of Jan's appearance: "She was thirty years old but she looked like a boy half that age until she looked at you. It was queer, you couldn't find a thing in her face but when she looked at you, you knew her hard young boy's body was a lie."<sup>562</sup>

In embodying both man and woman simultaneously, Jan exposes the inherent lie of society: that gender and sexuality are dimorphous and not amorphous, that they are inherent and not performative.<sup>563</sup> This lie comes full circle when Victoria leaves Jan for Dan, her male fiancé, and returns to her tomboyish ways. Dimock explains, "In the context of her relationship with Jan, she inhabits the full femininity of Victoria, while with Dan she can take on the ambiguity of Vic without any suspicion of her lesbian attraction."<sup>564</sup> As Mary Biggs, reviewing the reproduction of Wilhelm's books for *The Women's Review of Books* in 1986, wrote "one must be impressed by [the books'] refusal to be apologetic, rueful, or censorious. For Wilhelm, love between women is

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<sup>561</sup> Gale Wilhelm, *We Too Are Drifting*, (Tallahassee, FL: The Naiad Press, Inc., 1984), 18-20.

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>563</sup> "This 'lie' is the crux of Jan's hermaphroditism. It would be inaccurate to define her as either a man or a woman based on her body, and thus she is not 'inverted' in the sense of being a man in a woman's body or a woman in a man's body. Therefore, this lie is not any lie that Jan herself is telling, but instead the lie is based on the paucity of terms by which to label her body. Just like Ovid's myth, Jan's performative, amorphous gender and sexuality exposes the logical inconsistencies within society's ideological gender dimorphism by demonstrating that its own reasoning and discourse cannot determine a 'truth' from her body, so it must be called a 'lie'" (Dimock, "Crafting Hermaphroditism," 50).

<sup>564</sup> Dimock, "Crafting Hermaphroditism," 65.

just, well, love.”<sup>565</sup> Unlike Mary Llewellyn, who moves from one side of the binary coin (invert) to the other side of the binary coin (normal) when she leaves Stephen Gordon, Vic(toria) performs both her sexuality and her gender across an axis, existing at one end (feminine, homosexual) with Jan and then the other end (masculine, heterosexual) with Dan. While sexology had taught society to accept the masculine-homosexual/feminine-heterosexual dichotomy for Female Assigned at Birth individuals, Wilhelm turns this dichotomy on its head through the character of Vic(toria), who may be the first positive representation of bisexuality in modern anglophone fiction.<sup>566</sup>

Not only did Wilhelm write her books in such a way that the fictional world accepted lesbianism, but she also chose to write about lesbianism. One reviewer of this book, Stanley Young, praised the writing itself as well, recognizing that the themes were “downright chilling,” by seeing the writing as “honestly conceived” and praising Wilhelm’s “brilliant technique.” Young was disappointed that Wilhelm had written about women-loving women as, *We Too Are Drifting* could “claim none of the distinction which comes from those novels which move the intelligence to a new awareness of larger human impulses and ideas.”<sup>567</sup> Dimock saw Wilhelm’s debut work as an attempt to bring the lesbian love story to a wide audience, but contemporary reviewer Young recognized that, regardless of how gifted a writer Wilhelm may have been, her books with women-loving women themes would not be bestsellers. Wilhelm wrote lesbian novels that normalized lesbian existence, even though this choice meant she would not be

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<sup>565</sup> Mary Biggs, “Voices from Past,” in *The Women’s Review of Books*, (3.8, May 1986, 18-19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4019800>), 18.

<sup>566</sup> In describing Victoria, Jan tells her “You like Viennese waltzes and Millay’s poems” (Wilhelm, *We Too are Drifting*, 71), referring to bisexual icon Edna St. Vincent Millay, a slightly older contemporary of Wilhelm’s, who won the Pulitzer Prize for her poetry book *The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver* in 1923.

<sup>567</sup> Stanley Young, “Three Women; WE TOO ARE DRIFTING. By Gale Wilhelm. 206 pp. New York: Random House. \$2,” *The New York Times*, (August 18, 1935, Section BR, Page 6-7), 6. Stanley Young was a respected Broadway playwright, English professor, and, at the time, the literary advisor to the Macmillan Company. (“Stanley Young Is Dead at 69; Playwright, Poet Headed ANTA,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 1975. <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/03/25/archives/stanley-young-is-dead-at-69-playwright-poet-headed-anta.html>)

remembered as a great writer. She used her ability to write to further societal acceptance for lesbians. She was not writing a treatise asking for society's permission to exist, she was writing books in which lesbians already had the right to exist, encouraging society to catch up.

### *Real World Dangers & Eliminations*

While lesbian fiction of the 1930s ran the gamut in terms of each author's views of whether lesbianism should be accepted in society, many of these books referenced the alcoholism of lesbian communities. *The Well of Loneliness* called attention to the burgeoning bar culture within Continental Europe's lesbian communities. Drawing from this, books including *Loveliest of Friends*, *Nightwood*, and *We Too are Drifting*, brought specific attention to how alcohol was intertwining itself with Dead Lesbian Syndrome—both in fiction and in the real world. In one of the oral histories collected for *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, "Terry" recognized the lack of self-acceptance in the lesbian community growing in Buffalo in the 1930s. She claimed this was the root of the rampant alcoholism throughout the community. According to Terry, "Alcohol filled a need in my life at that time."<sup>568</sup> She goes on to explain:

We were all sitting ducks for alcoholism. We weren't getting positive feedback from the environment, we felt isolated, the only thing we could identify was with one another. We had nothing from the outside world to say who we were was okay. In fact, the outside world said who we were was sick, it was degenerate, and it was perverse. So then you had the availability of a drug, and we used it.<sup>569</sup>

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<sup>568</sup> Terry - Interviewee, "Interview: Terry, May 12, 1980 (Tape 1)," *LHA Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections of the LHA*, accessed June 21, 2020, [http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/document/SPW%23547.\(0:01-0:08\)](http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/document/SPW%23547.(0:01-0:08))

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.* (1:15-1:47)

In this way, the lack of self-acceptance within the women-loving women community and the lack of acceptance by the outside world of women-loving women culminated in toxic behaviors such as alcoholism and suicidal ideation. Another interviewee recounts her girlfriend, Skip, was “a big drinker” in the 1930s and there was always a “fairly lot of heavy drinking going on,” among Skip and her friends.<sup>570</sup> Terry adds, “I think, back in those days, we were more defensive. It was more at a survival level...Our survival was much more difficult.”<sup>571</sup> Coupled with feelings of isolation and the lack of positive feedback from society, women turned to alcoholism to cope with both internalized and societal homophobia.

In the United States, where most of these novels were written and set, the Volstead Act banning alcohol consumption had been in place for a decade by 1930. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, alcohol consumption was already declining in 1919 when Prohibition began. By 1934, when the Volstead Act was officially repealed and alcohol was legalized again, the amount of alcohol consumed had dropped over fifty percent.<sup>572</sup> Alcohol was illicit throughout the United States, and while the government did not track alcohol consumption throughout Prohibition, it was common in fiction of the decade.<sup>573</sup> However, a new phenomenon of this period was the alcoholism of women. Dr. Norman Jolliffe, a New York physician, conducted a study on the number of women admitted to Bellevue for alcohol abuse.

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<sup>570</sup> Terry, Tape 1, 0:01 to 0:08; Windsor (Interviewee) and Unknown Interviewer, “Windsor, July 17, 1980,” Lesbian Herstory Archives AudioVisual Collections, accessed June 21, 2020, <http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/items/show/122>, (7:30 to 8:00, 14:01).

<sup>571</sup> Ibid. (6:55-7:01); (8:58-8:59)

<sup>572</sup> “Table 1. Apparent per capita ethanol consumption, United States, 1850–2013” in “APPARENT PER CAPITA ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION: NATIONAL, STATE, AND REGIONAL TRENDS, 1977–2013” from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, (April 2015). [https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/surveillance102/tab1\\_13.htm](https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/surveillance102/tab1_13.htm)

<sup>573</sup> For examples, see: Hammett, Dashiell, *The Maltese Falcon*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930); Steinbeck, John, *The Grapes of Wrath*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1939); and Fitzgerald, F. Scott, (New York: Scribner, 1934).

Prior to the Volstead Act, the number of women admitted was 40% of the total number of alcohol abuse admits in the 1910s, this was almost double the amount of the previous decade.<sup>574</sup>

The alcohol abuse within lesbian novels is, therefore, not remarkable for the decade in which these novels were written; alcohol consumption was high among women throughout the country *and* other novels of the time featured alcohol abuse. This is not to say that alcoholism within the lesbian was on par with society: in the mid-twentieth century, it was believed that one in every three lesbians were alcoholics.<sup>575</sup> Research conducted in the 1980s concluded, “Despite the extra burden of oppression and discrimination that lesbian women carry, however, it appears that they do not differ significantly from heterosexual women in their general level of psychosocial functioning, *except in the incidence of alcoholism.*”<sup>576</sup> (emphasis added) Further research concluded that women-loving women are more likely than cisheteronormative women to engage in alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide attempts.<sup>577</sup> This research thus confirms “Terry’s” belief that alcohol was connected the isolation and suicidal ideation within women-loving women communities in the 1930s.

Alcoholism is rampant throughout Donisthorpe’s 1931 novel, *Loveliest of Friends*. In the novel’s final chapter, which functions as a coda to the story, Donisthorpe lists the evils of lesbianism, which includes “the drinking.”<sup>578</sup> In order to link alcoholism and the evils of lesbianism, Donisthorpe places the denouement of the novel within the context of a drunken

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<sup>574</sup> Michelle L. McClellan, *Lady Lushes: Gender, Alcoholism, and Medicine in Modern America*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 65.

<sup>575</sup> Sandra C. Anderson and Donna C. Henderson, “Working with Lesbian Alcoholics,” in *Social Work*, (Nov.-Dec. 1985, 30.5, 518-525, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/30.6.518>), 518.

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*, 520.

<sup>577</sup> “Saghir and Robins compared the incidence of psychiatric disorders in 57 heterosexual women. They found that although the former showed a statistically higher prevalence of psychiatric disorders overall, there was no statistically significant difference in the prevalence of any single disorder within the homosexual sample with the exception of higher rates of alcoholism and higher drinking, use of nonprescription drugs, and suicide attempts.” (Anderson and Henderson, “Working with Lesbian Alcoholics,” 520).

<sup>578</sup> Donisthorpe, *Loveliest of Friends*, 139.

evening. The dramatic showdown between Audrey, her lover Kim, and Kim's ex-girlfriend Honey, begins twenty minutes *after* "they had drinks at the flat," at which point Kim's ex-girlfriend asks Audrey, "Do come along down and have a drink."<sup>579</sup> By the next day, Audrey had attempted to commit suicide by abusing her sleeping pills, and so *Loveliest of Friends* linked lesbianism, alcoholism, drug abuse, and attempted suicide.

Thelma Wood's greatest sins were her alcoholism and her infidelity, which Djuna Barnes believed were connected.<sup>580</sup> These issues are reflected in *Nightwood*, especially in a conversation between Barnes' autobiographical character Nora and Dr. Matthew O'Connor. Nora brings up Robin's alcoholism when she says, "I haunted the cafes where Robin lived her night life; I drank with the men, I danced with the women, but all I knew was that others had slept with my lover..."<sup>581</sup> For Nora, alcohol represented her own depression about the state of her relationship. BJ Weathers addressed this in 1980, finding "alcohol may be used as a coping mechanism" for feelings of "low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and feelings of powerlessness or isolation."<sup>582</sup>

Wilhelm also connects with the belief that alcoholism was a coping mechanism within the lesbian community of the 1930s throughout *We Too are Drifting*. As Terry, a lesbian resident of Buffalo, NY in the 1930s, explains, "We were all sitting ducks for alcoholism."<sup>583</sup> In almost every scene in which Jan is engaging with her toxic ex-girlfriend Madeline, they are shown about to drink, currently drinking, or already drunk. After Jan crashes from her three-day mourning work binge, her first impulse is to make herself a brandy and soda.<sup>584</sup> *The Well of Loneliness*

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<sup>579</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>580</sup> Phillip Herring, "Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood," 12.

<sup>581</sup> Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, 129. The entire chapter of "Go Down, Matthew" offers an in-depth understanding of how drunkenness and infidelity intersected as vices for Robin, and, in turn, Thelma Wood.

<sup>582</sup> Anderson and Henderson, "Working with Lesbian Alcoholics," 520.

<sup>583</sup> Terry, Tape 1, (1:15-1:47)

<sup>584</sup> "Let's have a drink" (27); "Could we have a drink?" (43); "She was quite drunk" (53); "Shouldn't we have another drink, darling?" (55); drinking brandy while writing to Inga Kletkin (113).

depicted alcoholism as something lesbians became involved with to dull the pain of living in a world that rejected them; Wilhelm's novel is the first of many to suggest that women-loving women may turn to alcoholism because of the women who love them. This unhealthy coping mechanism, which many may have turned to in order to dull the isolation of the world, became a vice they used to fill any void, or dull any pain, indiscriminate of if it was rooted in homophobia.

Lesbian fiction in the 1930s was primarily written in the wake of *The Well of Loneliness*, which begged society for acceptance of women-loving women. Books such as *Loveliest of Friends* and *Nightwood* argued against the idea that society should accept lesbianism, which Donisthorpe warned was “the result of dipping the fingers of vice into a sex-welter whose deadly force crucifies a slow, eternal bleeding” and Barnes claimed would end in insanity.<sup>585</sup> While lesbianism led to insanity in *Pity for Women*, as well, Anderson at least made a compelling argument for lesbian existence, through the voice of her lesbian character, Judith. Finally, Wilhelm, instead of presenting an argument for the acceptance of lesbian, simply write two novels in which lesbianism was accepted both by the women-loving women protagonists and their heteronormative friends. The 1930s were a time of conversation for the concept of lesbianism: for the first time, women-loving women were recognized as possible—though not permissible—within society. During this decade, various fiction writers offered their suggestions for how society should address this newly discussed taboo.

Real-life lesbians were forced to contend with the new discourse on their right to exist in society. During the oral history interviews in Buffalo, NY, a casual comment about Skip and one of Skip's early lovers, “Bets,” reinforces the modelling of lesbian fiction after lived lesbian lives.

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<sup>585</sup> Donisthorpe, *Loveliest of Friends*, 140.

According to Windsor, Skip and Bets, “used to go to some Black club,” which was, “probably a straight club but they had a lot of gays.”<sup>586</sup> This suggests that there was a real connection between the Black and lesbian communities, as illustrated by the proximity of a Black man from Harlem, Hugo Fields, and a rich white lesbian from Manhattan, Leslie, in *Hell Cat* (1934) by Idabel Williams. Laura Grantmyre suggests that this proximity was by design. Drawing from Kevin Mumford’s interzone concept, Grantmyre argues that the police in major cities during the 1920s “pushed vice out of white neighborhoods by corralling it in discrete sections of African American neighborhoods.”<sup>587</sup> The interzones were thus Black neighborhoods that incorporated white sex workers, gender non-conformists, drug users, and sexual deviants throughout the 1920s. These white additions to the neighborhood were treated amicably. Brenda Tate, who was a young girl in the 1930s, explained to Grantmyre, “We had women in the community that were prostitutes but you called that woman ‘Miss So-and-So’...a child was made to respect that woman.”<sup>588</sup> Proximity to queer whiteness did not seem to cause trouble in Pittsburgh. The most it did was lead to interracial relationships and allow some Black women to explore their sexual identities. Conversely, in *Hell Cat*, Hugo’s life is put in danger when Leslie catches him in a sexual situation with a white woman. At a time when almost no literature existed exploring the relationships between white women-loving women and the Black communities they frequented, this fictional tension between a white lesbian and a Black cisheteronormative man failed to adequately reflect or reflect upon the racial realities of the 1930s.

Stenson’s research suggests it was the environments in which lesbian novels were written that created a homogenous white, middle-class backdrop for most fictional lesbians of the 1930s.

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<sup>586</sup> Windsor, Tape 1, 12:31-12:53

<sup>587</sup> Laura Grantmyre, “‘They lived their life and they didn’t bother anybody’: African American Female Impersonators and Pittsburgh’s Hill District, 1920-1960,” *American Quarterly* (63.4, 2011, 983-1011. doi:10.1353/aq.2011.0053), 984-985.

<sup>588</sup> Grantmyre, “‘They lived their life and they didn’t bother anybody,’” 990.



“Lesbians generally found one another where they socialized, worked, or went to school, which were (and often remain today) homogenous settings in terms of race and class.”<sup>589</sup> Because lesbian writers needed to be financially secure in order to support themselves without the help of men, they were often white, middle- and upper-class women who wrote about their own experiences. Black women writers, who could have discussed lesbianism in their own communities and created a more diverse representation of lesbianism in novels of the 1930s, “chose instead to write about Black women from a heterosexual perspective. The preference was motivated by the fear of being labeled a Lesbian, whether they were or not.”<sup>590</sup> At a time when eugenics and forced sterilization painted Black lesbians as undesirable, Stenson notes, the New Negro and Harlem Renaissance movements pressured women to present positive depictions of Black women. Stenson argues, “If women writers were concerned about the ‘exotic’ and ‘loose’ images of African-American womanhood, the presentation of lesbianism in their fiction could only complicate matters.”<sup>591</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Women-loving women fiction of the 1930s reinforced D’Emilio’s central belief that “capitalism is the problem.”<sup>592</sup> For queer women throughout this decade, both in fictional portrayals and in real life, access to money, stability, and society hinged on their ability to find a good man despite being a part of the “surplus 2 million” on both sides of the Atlantic and across the racial divide. Women who were accomplished, devious, or lucky enough to be able to

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<sup>589</sup> Linnea A. Stenson, “From Isolation to Diversity in Lesbian Novels,” in *Sexual Practice Textual Theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism*, Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope, (eds.), 208-225, (St. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 215.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>592</sup> D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” 110.

support themselves and a woman partner still faced the guilt, shame, and contempt forced upon them by a society which scapegoated queerness as the reason for the failure of capitalism. While this chapter charts a major increase in lesbian fiction throughout the decade following *The Well of Loneliness*, it also shows the toxicity of survival literature. When the only representation available to you is rooted in death, shame, and loneliness, vices such as alcoholism and unhealthy sexual decisions become palatable, and community is difficult to build upon this poisonous foundation.

The lesbian fiction of the 1930s helped to create imagined communities between women-loving women of the white middle classes and literate working class. The economic realities of the Great Depression pushed women to join the workforce and created homosocial working environments that translated to homosocial social environments in urban boarding houses across the country. As women increasingly entered the workforce—and experienced unemployment rates at lower percentages than men throughout the 1930s—the mythology surrounding the capitalist-centric nuclear family began to fall apart. An increasing number of women could now provide for themselves, making it difficult for society to uphold the concept of marrying for economic stability and protection. As the mythology surrounding capitalism began to collapse, women were free to explore romantic and sexual relationships with other women.

An essential part of capitalism is the continued reinforcement of the workforce and growth of consumption. Over the last three centuries, capitalism has used cisheteronormative couplings that produce children to both ensure a workforce and a consumer pool in the next generation. As the cisheteronormative family became less beneficial to the individual, society scrambled to ensure these couplings and families continued to exist because the nuclear family remained essential to the capitalist system. Companionate marriage was one way to reinforce the

myths of capitalism, specifically that cisheteronormative marriage was in some way beneficial to women. Marriage evolved from an economic necessity to an opportunity to find your best friend, your life partner, your “soul mate.” Before, marriage promised a steady supply of money to provide food, housing, and leisure items for the family. With companionate marriage, marriage promised emotional support, sexual pleasure, and societal acceptance.

However, as both fictional and historical narratives show, women already knew they could find emotional support, sexual pleasure, and—as women-loving women subcultures began to grow as they did in Harlem and Buffalo, NY—acceptance from their small section of society. Drastic measures were needed to convince women not to turn to homosexual relationships and find life partners among their own sex. Communities across class and racial boundaries turned to scapegoating homosexuals, feminists, and others who did not conform to the cisheteronormative narrative. Cautionary tales like *Loveliest of Friends* spoke directly to their readers, warning them against the toxicity and tragedy of lesbian relationships. Revelatory semiautobiographical novels such as *Nightwood* explored the difficulties of homosexual love and communities, including the temptation of alcoholism and the reality that adultery is not limited to cisheteronormative unions. Even novels that seemed kind to women-loving women, such as *Pity for Women* or *We Too Are Drifting* end with the lesbian left alone, her lover either gone off with a man or suddenly catatonic. The only positive ending for women-loving women was *Torchlight to Valhalla*, published only after Wilhelm got away with her more negative depiction of women-loving women in *We Too are Drifting*. She was the only one of the writers featured in this chapter who returned to themes of lesbianism in a second literary work—Barnes, Hellman, and the others did not.

As the Great Depression put strains on traditional marriages, emasculating men and empowering working women, scapegoating the lesbian for the ills of society worked to prevent women from pursuing homosexual relationships out of fear that society would not accept them. As shown in *Passing*, this scapegoating was even more prevalent in Black communities of the time, which were trying to navigate the influx of people due to the Great Migration and the new push for acceptance in the form of respectability politics. This chapter illustrates the intertwined connections of capitalism, misogyny, and Dead Lesbian Syndrome that continue to influence how women-loving women are portrayed as “thieves” in society to be contained and destroyed—almost a century after Larsen, Hellman, and Wilhelm killed off characters in order to adhere to society’s enduring belief “the only good lesbian, is a dead lesbian.”<sup>593</sup>

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<sup>593</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Note 20, Kindle Location 6955.

## Chapter Five Censoring Sex, Self, and Screen in the 1930s

### *Introduction*

For an era that centered both the male experience and the heterosexual couple, there seems to have been a juxtaposition of increased awareness and fictionalization of lesbianism. While most of the lesbian books of the 1920s addressed the topic in esoteric terms, always skirting just the right side of the censorship line and remaining too erudite to address the topic in terms laypeople understood, the lesbian novels of the 1930s were not only permitted but encouraged to be direct and salacious in their depiction of women-loving women. On both sides of the Atlantic, novels that served as public service announcements against the rise of same-sex relationships in the wake of World War I became popular. G. Sheila Donisthorpe's *The Loveliest of Friends* (1931) had to be reprinted multiple times to keep up with demand, while Djuna Barnes' slanderous attack on a former lover manifested as a warning that lesbianism would lead to insanity. Most of the depictions of women-loving women characters were either monstrous or tragic, suggesting that women who chose to abandon their emasculated men were ruinous to society and would be dealt with karmically. Although they were depressing reads that did little to help readers escape from the depressing state of a world in the grip of the Great Depression, lesbian literature created a foundation in the 1930s that proved the genre was marketable and lucrative for those publishing houses willing to print taboo materials.

Building from the economic argument in Chapter Four, this chapter dives into how the legal and medical communities worked together to see lesbianism as simultaneously congenital *and* criminal, using both medicine and legislation to police women-loving women. Lesbian novels including *That Other Love*, *Loveliest of Friends*, *Hell Cat*, *Pity for Women*, and *Nightwood* reinforce the degenerative and psychological arguments against lesbianism.

Meanwhile, *Hell Cat* and the 1934 semi-biographical work *Female Convict* by Vincent Burns, suggest lesbianism should be punished and can result from being subjected to the prison industrial complex. The lesbian fiction of the 1930s reinforced commonly held beliefs about women-loving women that Othered them from society. Still, these novels fought for society to accept that women-loving women existed and could not be ignored or rendered invisible, as the British and American governments had tried to valiantly to do in the previous decade.

Gale Wilhelm fought hardest for societal recognition of the existence of women-loving women. In *We Too are Drifting* (1935), she argues for a women-loving woman's right to exist in the liminal space *between* man and woman, instead of as a man trapped in a woman's body, as Stephen Gordon is often interpreted. In *Torchlight to Valhalla* (1937), Wilhelm takes for granted not only her lesbian character's *a priori* right to existence, but also her right to find love with another women-loving woman, *at the expense of a heterosexual man*. Wilhelm's writing most ardently stands in opposition to Dead Lesbian Syndrome but, as argued in this chapter, the specter of death haunts her novels as well, suggesting that lesbianism demands sacrifice from society and martyrdom from men closest to the lesbian—prices perhaps too high for society to pay for two women's happiness.

In truth, cost may have been the biggest gatekeeper for those wishing to access homosexual media. In 1933, the average cost of a movie ticket was \$0.25, while Gale Wilhelm's 1935 novel *We Too are Drifting* debuted at \$2.00 and a Broadway ticket in 1935 cost between \$2.00 and \$5.00.<sup>594</sup> Movies were much more accessible to the average American, costing 700% less money than a novel and up to 1900% less money than a trip to Broadway. Having grown up

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<sup>594</sup> Young, "Three Women: WE TOO ARE DRIFTING. By Gale Wilhelm," BR68; Nick Taylor, "Chapter 2: The Federal Theater Project: Prelude" in *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA: When FDR Put the Nation to Work*, (New York: Random House, 2008).

with the paternalism of the Victorian Era, in which the middle class felt beholden to “save” the indigent from immoral influences, lawmakers and influencers across the country felt it necessary to serve as gatekeepers for the movies, to protect the more vulnerable Americans from vice and sin.

These cost differences meant the 1930s changed the way people consumed popular media. Just as the silver screen completed its transformation from silent films to “talkies,” consumers were faced with the economic realities of the Great Depression. Unlike books, which were primarily marketed to the middle class, movies were accessible to the working class and America’s youth, two groups the Progressive Era saw as easily influenced and therefore in need of protection. As more and more Americans made their way to local theaters, critics and censors across the country tried to eradicate any depiction of women-loving women on screen and minimize the threat of this taboo. This chapter therefore analyzes women-loving women representation on the page, stage, and silver screen, to better understand how different audiences consumed different portrayals and plotlines of women-loving women romance.

To best understand how different media was created and consumed, it is important to recognize the role of censorship in both written works and performance pieces. In the literary world, self-censorship was integral to the creation of women-loving women novels, as many writers and publishers were willing to go as far as *The Well of Loneliness*’s precedent of a tragic ending and no further. However, there were no nationally reported censorship trials for any of the lesbian novels discussed in Chapter Four, and, it appears, no legal battles at all for their writers or publishers. On the stage, the specter of *The Captive* was omnipresent, but as the play had not received the national attention of *The Well of Loneliness*, there appears to have been slightly more freedom for playwrights. It was the silver screen that faced the greatest amount of

censorship, during both the creation and consumption stages. The Hays Code, introduced in 1931, grew into a national censorship movement by 1934, and effectively shut down production of any film portraying homosexuality in any form.

This chapter begins with an exploration of how society altered their perception of women-loving women as invisible, rare occurrences to be ignored into monstrous threats to both individual marriages and cisheteronormative society as a whole. This exploration centers the role lesbian fiction played in both reinforcing and pushing back against this process through the common endings of lesbian fiction with one of the partners either exhibiting signs of insanity, locked inside a psychiatric institution, or dead. Censorship, both self-enforced and top-down, helped society dictate when and how portrayals of women-loving women were acceptable. This chapter evaluates different forms of censorship, how lesbian fiction and real women-loving women fared under this censorship, and the role of class differences in the manifestation of censorship across the United States. Like most of history, the perpetuation of Dead Lesbian Syndrome into the postwar era was not inevitable, and this chapter charts how different stakeholders in lesbian fiction bred this disease to grow and evolve, giving it the strength to survive both World War II and Gay Liberation in order to continue to thrive into the present day.

### *The Medicalization and Monsterization of Lesbianism*

By the mid-1930s, eugenics was an established part of American and European culture. The Nazi Party had taken control of Germany, the eugenicist ideologies touted by Marie Stopes and Margaret Sanger monopolized the fields of women's health and motherhood, and physical psychiatric intervention, such as electroshock treatment and lobotomies, was increasingly seen as an appropriate method for treating strains of "insanity," including high libidos in women,



effeminacy in men, and sexual nonconformity of any stripe as it manifested across the genders.<sup>595</sup> Throughout the decade, laws reinforcing gender binaries, heterosexism, white supremacy, and patriarchy reflected the increasing fears of Americans facing economic turmoil, a second war in Europe in less than a generation, and increasing racialized violence across the country. As both pollutants and transgressors, women-loving women became a symbol for the existential angst American society faced throughout the decade.

While lesbian literature was available in bookstores, corner stores, and libraries, other popular media, specifically movies, with LGBTQ themes were becoming *less* available in the 1930s than previous decades. “The industry was pedaling backwards as fast as it could, but not fast enough for its opponents, who in 1933 found themselves, for the first time, in the ascendant.”<sup>596</sup> As the Great Depression dragged on, American morals returned to the strict and proper attitudes from before the “Roaring Twenties.” In short, concern about movies and their content “were symptoms of a moral panic about social behavior, induced by economic collapse.”<sup>597</sup> The Motion Picture Association of America worked to prevent Hollywood films from discussing increasingly taboo topics and describing immoral acts or ideas. However, as documentaries like *Birth of a Baby* (1938) and *The River* (1938) illustrate, the government did not have to bend to the whims of censorship to which Hollywood films were subjected.

Un beholden to the silences forced upon Hollywood’s production companies, government films

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<sup>595</sup> For more on the history of eugenics in the United States see Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009; Nancy Ordover, *American Eugenics Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); and Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). For more information about the various pseudoscientific methods used to combat homosexuality in Americans and Britons, see Tommy Dickinson, *‘Curing Queers’: Mental Nurses and Their Patients, 1935-74*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Paige Daniels, “Just What the Doctor Ordered: Treatment Methods of Homosexuality in Minnesota, 1920-1950,” *Department Honors Projects*, Hamline University, 2020; and Helene Deutsch, “On female homosexuality,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, (1.3-4, 1932, 484-510).

<sup>596</sup> Richard Maltby, “Chapter Three: The Production Code and the Hays Office,” in *History of the American Cinema: Grand Design, 1930-1939*, 37-72, (Volume 5, Tino Bailo, ed., New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1993), 49.

<sup>597</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

were able to discuss prohibited topics. In 1934, the government used this freedom to produce a film discussing, and warning against, homosexuality.<sup>598</sup>

According to Mary Douglas and her predecessor in the field of Symbolic Anthropology, Victor Turner, monsters are created to teach children the limits of their reality. Douglas explained society maintains order through the utilization of danger-threats, which are created to prevent transgression of internal boundaries.<sup>599</sup> *The Well of Loneliness* played into the idea of danger-threats through the death of Barbara, the suicide of Jamie, and the isolation of Stephen Gordon after she lost Mary Llewellyn to a heterosexual man.<sup>600</sup> However, cisheteronormative society decided that the story, as it was written, would not translate well as a danger-threat on the silver screen, and so it was considerably adapted as *The Children of Loneliness*, produced by Jewel Productions, Inc.<sup>601</sup>

The central plot of *The Children of Loneliness* is the story of Elinor Gordon, a victim of child molestation who is, at first, falling in love with her female roommate, Bobby Allen. However, when Elinor tells her psychologist about her sexual inversion, the psychologist quickly persuades Elinor to leave Bobby and pursue a relationship with Elinor's boss, Dave. When Elinor rebuffs Bobby's advances, Bobby violently retaliates by throwing acid at Elinor. Elinor evades the acid, and, in an act of heterosexual male heroism, Dave throws some of the remaining acid at Bobby. Temporarily blinded by the acid in her eyes, Bobby wanders out into traffic and is killed by an oncoming car. A subplot of this movie dealt with male homosexuality, in that the daughter of Dave's boss is in love with a male homosexual, Paul, who commits suicide by the

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<sup>598</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>599</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 105; Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 3.

<sup>600</sup> Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 395-441.

<sup>601</sup> Turner Classic Movies, "Children of Loneliness (1937)," Leonard Maltin Classic Movie Guide, (2013, Accessed 2 November 2013, <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/493649/Children-of-Loneliness>).

end of the movie.<sup>602</sup> This synopsis was produced by Turner Classic Movies in a 1953 issue of *The Exhibitor*, along with a cast list and production information. In the *Motion Picture Herald* review, we learn that the film includes a prologue and an epilogue starring Dr. S. Dana Hubbard from the New York Health Department, who provided a clinical summary of horrors of homosexuality. To further shield themselves from positive associations with homosexuality, the producers submitted an explanation alongside their application for copyright. In this explanation, the producers explained that the movie “is an educational and scientific presentation of an absorbing subject that deals with the manifestations, evil associations and mental complexes that affect and misdirect normal adults into channels resulting in homo-sexuality [*sic*].”<sup>603</sup>

In the explanation offered alongside the copyright application, the producers seem to agree with Douglas’ belief that danger-threats are employed to teach children the difference between what is acceptable and unacceptable in society. They wrote, “*Children of Loneliness* points out the part that Society plays in the development of normal children into normal humans, and eloquently brings out the potent fact that society cannot cure those who have been so misguided by simply ignoring and refusing to discuss them....The story of these inverts is a tragic one and reveals the known fact that these people are mentally sick and their only hope lies in treatment by competent physicians...”<sup>604</sup> Despite this explanation, Turner Classic Movies found that *Children of Loneliness* was unable to pass New York state censors in 1937. According to the International Movie Database, the movie is presumed lost.<sup>605</sup>

The fact that New York would not allow *Children of Loneliness* to run even with Dr. Hubbard’s prologue and epilogue offers an interesting microcosm of how lesbianism was viewed

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<sup>602</sup> Ibid.

<sup>603</sup> Ibid.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid.

<sup>605</sup> “The Third Sex,” *International Movie Database*, Accessed May 9, 2014, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0053353/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0053353/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1).

by the cisheteronormative society in the 1930s. Instead of accepting *The Well of Loneliness*, as the courts had in 1929, Jewel Productions chose to destroy the lesbian threat by giving Elinor to a man *without* any prompting from Bobby and killing Bobby instead of allowing her to live with her heartache, as Stephen Gordon had. The censors of New York ruled that a fictional destruction of a sexual invert was still inappropriate for the general, much poorer public than the literate classes who had read *The Well of Loneliness* a few years earlier. These censors chose instead to avoid sexual inversion all together and forbid the movie from being screened. As such, a movie about sexual inversion was rejected by cisheteronormative society, not even ten years after *The Well of Loneliness* had made *The New York Times*' Bestsellers List.

Although New York state censors would not allow wide distribution in 1937, *Children of Loneliness* made it to theaters sporadically across the country throughout the late 1930s and 1940s. Advertisements of the film in 1935 suggest it was shown in Idaho, Utah, and Washington, DC.<sup>606</sup> A review of the film was featured in the very first issue of *Vice-Versa*, a postwar lesbian periodical published between 1947 and 1948 that claims to have been the country's first lesbian periodical. The reviewer, who seems to have seen the movie somewhere in Los Angeles in 1947, provided a full summary of the film, including direct quotes. She notes immediately, "The story, unfortunately, in no way resembled the book upon which it was purportedly based."<sup>607</sup> According to this review, the doctor who offered a prohibitive prologue concludes with, "Let this picture be shown to every adult, so that he (or she) will know how to combat such abnormal love and will not be dragged into the depths of degradation."<sup>608</sup>

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<sup>606</sup> Cary O'Dell, "Gay Cinema/Lost Cinema: 'Children of Loneliness' (1935)," *Library of Congress*, November 17, 2015, Accessed April 17, 2021, <https://blogs.loc.gov/now-see-hear/2015/11/a-movie-missing-in-action-children-of-loneliness-1935/>.

<sup>607</sup> Lisa Ben, "Film Review: 'Children of Loneliness,'" *Vice Versa*, (1.1, June 1947, 9-13, <http://queermusicheritage.com/viceversa1.html>), 9.

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*

*Children of Loneliness* fed into Dead Lesbian Syndrome in two distinct ways: first, by having the doctor come on the screen beforehand to explain that homosexuality should be combatted as “abnormal love” and “degradation;,” second, by killing the lesbian, Bobby, in the end. In fact, the film critic for *Vice Versa* remembered the scene as, “Vanquished Bobby’s death shriek provides a background for their first kiss, as ‘true love’ triumphs.”<sup>609</sup> *Children of Loneliness* follows the themes of *Well of Loneliness* ad absurdum—while Stephen Gordon only *felt* like she had died when she let Mary Llewellyn go to marry Martin, Bobby Allen *actually* died in order for Elinor and Dave to be together. The film highlights the causal connection between Bobby’s death and Elinor’s happiness in a “normal” relationship by contrasting Elinor and David sharing their first kiss while a woman they both know is actively dying in their vicinity. The complete disregard for the life of this lesbian character reflects society’s hatred of the lesbian in during the heightened neo-Victorian repressive morality of the mid-1930s.

The lesbian novels of the 1930s show a distinct *a priori* reliance on the reader’s understanding that a woman belongs married to a man and those women who do not want men are monsters. The monstrous nature of Kim in *Loveliest of Friends* (1931) and the inappropriateness of Leslie’s infatuation with Scoot in *Hell Cat* (1935) both rely on the reader’s belief that to steal a good woman from a good man is taboo. In chapter three of *Loveliest of Friends*, the antagonist Kim is introduced as wearing masculine clothing, which was fashionable for women in many Western societies by the late 1920s, and so relatively unremarkable in and of itself.<sup>610</sup> Two chapters later, however, when protagonist Audrey says, “I’d fall bang in love with

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<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>610</sup> G. Sheila Donisthorpe, *Loveliest of Friends*, (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Publishing Corporation, 1955), 17.

you if I were a man,” Kim responds, “I don’t like...men.”<sup>611</sup> She says this despite the fact that she is married to a man. Soon after Kim admits her predilection for women, she tells Audrey: “There’s nothing tragic about it,” in direct opposition to the tragedy that is *The Well of Loneliness*. Kim goes on to say, “I’m going to make you very much in love with me.”<sup>612</sup> Although this phrase may not seem sinister in and of itself, it foreshadows Kim’s seduction of Audrey. After learning of Kim’s lesbianism, Audrey chooses not to end her friendship with Kim, and soon meets one of Kim’s former lovers, Rosamund, who warns Audrey, “You haven’t got a dog’s chance—not if she likes you. Don’t you see—don’t *you see*? The things she does to people! Handcuffs them for life and then sits back and watches effects...” Rosamund explains further, “But you won’t be left alone—not until she’s got you tied up to her. It’s only after that she’ll let you alone. She’s dreadfully male in some ways, rouses all your instincts and then there’s ice-water behind to hit you in the face for being such a fool.”<sup>613</sup> In this tone, Kim’s declaration that she would *make* Audrey in love with her seems like a threat more than a promise.

The imagery used throughout the latter half of the novel is particularly monstrous. During their first kiss, “Audrey sat there, still and calm, looking at Kim with half-tranced eyes, dimly aware of all the cruelty that she was bringing her, as some small furry animal is aware of the hand that is going to rip open its heart while it gazes fascinated, with soft, unseeing eyes.”<sup>614</sup> After falling in love with Kim, Audrey “knew that she was slowly but surely destroying the happiness of this gentle, gracious man who was her husband, knowing that the thing that was poisoning their lives could never have crossed the path of his wildest imagination.”<sup>615</sup> Later,

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<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>612</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>613</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

Audrey realizes, “She would never belong to herself anymore. She was Kim’s. The poison of this woman had entered her. She would never be rid of it. It might destroy her in the end, a conscious and submissive victim.”<sup>616</sup> If Kim is a monster, she has two victims in this novel, Audrey, the woman she seduces, and John, Audrey’s husband, from whom Kim steals a good woman.

According to Sheila Jeffreys, the original edition of *Loveliest of Friends* (1931) had the dedication: “To all the contemplating Audreys of this world the message in this book is offered.”<sup>617</sup> The first pages of the novel also include the following from Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man*: “Vice is a monster of so frightful mien/As to be hated, needs but to be seen;/ Yet seen too oft; familiar with her face,/We first endure, then pity, then embrace.” In submitting to the vice of lesbianism consciously, Audrey was doing exactly what Pope warned against—embracing the vice, even though it was a “monster of so frightful mien.” Kim was very much a monster, keeping three women, “Prisoners all of them.”<sup>618</sup> Kim serves as a warning that masculinity in women can quickly descend into the evil vice of lesbianism and lesbians were monsters who wanted to seduce and entrap happily married women.

Idabel Williams’ 1934 novel *Hell Cat* reinforces the suggestion lesbians are seductive monsters who prey on innocent women. The character Howard Marvin explains women like Scoot’s lesbian benefactress Leslie are “born inverted sexually...They are constituted like men.” While he seems sympathetic towards this congenital, inherited trait, Marvin is angry about Leslie’s attempt to seduce Scoot. His internal monologue concludes with: “Women like Leslie Gates should be hamstrung for getting a girl as pure and clean-minded as this one into her

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<sup>616</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>617</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930*, North Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: Spinifex, 1985, <https://www.feministes-radicales.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Sheila-Jeffreys-The-Spinster-her-Enemies.pdf>, 126.

<sup>618</sup> Donisthorpe, *Loveliest of Friends*, 106.

repulsive, unnatural grasp.”<sup>619</sup> When Scoot calls him after Leslie throws her out of her home, Marvin is pleased to rescue Scoot from Leslie’s clutches.

Unlike Audrey’s attraction to Kim, Scoot is never romantically attracted to Leslie. While *Loveliest of Friends* reads like a public service announcement and *Hell Cat* reads more like a chronology of vices, both novels serve as warnings for bored, middle-class married women. Lesbianism may seem harmless, and women may appear to make better companions than men, but these narrative arcs insist only insanity can come from falling in love with a woman or putting your marriage at risk to chase a lesbian romance. In this way, the lesbian novels of the 1930s suggested lesbianism as the antithesis of companionate marriage while also making lesbians that scapegoats for failed companionate marriages. Innocent women are lured from their male companions by independent lesbians, only for the lesbian relationship to end in insanity, heartache, or death.

Beyond its treatment of Leslie as a homewrecker, *Hell Cat* also covers an array of psychoses of the 1930s. To set the stage, *Hell Cat* begins and ends with trainee social workers observing a patient in a holding cell, who is awaiting her permanent confinement in a psychiatric sanitarium. According to the first and last pages of the book, the patient “Can’t keep clothes on her—tears ‘em off the minute we leave,” is “a holy terror,” and would “claw you to pieces if she could get at you.”<sup>620</sup> In the interim, readers learn the patient, Scoot Frazier, started her descent into madness young and nurtured her insanity with nymphomania, elevated by both lesbianism and interracial relations. She also effectively destroyed the lives of almost everyone in her life.

Scoot’s aversion to lesbianism is made clear throughout the novel. When Scoot ends up at the same party as lesbian Leslie Harris, she responds to the existence of a lesbian by telling her

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<sup>619</sup> Idabel Williams, *Hell Cat*, (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1951), 99.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*, 1; 160.



companion, “I’m glad I’m normal.” When Babs Franklin tells Scoot, “You’d probably find her more interesting than most men,” Scoot is vehement in her denial: “‘Not me,’ said Scoot scornfully, ‘I like men!’”<sup>621</sup> Even after going to live with Leslie in New York, Scoot retains a vice grip on her heterosexuality. She’s more than willing to accept housing, food, and gifts from Leslie, but she refuses to be branded a lesbian because they live together. Scoot indulges in numerous affairs with men under Leslie’s roof, and when Leslie asks her to stop, Scoot responds, “...get this straight: I like men! Lots of ‘em, all of ‘em, and I always will.”<sup>622</sup>

Scoot’s sexual perversion is established in the novel by her interracial relationship with Hugo Fields, which may serve as another example of Morrison’s American Africanism. As discussed in Chapter Two, interracial relationships were sometimes used as a metaphor for other sexual taboos. In the case of Hugo and Scoot’s relationship, shown alongside the possibility of lesbianism, Hugo forces the reader to question the acceptability hierarchy of the 1930s: is it better to engage in a romantic relationship with a member of the *same* sex or a member of a *different* race?

Hugo, a well-respected Black man from Harlem and one of Leslie’s friends, is a writer who focuses on race-relations in the United States. Scoot is immediately attracted to Hugo, as he was “chocolate-colored” and was “so hard and firmly made.”<sup>623</sup> However, she also immediately wants to hurt him: “she wondered what it would be like to drive a pair of scissors into his flesh and snip it open.”<sup>624</sup> Hugo is painted as something both more than a Man of Color and less than human. “His eyes were soft and brown like a hound, and his features were not coarse and

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<sup>621</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>622</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid., 101.

Negroid.”<sup>625</sup> In the hierarchy of *Hell Cat*, the hound is above a Black man, although still not human.

It is Scoot’s relationship with Hugo that forces Leslie’s hand. Leslie is at first unwilling to believe that Hugo has “forgotten that he was black.” But then she remembers that Scoot has driven Leslie to the brink of insanity, as Leslie “had thrown overboard her own scruples for the girl—every principle had been discarded.”<sup>626</sup> When Leslie picks up the gun to shoot Hugo, she believes she is protecting Scoot from a “hound” that has forgotten his place. Scoot’s inability to go through with the act, and her last-minute defense of Hugo shed full light on the situation, and Leslie throws Scoot out of her home. In this way, Leslie sees lesbianism as a more acceptable act than miscegenation. However, the reader is left to draw their own conclusions. In Kingsley Davis’ analysis of jealousy and sexuality, he uses the example of race to explain how individual emotions and social expectations work together to keep men and women of the same race and social class together. In this love triangle (Leslie → Scoot → Hugo), Leslie has the advantage of being the right race for Scoot, but the wrong gender; while Hugo has the advantage of being the right gender for Scoot, but the wrong race. In the end, Hugo “wins” Scoot from Leslie, but he loses her shortly after, to a white man.

When Leslie turns Scoot out on the streets, Scoot turns to wealthy, single benefactor Howard Marvin. Although Marvin thinks he is rescuing a girl who is “good” and “pure,” he comes to realize that Scoot is quite the opposite. When Marvin finds Scoot and Hugo fighting and Scoot threatens to have Hugo imprisoned, Marvin tells Scoot “Your mind is disfigured, Scoot; Hugo Field had nothing to do with that.”<sup>627</sup> This is the beginning of *Hell Cat*’s

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<sup>625</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>626</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>627</sup> Ibid., 117.

denouement. Moving forward, the psychosis angle is methodically established in the novel. Scoot is exposed to the works of sexologists Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Sigmund Freud, but this does not seem to help her with any self-discovery.<sup>628</sup> Instead, it falls on others to tell Scoot that she has a problem. Leslie tells Scoot, “You are a psychological case. If something doesn’t happen to straighten you out, you’ll be a nervous wreck inside of a year. An extreme emotional upset would send your straight into the psychological ward of a sanatorium.”<sup>629</sup> Leslie’s diagnosis of Scoot comes because of her own experience with using psychology to process her homosexuality. Although Scoot dismisses Leslie throughout the novel, after she has a psychotic breakdown, the rhyme Scoot repeats is: “You think I’m drunk—father thinks I’m bad—Carl thinks I’m the bunk—and Leslie thinks I’m mad!”<sup>630</sup>

*Hell Cat* is not focused on lesbianism, but it does set up some important points of contact between insanity and lesbianism, sexual taboo and lesbianism, punishment and lesbianism, and the concept of lesbian-as-predator. Although Leslie does not go insane, she is knowledgeable of psychoses because of her research into homosexuality. When Scoot goes insane, the only people she remembers or cares about are her father, her husband, and Leslie. The other men involved in her life are forgotten, implying that it was Leslie who had the greatest impact on Scoot, despite the lack of romantic or sexual relationship between them. Leslie is not killed for seducing Scoot, but she does seem to see Scoot’s presence in her life as punishment itself. Leslie is also painted as a predator by Howard Marvin, even though she never forces Scoot to perform any sexual favors in return for bringing her to New York, giving her a home, and providing her with an almost unlimited allowance. When *Hell Cat* hit the markets in 1930s, it espoused all the correct

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<sup>628</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid., 159.

views of the 1930s: lesbian Leslie was a homewrecker, preying upon a young wife and keeping her from other available men. However, reading the book in the 21st century, it appears the author, Idabel Williams, created a sympathetic character in Leslie, who survives the novel relatively unscathed compared to the other people in Scoot's life.

*Hell Cat* suggests that Scoot is “mentally deficient,” an idea expanded upon in the 1930 British novel, *That Other Love*, by Geoffrey Moss. Throughout *Hell Cat*, the specter of Scoot's mother's death and her maternal family's unknown temperament suggests that Scoot's psychosis may come from her mother.<sup>631</sup> At the end of the novel, readers learn that Scoot's mother was claustrophobic and “as sexless as a stone.”<sup>632</sup> In *That Other Love*, the protagonist's parentage and early upbringing are to blame for her foray into lesbianism. After first meeting young Philidia, the sophisticated father figure Gossett concludes Philidia is “A savage!”<sup>633</sup> Hector, one of Philidia's mother's lovers, reinforces this view when he speaks to Gossett the day Gossett arrives to collect Philidia. Hector warns, “If the child is made to feel she's a savage, different from other people, a sort of mental case—you know—she'll accept the idea; and it might easily stick to her all her life.”<sup>634</sup> Edmund, the married man that Philidia falls in love with, sees her as “a young savage”<sup>635</sup> In her final meeting with Gossett before the novel's end, Philidia asks her old patron if she took after her mother—the ugly, irresponsible woman who took up with multiple men in Monte Carlo. Gossett promises Philidia, “No—to look at you're like your father was at your age...No, I don't see you're like her in anything. No, she was a big woman.”<sup>636</sup> His answer was purely physical, allowing the reader to believe that the *moral* defects of the mother were passed

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<sup>631</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>633</sup> Geoffrey Moss, *That Other Love*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, & Company, 1930), 15.

<sup>634</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>636</sup> Ibid., 312.

down to the daughter. Together, *That Other Love* and *Hell Cat* encompass the early-1930s' approach to lesbianism: whether it was a cause or an effect, homosexuality in women was deeply connected to congenital degeneration.

While Leslie views her lesbianism as psychosis and survives to the end of the novel, other fictional lesbians of the 1930s did not. In *Pity for Women*, the “crime” of stealing a woman of marriageable age from a “good man” ends in a psychotic break. This novel illustrates the interconnected definition of lesbianism as both congenital degeneration and criminal offense. After Judith admits to Elizabeth that she has committed a crime for which “no lawyer could find words to defend,” she continues to be with Ann and, by the end of the novel, convinces Ann to partake in an extra-legal marriage ceremony with her.<sup>637</sup> Ann goes insane just before she is supposed to say the vows. Her insanity leaves her catatonic, rendering Judith without her lover, Ann without her mind, and the world with one less woman to contend with the additional “surplus two million” left behind from World War I. Written at a time when cisheteronormative women were terrified by the statistic that there were “five women to every three men,”<sup>638</sup> lesbianism and the psychosis of the lesbian is seen as a solution: if there are in fact two “surplus” women in every five women from the Allied countries, then getting rid of any woman undeserving of a man, such as a congenital lesbian, would better the odds for the good, wholesome, cisheteronormative women vying for male attention. By exploring the psychological and criminal context in which Anderson wrote *Pity for Women*, we can better understand how anglophone society accepted lesbianism as a defect of birth, and thus not a choice, while simultaneously blaming women for the crime of homosexuality.

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<sup>637</sup> Anderson, *Pity for Women*, 150.

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

The 1930s marked the beginning of a reliance upon a hybrid of congenital and Freudian analysis of homosexuality—nature *and* nurture, with evidence of homosexual inclination manifesting by early childhood. Dr. Paul Bowers, researching inmates at the Indiana State Prison in the mid-1920s, concluded that homosexuals were “psychopathic,” but also that “inverse and perverse sexual habits may be acquired early in life by the association with vicious and depraved individuals.” Either way, Dr. Bowers concluded, “sexual perverts are at any rate an exceedingly dangerous and demoralizing class which should be permanently isolated to prevent their mingling with others.”<sup>639</sup> This indiscriminate comingling of turn-of-the-century sexology and Freudian psychopathy became the cornerstone of legal and cultural persecution of the homosexual (across the gender spectrum) throughout the twentieth century.

In 1931 New York City added a new reporting category for its law enforcement officers: “impairing the morals of minors.”<sup>640</sup> New laws were introduced across the country that turned homosexuality into a psychological *and* legal issue. In 1935, Michigan passed a law which allowed for a sex offender who appeared “psychopathic” or was “sex degenerate” or “sex pervert” to be detained. This law empowered the state to imprison the convicted individual in a state psychiatric hospital for an indeterminate amount of time and gave the state the right to sterilize the convicted individual if the state saw fit.<sup>641</sup> “The modern regulatory state cut its teeth on gay people. Government police, censors, medics, and licensors worked, episodically, to suppress homosexuality from public awareness.”<sup>642</sup>

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<sup>639</sup> Dr. Paul Bowers, “A Survey of Twenty-Five Hundred Prisoners in Psychopathic Laboratory at the Indiana State Prison,” 33 (no date), attached to Los Angeles Police Department, *Annual Report*, 1924. Quoted in William N. Eskridge, Jr., *Gaylaw: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 39.

<sup>640</sup> Eskridge, *Gaylaw*, 41.

<sup>641</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>642</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

However, lesbianism in prison has a causality dilemma similar to the “chicken or the egg” debate. Are the women-loving women in prison there because of their lesbianism, or did their imprisonment cause them to turn to another woman for physical and romantic intimacy? To analyze this question, it is important to look at the fictional example of imprisoned lesbians put forth by *Female Convict* and the actual lives of women-loving women behind bars in the 1930s, as explored through the girls at Samarcand, the State Home and Industrial School for Girls in Moore County, North Carolina. *Female Convict*, published in 1934, was a supposedly true story told to Vincent E. Burns by Eleanor Brown, most likely a pseudonym, a woman who was sentenced to eighteen months in prison for stealing an expensive coat. One of Eleanor’s cellmates, Helen, tells her early in her sentence, “They make criminals here.”<sup>643</sup> Helen is also the one to tell Eleanor about the lesbianism taking place in the prison. When Eleanor overhears strange noises and asks Helen about the noises, Helen responds: “Stupid!...are yer that dumb? They’ve been lady-loving—and they don’t want the bull to catch them at it!”<sup>644</sup> This is Eleanor’s introduction to lesbianism, which she later tells the author she finds “horribly revolting.”<sup>645</sup>

When Eleanor is offered the opportunity to receive benefits in the penitentiary in return for lesbian sexual favors for the matron, she writes to the Commissioner asking for his help. He tells her to “cooperate with your officers.” Reflecting on this, Eleanor tells the author, “Little did the Commissioner know or care that in my case ‘cooperating with your officers,’ meant perversion and prostitution.”<sup>646</sup> Discussing her time in prison, Eleanor speaks of sex workers, Women of Color, and murderers fondly. Discussing her ability to befriend rats in the prison, she explains, “When one finds beastliness in humanity one is driven to find humanity in beasts.”

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<sup>643</sup> Vincent E. Burns, *Female Convict*, (New York: Pyramid Books, 1953), 41.

<sup>644</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>645</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>646</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

Although ostensibly referring to the rats, Eleanor makes this statement right after explaining the death of “Black Mary,” a Black woman she befriended in jail, and the insanity of a sex worker with syphilis. The parallel is evident, and Eleanor’s explanation serves to exonerate her from making friends with “undesirable” people while imprisoned.<sup>647</sup> Like *Hell Cat, Female Convict* conflates interracial relationships, in this case platonic, and lesbianism. Where one taboo exists, the other is not far behind.

Although there are allusions to lesbianism and other forms of “sexual perversion” throughout Eleanor’s early months in prison, it is not until she is transferred to Graywalls that Eleanor is confronted with the amount of lesbianism in the carceral system. Her new cellmate, Eloise, explains, “This place is loaded with sex-perverts...They ship them all here on purpose, from all over the state, when they catch them in the act...It’s a sex crazy-house. These caged-up women are absolutely sex-mad.”<sup>648</sup> Within Graywalls, there was also a sense that, as Edgar Allan Poe captured in *The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether*, “the inmates are running the asylum.”<sup>649</sup> Inmates often engaged in sexual relations with matrons, and the Head Matron was a known bisexual who entertained both male and female partners openly.<sup>650</sup> There were many different types of women living within Graywalls, most of them unwanted at other prisons and sent to Graywalls as a last resort. However, when a fire breaks out and claims 23 lives, the deaths include the hated spymaster for the Head Matron, at least a dozen women in solitary confinement, and “Two lady-lovers, Lillian Jones and Janet Franklin, still locked firmly in each other’s embrace.”<sup>651</sup> Although she never passes judgment on the “lady-lovers,” the fact that they

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<sup>647</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>649</sup> A full text of this short story about the horrors of Victorian insane asylums is available at <https://poestories.com/text.php?file=systemoftarr>.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>651</sup> Ibid., 137.



alone are singled out suggests the death was due to their vice. Eleanor tells Vincent Burns, “The most disgraceful crime of all is the treatment which society has accorded to those unfortunates whom we call criminals but who in reality are mentally and morally sick.” She concludes the prisons “do not remedy crime. They increase it.”<sup>652</sup> Does Eleanor believe the “lady-lovers” are the “mentally and morally sick,” or does she believe that their love is the “increased crime” caused by imprisonment? Unfortunately, neither she nor Burns offer closure on this subject. The last we hear of lesbianism is the two ladyloves who burned to death in the Graywalls fire.

What we do know, from both *Female Convict* and research conducted on women’s and girls’ correctional houses, is that the 1930s was a time when imprisonment was used to further the agenda of white supremacy and eugenics through a carceral system rooted in classism and racism, forced sterilization of women convicts, and the societal control of young women’s sexualities.<sup>653</sup> Karin L. Zipf’s research into Samarcand shows that young women were forced to learn to navigate the classist, racist, and heterosexist system that utilized prison to further an agenda rooted in white supremacy, heteronormative nuclear families, and the protection of bourgeois ideals, even at the expense of human rights for Black, indigent, and homosexual women.<sup>654</sup>

As explained by Eskridge in *Gaylaw*, the criminalization of independent women came primarily from the impetus of middle-class white men to maintain their grasp on societal power

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<sup>652</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>653</sup> See the following: Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, New York: WW Norton, 2019; Amy Beth Werbler, *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018; Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009; Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005; Nancy Ordover, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003; Margaret Sanger, *Women and the New Race*, New York: Bretanos, 1920.

<sup>654</sup> Karin L. Zipf, *Bad Girls at Samarcand: Sexuality and Sterilization in a Southern Juvenile Reformatory*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2016), 2-4.

in light of women's new economic and political power. "Faced with the newly independent woman, middle-class men grew obsessed with cultural reinforcements for their manliness."<sup>655</sup> By the 1930s, there was an increased desire to "come out," which brought the concept of homosexuality into the public discourse. This created a societal policy "against being homosexual, and it was federal in nature. States and localities generally policed homosexual acts; sometimes the feds did as well."<sup>656</sup> Even without laws specifically targeting homosexuality, the 1930s were a time when the carceral state began to use laws that empowered police to arrest, detain, and imprison homosexuals, leading to homosexuals losing their dignity, families, and careers. Homosexual men faced legal and societal discrimination before women, as "male perverts mattered so much to the state because male citizens did."<sup>657</sup> As women gained more rights throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the government began to place greater emphasis on policing the homosexuality of women.<sup>658</sup> As such, the law itself was not often employed against women until the postwar era, but the societal prohibition on homosexuality created a specter of taboo and punishment that haunted lesbians throughout the interwar era.

By the 1930s, the government at both the state and federal levels had garnered enough respect and control across the country that, "Few questioned the master narrative that control and care of delinquents rested with the state."<sup>659</sup> The main laws utilized in the early twentieth century to control homosexual women were those that addressed crossdressing and prostitution. By the 1930s, the Freudian concept of childhood trauma and experiences influencing adult identities, the suggestion that lesbian women preyed upon young women, and the eliding of male

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<sup>655</sup> Eskridge, *Gaylaw*, 3.

<sup>656</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>657</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>658</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>659</sup> Zipf, *Bad Girls at Samarcand*, 23.

homosexuality and pedophilia moved the homosexual from “the mannish lesbian and the female impersonator” to “a creature whose uncontrollable libido posed a momentous social danger to children’s budding sexuality.”<sup>660</sup> Lesbians were no longer just pitiful dangers to themselves, as depicted in *The Well of Loneliness*, but were now predators that could not be trusted around single women or young children.

Furthermore, as sex work became more strongly associated with congenital sexual perversion, there was greater conflation of the sex worker and the lesbian. “For women, the main community associated with unnatural sex acts and gender deviance was that of prostitutes. Many female sex-workers, especially Women of Color, offered oral sex to their male customers and found sexual and emotional solace in one another.”<sup>661</sup> At a time when both sex workers and lesbians were seen as degenerative and dangerous, it was easy for society to utilize laws against lewdness and public indecency to punish women-loving women. Furthermore, as sex workers were often seen as a burden upon the state, when the Great Depression hit there was an increased desire to rid the state of anyone dependent upon the public welfare system who did not adhere to gender norms and cisheteronormative nuclear family models. States wanted to repudiate their sex workers and homosexuals in equal measure, and some legislatures turned to laws that allowed for indeterminate sentencing in psychiatric hospitals, jail time for “lewd vagrancy,” and greater use of “mental defectives” laws to control the new “sexual psychopath,” an umbrella term referring to nymphomaniacs, pedophiles, sex workers, necrophiliacs, people who engaged in bestiality, and homosexuals.<sup>662</sup>

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<sup>660</sup> Eskridge, *Gaylaw*, 14.

<sup>661</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>662</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-42.

In a world in which lesbians were seen as monsters, prison seemed a good place to put them to keep society safe. Discussing the girls and young women imprisoned at Samarcand, Zipf explains the governing body of the women's correctional facility believed, "Institutional training and parole might socially adjust half of this group. The rest, those most feeble-minded of the mentally unfit, required permanent institutionalization."<sup>663</sup> The imprisonment of women-loving women, sex workers, and nymphomaniacs was rarely about rehabilitation. The leaders of Samarcand believed, "Segregation [of these women from society] would protect the larger population from contact with the most deficient."<sup>664</sup>

By the 1930s, lesbianism was considered an *a priori* reality of women's correctional facilities. For the young girls at Samarcand, rumors they partook in sodomy and lesbian practices followed them even after the girls left the institution.<sup>665</sup> This made it difficult for girls to readjust to life at home or in the foster care system, thus increasing recidivism and the likelihood that even women who would not engage in homosexuality outside of the walls of an institution would turn to other women for solace within a psychiatric hospital or penitentiary. Eleanor of *Female Convict* did not feel safe or able to return to normal until she and her husband left the city outside the prison and moved far away.<sup>666</sup> For a teenage girl whose family not only could not move away, but sometimes even catalyzed her original imprisonment to begin with, these rumors could have a damning impact on her reputation, rendering her unmarriageable in the eugenicist zeitgeist of 1930s America.

Despite these realities, lesbianism in prisons was rarely acknowledged by any person in power throughout the mid-twentieth century. While anecdotal evidence suggests that there were

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<sup>663</sup> Zipf, *Bad Girls at Samarcand*, 79.

<sup>664</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>665</sup> *Ibid.*, 105; 138.

<sup>666</sup> Burns, *Female Convict*, 154.

interracial lesbian relationships in many of the women's correctional facilities throughout the country, Estelle B. Freedman's research in the 1990s shows there is almost no reference to female homosexuality in official prison records. Sheldon Glueck and Eleanor Glueck, criminologists focused on Boston's prisons in 1934, did not mention lesbianism once, even after surveying 500 female convicts. Samuel Kahn's 1937 study on prison homosexuality, *Mentality and Homosexuality*, lacked information about the lesbianism at New York City Women's Workhouse because both the warden (a woman) and the priest refused Kahn's request to interview women-loving women inmates.<sup>667</sup> *Female Convict* was popular because it shed light on a conversation no one else was having in the mid-1930s. It would not be until the postwar era that discussions of lesbianism within women's prisons would enter public discourse.

The 1930s were replete with real women locked away in psychiatric wards and federal prisons, as prison populations skyrocketed throughout the country in the interwar era. In fact, between 1925 and 1939, the number of women sentenced to state and federal prisons annually almost doubled.<sup>668</sup> The new laws specifically targeting sexuality and gender expression, as well as the growth of the eugenics movement both helped to fill the prisons with women who were looking for solace in an uncomfortable and unforgiving environment. The lesbian fiction of the 1930s reflects these difficulties, depicting the realities of institutionalizing women, either through Scoot's story as a nymphomaniac or Eleanor's story as an accidental coat thief. More importantly, lesbian fiction did not offer any concrete answers, as society continued to evade determining whether lesbianism was innate or chosen, whether women-loving women should be

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<sup>667</sup> Estelle B. Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965," *Feminist Studies*, (22.2, Summer 1996, 397-423), 402-403.

<sup>668</sup> "Between 1925 and 1939 the number of sentenced prisoners grew by 88,000, an average annual rate of 5 percent, substantially higher than for the entire 1925-81 period even though there was virtually no growth during the depth of the depression, 1932-34." (US Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Prisoners 1925-81," US Department of Justice, December 1982, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p2581.pdf>). 3,438 women were sentenced to state and federal prisons in 1925 and 6,675 women were sentenced to state and federal prisons in 1939 (see Table 1 in "Prisoners 1925-81").

treated or imprisoned. In the end, the novels share a similar conclusion: the best thing for society is for a women-loving woman to be taken *out* of society. It does not matter what is best for the women-loving woman herself.

*Approaching Censorship from Self to Shelf to Stage*

*Hell Cat*, along with other works featuring lesbianism, was banned in various places throughout the mid-twentieth century, including the country of Australia. According to Nicole Moore, author of *The Censor's Library*, the banned books of the 1930s all had “morbid” plots, “pathologised,” characters, and “tragic” endings.<sup>669</sup> One of these novels, *Love Like a Shadow*, was published by Phoenix Press in 1935. *Love Like a Shadow*, which dealt with a sexually liberated woman who, at times, turned to lesbianism, was picked up by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and ruled “indecent.”<sup>670</sup> The owners of Phoenix Press, a rising New York-based publishing house, faced either a \$500 fine or three months in prison. The publisher in question, Emanuel Wartels, said he would appeal.<sup>671</sup> Emmanuel and his brother Nathaniel, co-owners of Phoenix Press, were involved in two cases regarding books published in 1935.<sup>672</sup> Nathaniel Wartels would go on to be one of the richest publishers in the world before he sold Crown Publishing, Phoenix Press’ parent company, to Random House in 1988.<sup>673</sup> These books sold, and by the end of the 1930s, printing presses across the country began to capitalize on the “average American’s” desire for affordable, paperback novels that dove into the hypersexualized

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<sup>669</sup> Nicole Moore, *The Censor's Library*, (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2012), 140.

<sup>670</sup> Unfortunately, *Love Like a Shadow* by Lois Lodge is no longer in circulation and thus is not included in this study.

<sup>671</sup> “Vice Crusaders Nab Shadow of Love; \$500 Fine,” *Daily News*, (New York, 26 May 1935, 46), 46.

<sup>672</sup> Jay Gertzman, *Bookleggers and Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica, 1920-1940*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 257.

<sup>673</sup> Edwin McDowell, “Nat Wartels, 88, the Chairman Of the Crown Publishing Empire,” (*New York Times*, 8 February 1990), <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/08/obituaries/nat-wartels-88-the-chairman-of-the-crown-publishing-empire.html>

worlds of nymphomaniacs, interracial relationships, homosexuality, and other taboo subjects of the 1930s.<sup>674</sup>

One of the writers to take advantage of this new appetite was Gale Wilhelm. Wilhelm was born in 1908 in Eugene, Oregon, and grew up in Oregon, Idaho, and Washington State before moving to the San Francisco Bay area in the early 1930s. She was 27 when she broke a major barrier to the production of lesbian fiction by publishing her first book, *We Too Are Drifting*, with the well-established Random House.<sup>675</sup> Wilhelm published six novels in the ensuing decade, before dropping out of public life in 1945. She lived with her partner, Helen Hope Rudolph Page, until Helen's death in the 1950s, and remained in Berkeley, CA for the rest of her life, until her death in July 1991.<sup>676</sup>

Founded in 1925, Random House already had a reputation for publishing morally questionable literature when it chose to take a chance on Wilhelm. In 1932, Random House obtained the rights to print *Ulysses* by James Joyce and retained Morris Ernst to represent the publishing house in the inevitable censorship case. As discussed in Chapter Two, Ernst was the defense lawyer for the American case against *The Well of Loneliness*. In 1931, Ernst won an acquittal for the well-known eugenicist and birth control advocate Marie Stopes. Stopes was acquitted on two different charges of obscenity by quoting from the dictionary definition of the word "obscene." This acquittal overturned the precedent set by the Hicklin Test, which allowed for the banning of any book which could "deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences." Instead, "obscene" now meant, "Offensive to modesty or decency;

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<sup>674</sup> Lilyan Brock, *Queer Patterns*, (San Francisco: She Winked Press, 1952), 210.

<sup>675</sup> Barbara Grier, "Introduction" in *We Too Are Drifting*, Gale Wilhelm, (Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, 1984).

<sup>676</sup> Grier, "Introduction"; Biggs, "Voices from the Past," 18; "The Gale Wilhelm Papers," Online Archive of California, Accessed July 3, 2021, <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt3h4nd3bv/admin/#bioghist-1.3.4>

expressing or suggesting unchaste or lustful ideas; impure, indecent, lewd.”<sup>677</sup> These cases paved the way for *Ulysses* to be cleared of obscenity charges in 1933, solidifying both Ernst’s and Joyce’s places in censorship history.

After risking financial ruin during the Great Depression to render possible the publication of *Ulysses*, Random House was taking much less of a risk on Wilhelm’s *We Too Are Drifting*, since *The Well of Loneliness* had already proven that books about sexual inversion among women could be published without censor in the United States. Still, Random House put effort into this inaugural work by a young author. By publishing with an established publishing house and racking up positive reviews, “*We too are Drifting* sought to make lesbian culture and sexuality visible to a wide American literary audience.”<sup>678</sup> Some of the top newspapers and literary magazines in the country, including the *New York Times Review of Books*, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, and the *New York Herald Review* published reviews on Wilhelm’s new book.<sup>679</sup>

Two years after *We Too are Drifting* met with relative success, Wilhelm’s second novel, *Torchlight to Valhalla* included certain elements of her first work, including a focus on the relationship between the women-loving woman protagonist and her cisheteronormative male friend, who may or may not be in love with her. Biggs questioned “if Wilhelm herself was in conflict about her goal, about which of the novel’s two romances really should have primacy,” as “[t]hroughout the book, even to its last pages—excepting the short section where Morgan and Toni meet and fall in love—the focus seems to be on the more complex, much more fully

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<sup>677</sup> Marisa Anne Pagnattaro, “Carving a Literary Exception: The Obscenity Standard and ‘Ulysses’” *Twentieth Century Literature*, (47.2, Summer 2001, 217-240, <https://doi.org/10.2307/827850>), 218-225.

<sup>678</sup> Chase Dimock, “Crafting hermaphroditism: Gale Wilhelm’s lesbian modernism in *We Too Are Drifting*,” *College Literature*, (41.3, 2014, 45-68) 45.

<sup>679</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.



analyzed and fundamentally more plausible relationship of Morgan and Royal...”<sup>680</sup> In analyzing the development of Morgan and Royal’s relationship, Biggs comes to the conclusion, despite Morgan and Toni ending up together, *Torchlight to Valhalla* is, at its heart a tragedy, and Morgan’s revulsion to heterosexual intimacy is her tragic flaw. Biggs writes, “Her inability to enjoy sex with him—she experiences a strong physical revulsion that somehow escapes this sensitive man’s attention—seems almost tragic, given what he offers her artistically and emotionally.”<sup>681</sup> Unlike Kletkin, who was married and seemed to accept Jan’s homosexuality, Royal coerces Morgan into sex and then does not realize “her teeth grew together with pain and disgust but mostly pain” and “She lay looking over his head toward the open door in shame and sadness.”<sup>682</sup> In this description, sex between a man and a homosexual woman is painted almost as rape, with dubious consent but good intentions. Both Royal and Morgan believe she should enjoy the encounter, even though she cannot.<sup>683</sup>

Wilhelm makes choices in *Torchlight to Valhalla* that she did not make in *We Too Are Drifting*, which turn the novel into a triangle between a woman, the man who loves her, and the woman she loves. While in *We Too Are Drifting* the central triangle is made up of women (Madeline→Jan→Victoria), with the tug-o-war between a women-loving woman and a heterosexual man (Jan→Victoria→Dan) on the periphery until the end, *Torchlight to Valhalla* centers the tension between the women-loving woman and the heterosexual man (Royal→Morgen→Toni). It is socially acceptable for one woman (Madeline) to lose another woman (Jan) to a third woman (Victoria), because heterosexual men are not the victims of lesbian seduction. Moreover, in the end, Victorian leaves Jan to be with Daniel, providing a

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<sup>680</sup> Biggs, “Voices from Past,” 18.

<sup>681</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>682</sup> Gale Wilhelm, *Torchlight to Valhalla*, (Tallahassee, FL: The Naiad Press, Inc., 1985), 71.

<sup>683</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-73.

perfectly suitable ending to *We Too Are Drifting*. However, in Wilhelm's second novel she not only posits the heterosexual man against a women-loving woman adversary, but she allows the woman-loving women adversary to *win*. Toni gets both the house Royal wanted and the woman he loves. Seen from the cisheteronormative perspective, that is, from Royal's perspective, this book is not only a tragedy, but also guaranteed to have failed the Hicklin Test. A happy ending for two homosexual women *at the expense of a man*? Radclyffe Hall did not go this far, allowing Mary Llewellyn to leave with Martin. Following in Hall's footsteps with her first novel, Wilhelm allowed Victoria to leave to be with Dan. And yet, in her second novel, Wilhelm refuses the compulsory heterosexuality of society and lets Morgen choose Toni over Royal, a complete rejection of Dead Lesbian Syndrome.

According to Dimock, "Part of the reason for Wilhelm's obscurity is the difficulty of fitting her within the popular narratives of LGBT literary history. Wilhelm's work contrasts with the depictions of lesbian identity in contemporaneous works and even with novels written decades into the future."<sup>684</sup> In 1938, Random House took a chance on publishing a narrative that not only gave women-loving women a happy ending, but did so at the expense of a heterosexual man's happiness. It was not censored, it did not lead to the publishing house or the author facing financial ruin, and it sold well enough for Wilhelm to get a contract for her fourth book, *Bring Home the Bride*, published in 1940. Happy endings for women-loving women could find success in the literary market. And yet, this failed to cure Dead Lesbian Syndrome; common knowledge remained happy endings in lesbian fiction could not sell.

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<sup>684</sup> Dimock, "Crafting hermaphroditism," 45.

While Wilhelm's books were successful throughout the 1930s and did not face censorship, Lillian Hellman's 1934 play *The Children's Hour* was censored continuously by Hellman herself and then by critics throughout its production—first as a script, then as a play, and eventually as the movies *These Three* (1936) and *The Children's Hour* (1961). In 1934, Lillian Hellman wrote and directed the Broadway play *The Children's Hour*. Her first success after a slew of failures, this play would launch Hellman into a successful writing career. During the writing process, however, Hellman was merely the girlfriend of a famous writer, Dashiell Hammett, running in the austere literary circles of the 1930s, which included giants such as Dorothy Parker and William Faulkner. She was regularly surrounded by leaders in literature that pushed on the margins of society, including Alfred Knopf (the man who originally wanted to publish *The Well of Loneliness* but rescinded his offer when the British censorship trials began), HL Mencken (founding editor of the boundaries-pushing literary magazine *The American Mercury*), and Willa Cather (a women-loving woman writer).<sup>685</sup> In short, she had an ideal environment in which to write the first performed women-loving women play on Broadway.

Biographers agree it was Hammett who introduced Hellman to the plot of *The Children's Hour*. Hammett came across the book *Bad Companions*, a collection of British court cases compiled by William Roughhead, and was particularly enamored with the chapter "Closed Doors, or The Great Drumsheugh Case," which focused on a case that took place in 1810. Originally, Hammett considered writing his own play based on the trial, but then "decided it would make a better play for Lilly...this seemed ideal for her; the subject matter, with its calumny and monstrous injustice, could harness the anger and the contempt for self-

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<sup>685</sup> William Wright, *Lillian Hellman: The Woman, The Image*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 70-77. For discussion of Mencken's boundary-pushing work, please see *The Editor, the Bluenose, and the Prostitute: History of the Hatrack Censorship Case* by Carl Bode (New York: Roberts Rinehart, 1990). For discussion of Willa Cather's same-sex attraction, please see *Willa Cather: Queering America* by Marilee Lindemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

righteousness that was so strong in Hellman's makeup."<sup>686</sup> Hellman did not deny nor refuse the benefits of creating a play based on a narrative already constructed.<sup>687</sup> Still, she did take artistic license. The biggest change, surprisingly, hinges on the basis of race.

To understand the artistic decisions Hellman made as a playwright, we need to turn to the source material, Roughead's *Bad Companions*. It is important to note here that the edition referenced here was published in 1931, just a few years before Hellman wrote *The Children's Hour*. In the introduction, written by the English novelist Hugh Walpole, we receive a well-argued assessment of Roughead's character. "He does not condone crime: all his books are most strictly moral, although never moralising; but he is calm, dispassionate, and often amused. He is sometimes disgusted, but he never permits his disgust to betray his judgment."<sup>688</sup> Walpole concludes, "Some say that these interests are morbid, I reply that under Mr. Roughead's hand they become human, eloquent, and instructive."<sup>689</sup> Hellman's approach to the subject of lesbianism, gossip, and lying echoes Roughead's detached but moral style. According to biographer Wright, Hellman "insisted her play was not about lesbianism, but about the destructiveness of slander."<sup>690</sup> By the end of the play, the audience is left to wonder about the moral of the story: Did Martha kill herself because she committed a crime or sin by being a lesbian, or did she kill herself because society would not permit her to exist as a lesbian? Was Mary, the child, correct in accusing her teachers of homosexuality when none existed, because it eventually "outed" Martha's real inclinations? Unlike *Loveliest of Friends*, in which Donisthorpe includes a page-long Public Service Announcement about the evils and tragic endings of lesbianism, or *Pity for Women*, in which Helen Anderson uses the voice of Judith to

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<sup>686</sup> Wright, *Lillian Hellman*, 86.

<sup>687</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>688</sup> Hugh Walpole, "A Little Forward," *Bad Companions*, William Roughead, (New York: Duffield & Green, 1931), viii.

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>690</sup> Wright, *Lillian Hellman*, 109.

extol the hardships of lesbianism and the oppressive nature of society, Hellman uses Roughead's "detached, moral style" to make her characters poignantly human without casting judgment upon their actions.

In Roughead's narrative of the scandal, the two teachers work in the Scottish town of Auld Reikie in 1810. The two women teachers were in their late twenties and from good families. They counted among their patrons Dame Helen Cumming Gordon, a well-respected and well-endowed older woman whose granddaughter was an orphan with mixed parentage: a white father and a Black mother. There is a bit of discrepancy here, in terms of the ethnicity of the young girl, Miss Jane Cummings. While Roughead refers to her as "a bastard, borne to [Dame Cummings' son] by a [B]lack woman," Mr. Cummings was in India when his daughter was conceived, and Jane was raised in Calcutta. Roughead's own racism bleeds through in the narrative, as he claims the two teachers, "agreed to swallow the black draught..." when they allowed Jane to join the school.<sup>691</sup> Furthermore, when comparing Jane to the white students, Roughead concludes, "Miss Cumming, by reason of her mixed blood, was much the most mature of the three."<sup>692</sup> She was, at the time, thirteen, while her companions were between the ages of eleven and fifteen. Throughout the story, Roughead repeatedly draws upon Jane's race as an explanation for her behavior.<sup>693</sup> By choosing instead to make "Mary" the white stand-in for "Jane Cumming" in *The Children's Hour*, Hellman loses Roughead's explanations of Jane's character flaws. Instead, Mary is shown to be a spoiled but "normal" student, who simply refuses to adhere to the rules set forth by Martha and Karen.

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<sup>691</sup> Roughead, *Bad Companions*, 116.

<sup>692</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>693</sup> "Miss Jane Cumming, conscious of the disadvantages from which she suffered in competition with her fair companions, sought by every artifice to ingratiate herself with the principals." (Roughead, *Bad Companions*, 120)

Although Hellman changed the race of the accuser, she aligned with Roughead's overall assessment of the charges. Roughead writes, "I make no claim to the license granted to Professor Krafft-Ebing, Mr. Havelock Ellis, and other scientific exponents of such problems. No; my interest in the case resided in the fact that *the charge was false*; also in the astounding audacity of the traducer, and in the long legal duel to which her precocious wickedness gave rise."<sup>694</sup>

(emphasis original) For Roughead, Jane Cumming, the accuser, was evil. Lillian Hellman took a different approach.

Hellman changed Jane's name to Mary and made her a young white girl who lived with her grandmother Mrs. Tilford. Mary, as a white girl, could not be expected to be mature or hypersexual based on her race alone, and so Hellman created a new nexus for Mary's forbidden knowledge: reading. Hellman had Mary read *Mademoiselle du Maupin*, the book discussed in Chapters One and Two which features erotic lesbianism and faced trial in the 1920s for its subject matter. In this way, Hellman modelled the role of lesbian literature in making mainstream society aware of lesbianism—had Mary never read *Mademoiselle du Maupin*, she never would have invented the lies about her teachers, and the town never would have needed to confront the threat of lesbianism in their community. Hellman, who had also read *Mademoiselle du Maupin* as a child, showed her audience the power of lesbian fiction—for better or for worse.<sup>695</sup> None of her published works nor her biographies suggest that Hellman ever explained why Mary received her knowledge of lesbianism through books, but the concept does perfectly reflect the fears of the Progressive Era: access to taboo subjects would be corruptive to the impressionable, especially the young and the indigent.

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<sup>694</sup> Roughead, *Bad Companions*, 127.

<sup>695</sup> Mary Titus, "Murdering the Lesbian: Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*," in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, (Vol. 10, No. 2, Autumn, 1991, pp. 215-232), 218-219.

Hellman's narrative structure in *The Children's Hour* was modelled after the male writers of her time. Lesbians, for these male writers, "function as a social disorder."<sup>696</sup> Hellman deals with the lie of lesbianism through a trial and the destruction of Karen and Martha's dreams; she deals with the reality of lesbianism through suicide. Hellman utilized the structure of a classical tragedy, in which "Martha's unacknowledged desire is her fatal flaw; it brings on the tragedy and provides the 'cause' and 'possible justice' for her death."<sup>697</sup> Hellman's own notes explain how Martha's suicide changes the whole morality of the play. According to Hellman, Martha's confession of lesbian feelings towards Karen, is "the difference between having been injured unjustly—some comfort in that—and being injured with some possible justice."<sup>698</sup> This first play was not a foreshadowing of Hellman's future ties to the Community Party. Rather, "*The Children's Hour* that Lillian Hellman first imagined was not a play of social criticism, one that would foreshadow her later political drama. It was instead a profoundly conservative text, one that she wanted to conform to contemporary sexual ideology overtly."<sup>699</sup> Hellman's work was more like Hall's reactionary defense of the pitiful homosexual than like Wilhelm's revolutionary argument that the homosexual could be proud.

Unlike Roughead's narrative, in which two innocent teachers are treated unjustly by society to their ruin, Hellman justifies the terrible treatment Karen and Martha receive through Martha's lesbianism.<sup>700</sup> When reviewing the play for a new edition in the 1960s, Hellman suggests she should have ended with Martha's suicide, as "the danger is over when the lesbian is

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<sup>696</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>697</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>698</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>699</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>700</sup> Roughead explains the situation as "The pursuers were stabbed in the dark, with no chance of vindication. The slander was whispered, under seal of secrecy, to those with whom their fate rested. They lost their all- character, their very existence in society. And the defense to their just claim for reparation is--the truth of the charge!" (141)

dead.”<sup>701</sup> Instead, the play ends with Mrs. Tilford explaining that Karen’s life will get a clean slate, as Mrs. Tilford told the Judge about Mary’s lies. This resolution does little for Karen, who appears unimpressed with the libel suit ending in her favor, in the same way that Roughead’s women are unable to get much satisfaction from their settlement. In the end, Hellman and Roughead’s treatment of the accusation both align with a heterosexist denouement: Hellman destroys the lesbian and hurts the heterosexual woman implicated in lesbianism because of *Dead Lesbian Syndrome*, which requires lesbianism to result in tragedy. Roughead rejects the lesbianism, thus suggesting that the treatment of Miss Woods and Miss Pirie is unjust. For both writers, the lesbianism itself is what must be destroyed to restore social order.

Hellman’s biographer, Wright, argues the biggest difference “is the suicide of one of the teachers at the play’s end.” Historically, the two accused women bankrupted themselves to prove their innocence, eventually winning an appeal case and clearing their names, although it was “too late to salvage their lives,” and the grandmother who accused them of homosexual relations never rescinded her accusations.<sup>702</sup> The real-life case dragged on for a decade, as Miss Woods (the real Martha), turned to friends to support herself and her aunt while Miss. Pirie (the real Karen), “suffered so severely in her health and constitution as certainly to embitter the remainder of her days, and in all probability greatly to shorten her life.”<sup>703</sup> Eventually, Dame Cumming Gordon was ordered to give the women a sum of £ 3,500, but Roughead cannot prove that the women ever received the reparations.<sup>704</sup> In *The Children’s Hour*, Mary eventually confesses that she invented the lesbianism, and Mrs. Tilford rushes to apologize to Karen and Martha, only to learn that she was minutes too late to prevent Martha’s suicide. The real-life case took years to

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<sup>701</sup> Titus, “Murdering the Lesbian,” 225.

<sup>702</sup> Wright, *Lillian Hellman*, 90.

<sup>703</sup> Roughead, *Bad Companions*, 143-144.

<sup>704</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.



settle, whereas the whole play takes place over the span of seven months, from April to November.<sup>705</sup>

Whether it was the original story, Hellman's decision to make Mary white, or her decision to make Martha commit suicide that people found compelling, *The Children's Hour* proved to be successful. She submitted the play anonymously to her boss at the time, Herman Shumlin, a Broadway theatrical director with whom she would later have a sexual affair. Shumlin was so impressed by the play that he offered to produce it before learning who wrote it, but he was reportedly "delighted to learn who the author was."<sup>706</sup> He began casting almost immediately, only to find that the specter of *The Captive* still haunted Broadway, preventing any of the leading actresses from auditioning for *The Children's Hour*. Eventually, he was able to cast the play, including a new, young star, Eugenia Rawls, who had fond memories of the play when asked about it later in life. According to Rawls, "None of us girls knew what the play was really about, except maybe Florence, who was married."<sup>707</sup>

In the end, the play was a rousing success. Brooks Atkinson, who had previously reviewed *The Captive*, was one of the first to review the new play. On November 21, 1934, the day after opening night, Atkinson published "'The Children's Hour,' Being a Tragedy of Life in a Girls' Boarding House" in the *New York Times*. His review began scathingly:

In the last ten or fifteen minutes of the final act, she tries desperately to discover a mettlesome dramatic conclusion; having lured "The Children's Hour" away from the theater into the sphere of human life, she pushes it back among the Ibsenic dolls and baubles by refusing to stop talking. Please, Miss Hellman, conclude the play before the pistol shot and before the long arm of coincidence starts wobbling in its socket. When two people are

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<sup>705</sup> Lillian Hellman, *Six Plays*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 4, 72-78

<sup>706</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>707</sup> Quoted in Wright, *Lillian Hellman*, 95.

defeated by the malignance of an aroused public opinion, leave them the dignity of their hatred and despair.<sup>708</sup>

Atkinson goes on to laud Florence McGee as Mary, “who forces every drop of poison” out of her role. He is complimentary to each of the actors and even applauds Hellman and Shumlin for producing a “pitiless tragedy.” He instructs them that the play could be “vivid drama” if they end right before Martha’s suicide.<sup>709</sup> As an early supporter of *The Captive*, in this essay Atkinson may have reinforced his standing as one of the first public and mainstream critics of Dead Lesbian Syndrome. Despite Atkinson’s review, the play did very well, and continued with eight performances a week through the summer.<sup>710</sup>

Atkinson’s review may have come as a shock to his audience, who were informed of the play in *The New York Times* the day before. In summarizing the play, the *Times* wrote only, “The story concerns a girls’ boarding school.” While in the 21st century this sentence may have been enough to tip-off audiences that women-loving women would be present, if not overtly then at least covertly, in 1934 this summary did little to prepare viewers for continued discussion of lesbianism throughout the second and third acts. This advertisement also informed *New York Times* readers that the book version of the play would be available to purchase the following day. The book’s publisher was Alfred Knopf, who had refused to publish *The Well of Loneliness* after its English trials in 1928.<sup>711</sup>

The Broadway debut of *The Children’s Hour* did so well that within a few months Hellman and Shumlin were looking to bring the play to London. However, because Britain

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<sup>708</sup> Brooks Atkinson, “THE PLAY: ‘The Children’s Hour,’ Being a Tragedy of Life in a Girls’ Boarding House,” (*New York: New York Times*, November 21, 1934), 23.

<sup>709</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>710</sup> “News of the Stage: Mr. Short Returns to the Broadway Scene – ‘The Children’s Hour’ Abandons Monday,” (*New York Times*, Jul 10, 1935, 24), 24.

<sup>711</sup> “News of the Stage: ‘The Children’s Hour’ (Not Longfellows) at Hand this Evening – ‘Jayhawker’ Closes Next Monday,” (*New York Times*, November 20, 1934, 24), 24.

censored even the mention of homosexuality in their plays, their dream was unable to come to fruition. According to the explanation wired to *The New York Times* in March 1935, “plays on this theme are automatically forbidden irrespective of merit, as is the case of ‘The Captive’ and others.”<sup>712</sup> At the end of 1935, *The Children’s Hour* tried to expand again, this time into Boston. On December 15, 1935, *The New York Times* reported Boston Mayor Frederick W. Mansfield had added *The Children’s Hour* to the growing list of plays and books banned in Boston. Hellman wrote to *The New York Times* almost immediately, and the following day her decision to fight the censorship was published in the “News of the Stage” section.<sup>713</sup> Mayor Mansfield stood by his decision to enforce the censorship of *The Children’s Hour*. In an article written for *The New York Times* a week later, readers learned two important points in the history of censorship: Boston continued to have one of the strictest censorship laws in the country and the ruling in favor of *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928 changed the way Boston censors judged books. “For years the Massachusetts book ban depended on an isolated passage, and sales were forbidden of works ‘containing obscene, indecent, or impure language, or manifestly tending to corrupt the morals of youth. A few years ago this first clause was amended to read simply, ‘which is obscene.’ The whole book is now the test.”<sup>714</sup> This is the argument put forth by Judge Andrews in *Halsey vs. New York Society*, the 1922 case explored in chapter two which permitted individuals to continue to sell *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, the same book Mary reads in *The Children’s Hour* to learn about lesbianism.<sup>715</sup> In the end, the argument that the book should be

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<sup>712</sup> “American Play Banned: English Censor Forbids Presentation of ‘The Children’s Hour,’” *New York Times*, March 12, 1935, 24), 24.

<sup>713</sup> Associated Press, “‘Children’s Hour’ Banned in Boston: Mayor Acts after Report by City Censor who Saw Hellman Play Here. Private Showing Barred Mansfield Rejects Manager’s Offer—Drama Was Backed by Guild Affiliate,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1935, 42), 42; “First Boston Play Ban: Author of ‘The Children’s Hour’ Calls Mayor Arbitrary,” *New York Times*, December 16, 1935, 22), 22.

<sup>714</sup> F. Lauriston Bullard, “Censor Still Rules Boston Theaters: ‘The Children’s Hour’ is Latest Play to Meet Ban as City’s Old Code Persists,” Editorial Correspondence, (*New York Times*, December 22, 1935, E11), E11.

<sup>715</sup> *Halsey vs. New York Society*. Court of Appeals of the State of New York, July 12, 1922, <https://casetext.com/case/halsey-v-ny-society>.

judged *as a whole* was not enough to save *The Children's Hour*, and Hellman was forced to look elsewhere to stage her play outside of Manhattan.

Although the play did not make it to the London or Boston stages that year, it continued performances on Broadway. By July 4, 1936, its final performance on Broadway, the performers had staged 691 performances and the play ranked ninth for Broadway's longest running shows at the time. Even before the final performance began, *The Children's Hour* was slated to tour the next season.<sup>716</sup> The play continued to be banned in Boston and faced new obstacles in January in an attempt to bring it to Chicago.<sup>717</sup> However, soon after closing, *The Children's Hour* finally found purchase in London, opening at a private club that was not beholden to the London censor. Gate Theater Studio hosted opening night on November 12, 1936, just a week shy of the two-year anniversary of the show's first performance. A critic reviewed the private show for the *Times* of London and agreed with Atkinson's belief that the interaction between Karen and Mrs. Tilford in the final act was superfluous. The critic suggests that if Martha had been given more time to explore and share her lesbian feelings with Karen, this would have made "the play even more moving than it was."<sup>718</sup>

Through performances and press coverage, *The Children's Hour* became part of a conversation about single-sex education that plagued society on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean in the interwar and postwar eras. There was "uncertainty" in portrayals of love between girls in single-sex high schools, "representing childhood crushes as both common aspects of school girl

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<sup>716</sup> "News of the Stage: Exit 'The Children's Hour' on July 4 – This Evening's Gift from the WPA – The Summer Circuit Reports," (*New York Times*, June 26, 1936, 17), 17

<sup>717</sup> "'The Children's Hour' is Weighed in Chicago: Theater Guild Head Says It Has Been Barred, but City Official Denies Action," (*New York Times*, January 10, 1936, 17), 17.

<sup>718</sup> "Gate Theater: 'The Children's Hour' by Lillian Hellman," (*The London Times*, November 13, 1936, 14), 14; "'The Children's Hour' is Hailed in London: Production at Gate Theater Studio is Uncensored – Wins Critical Acclaim," (*New York Times* November 13, 1936, 27), 27.

culture and the forerunner of adult lesbianism.”<sup>719</sup> As an increasing number of books were published throughout the 1930s and 1940s reflecting the existence of lesbianism in same-sex schools, popular culture began to label single-sex schools as “hotbeds of homosexuality.”<sup>720</sup> Havelock Ellis himself supported this claim.<sup>721</sup> Influenced by *Girls in Uniform* (1931), sexological studies, and the gossip of the upper-class literati with whom she and Hammett kept company, Hellman already knew that homosexuality in an all-girls’ boarding school had to be dealt with as a taboo if she was going to get her play past even the most liberal of censors.

Homosexuality, as understood through the lens of 1930s eugenics, was poisonous because it reproduced without procreation. Unable to explain exactly *how* one passed their homosexuality on to another, theorists concluded that proximity, in this case the students learning from their teachers, was unsafe.<sup>722</sup> In the Roughead case, the true evil is miscegenation, which is the cause of Jane Cummings’ degenerate behavior (Jane is the result of a white Scottish man having sex with a Black/Indian woman). Future children similar to Jane Cummings could be avoided through “proper” breeding of the “master race.” In Hellman’s play, the true evil is Martha’s lesbianism, for which no cause is provided and which cannot be prevented through sterilization. Furthermore, in Roughead’s narrative, Jane Cummings knows about homosexuality because of her Indian background. In Hellman’s play, Mary comes across the knowledge by reading a book. *The Children’s Hour* thus represents a shift in the 1930s, from which the white race, previously poisoned primarily through miscegenation or interclass relationships, now faced a new horror: popular culture.

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<sup>719</sup> Rebecca Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A lesbian history of post-war Britain*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>720</sup> Titus, “Murdering the Lesbian,” 221.

<sup>721</sup> Mikko Tuhkanen, “Breeding (and) Reading: Lesbian Knowledge, Eugenic Discipline, and the Children’s Hour.” *Modern Fiction Studies* (48.4, Winter, 2002, 1001-1040, doi: 10.1353/mfs.2002.0081), 1010.

<sup>722</sup> *Ibid.*, 1002.

If popular culture was a threat to the procreation of white supremacy, then popular culture needed to be controlled. As an increasing number of books, plays, and films began to explore homosexuality as a theme, society began to exert pressure on anglophone writers to place limits upon homosexual expression and existence. According to Titus, “women’s equality in the 1930s came at the price of hypersexual heteronormativity. Her generation had new versions of female success and like many of her contemporaries, Hellman viewed the active heterosexuality of unmarried women as an important symbol of female independence.”<sup>723</sup> For Hellman, and other women of her age, “sexual liberation became the sign of independence and equality, and this meant that women found their status still defined by their relation to men. Women who demanded equal status yet rejected active heterosexuality were accused of lesbianism.”<sup>724</sup> Even though sexually liberated women of the 1930s eschewed marriage in exchange for either serial monogamy or balancing multiple men, these strong women still clung to the auspices of cisheteronormativity, to avoid the diagnosis of lesbianism and the damnation it entailed.

Hellman was afraid of being accused of lesbianism, the same fear shared by Djuna Barnes, who was writing *Nightwood* around the same time Hellman was writing *The Children’s Hour*. To ensure that she herself was not accused of lesbianism, Hellman was pressured, either consciously or subconsciously, to kill the lesbian. “The society outside the play, as much as the society within, has accused the ‘wright’ of lesbianism. If in the play that society, mustered by Mrs. Tilford, brought on Martha Dobie’s suicide, outside the play another society forced the playwright to murder the lesbian in her text, and perhaps in herself. In both worlds the result is

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<sup>723</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>724</sup> Ibid., 227.

the same: isolation and grief, not a renewed, happily heterosexual social order.”<sup>725</sup> Although she was never publicly outed as a lesbian, Hellman did offer some speculation on her own intense attachment to a young woman she was friends with as a teenager. According to Hellman, the love she felt for the other woman was “too strong and too complicated to be defined as only the sexual yearnings of one girl for another, and yet certainly that was there.”<sup>726</sup> In a 1952 interview, Hellman further distanced herself from lesbianism when she said, “One thing that has struck me about ‘The Children’s Hour’ is that anyone young ordinarily writes autobiographically. Yet I picked a story that I could treat completely impersonality [*sic*]. I hadn’t even been to boarding school – I went to school here in New York.”<sup>727</sup> Hellman rejected her own same-sex tendencies in adulthood, killing the lesbian within her; when Martha could no longer repress or renounce her lesbianism, she had to be killed as well.

*From Page to Screen: Adapting for the Masses*

In his review of *The Children’s Hour*, Boston censor Herbert L. McNarry wrote, “The theme centers around homosexuality and nothing could be done with the play to relieve it of this.”<sup>728</sup> When Samuel Goldwyn purchased the rights to turn *The Children’s Hour* into a movie, many believed it was a joke. “‘The Children’s Hour’ in Hollywood’s eyes, was a dead horse, and Mr. Goldwyn, much to everyone’s amusement, donated \$50,000 for the privilege of carting it away under cover of night.”<sup>729</sup> The Hays Code, which went into effect in 1931 but was more stringently enforced beginning in 1934, prohibited homosexuality of any kind in Hollywood

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<sup>725</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>726</sup> Lillian Hellman, quoted in Titus, “Murdering the Lesbian,” 225.

<sup>727</sup> Harry Gilroy, “The Bigger the Life: Drama Dealing with the Big Lie,” (*New York Times*, December 14, 1952, 3-4), 3-4.

<sup>728</sup> The Associated Press, “‘Children’s Hour’ Banned in Boston,” 42.

<sup>729</sup> Frank S. Nugent, “These Three, Those Five: ‘The Children’s Hour’ and the Dionnes Alike Have Whispering Campaigns,” (*New York Times*, March 22, 1936, X3), X3.

movies. However, by March 1936, less than two years after *The Children's Hour* made its Broadway debut, Goldwyn had a film based off this play that not only passed censor, but also received a glowing review in *The New York Times*. According to Frank S. Nugent's review of the film, *These Three*, "Miss Hellman has written her adaptation with rare skill, retaining the play's dramatic framework while revising almost completely its pattern of motivation."<sup>730</sup> Nugent went on to call *These Three*, "one of finest screen dramas in years."<sup>731</sup>

Hellman's ability to censor *The Children's Hour* to the point of completely erasing lesbianism was rooted in her belief that lesbianism was not pivotal to the play. "She insisted her play was not about lesbianism, but about the destructiveness of slander. She could write an adaptation that contained no hint of homosexuality."<sup>732</sup> In fact, Hellman told Goldwyn that Shumlin had "overemphasized the homosexual theme at the expense of the real theme: the devastation caused by a lie."<sup>733</sup> During her 1952 interview for the *New York Times*, Hellman explained she did not see Mary as evil. "It's the result of her lie that makes her so dreadful—this is not really a play about lesbianism, but about a lie. The bigger the lie, the better, as always."<sup>734</sup>

*These Three*, which premiered in March 1936, kept true to the basic plot of *The Children's Hour*, except Martha was accused of having a romantic relationship with Dr. Joe, Karen's fiancé, instead of with Karen. In the play, Martha and Karen *both* knew the slanderous accusation that they were romantically involved was a lie. In the film, Mary's accusation creates an unbreachable schism between Martha and Karen, as Karen cannot be completely certain her best friend was not in love with her fiancé. The accusation moved from lesbianism to adultery, a

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<sup>730</sup> Nugent, "These Three, Those Five," X3.

<sup>731</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>732</sup> Wright, *Lillian Hellman*, 109.

<sup>733</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>734</sup> Gilroy, "The Bigger the Lie," 4.



sin that American movie audiences were much better acquainted with, and which could get *These Three* past the censors on both coasts and across middle America.<sup>735</sup>

To ensure a happy ending for Karen and Joe, Hellman made it clear in the first half-hour of the movie this is a cisheteronormative romance. Although she claimed that lesbianism was not required to make her case, Hellman alluded to homosexuality when she has Mary turn on a fellow girl student and say, “That’s right, defend your crush.” The crush, in this situation, was Martha.<sup>736</sup> However, beyond this brief interaction the plot remained very cisheteronormative. After losing their libel suit, Karen and Martha hid in the house, as they did in the play. Dr. Joe came to visit them and whisk the three of them away to Vienna, to start over. Martha went into the kitchen to cook a meal to celebrate, as she did in the play. However, the conversation that took place between Karen and Joe changed ever so slightly (Figure 1). By making Joe the one accused of cheating, instead of Karen, the film suggested that Joe can be forgiven, even if it is true, because adultery is “normal,” unlike lesbianism.

<i>The Children’s Hour</i> (1934) <sup>737</sup>	<i>These Three</i> (1936) <sup>738</sup>
Karen: It won’t work Joe Cardin: What? Karen: The two of us together. Cardin: Stop talking like that. You’ll believe it soon. Karen: Tell me. ( <i>Turns to Cardin</i> ) Tell me what you want to know. <b>Cardin: I have nothing to ask. (<i>Neither speaks. He turns facing U.L.</i>)</b> Karen: ( <i>Holds hid D.S. arm, leans her head on his shoulder.</i> ) After a while, in the court., I stopped listening. After a while, it didn’t seem to matter what anybody said. Then I began to watch your face. It was the only nice thing I	Joe Cardin: Look at me ( <i>moves Karen’s head to look at him</i> ) Your face is the way it was that last day in court— <b>ashamed, and sad at being ashamed.</b> What is it? Karen: I don’t know. ( <i>looks down</i> ) I just don’t know whether people can start again. Cardin: Karen we’ve got to face this. Say it now. Ask it now. <b>Karen: I’ve got nothing to ask, nothing.</b> Alright, were you—were you and Martha ever ( <i>Joe covers Martha’s mouth</i> ) Cardin: No. Karen, Martha and I never even thought of each other. Don’t you believe me? <b>Karen: People can’t believe, just because</b>

<sup>735</sup> Wright, *Lillian Hellman*, 113.

<sup>736</sup> William Wyler, director, *These Three*, Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1936, 45:00.

<sup>737</sup> Hellman, *The Children’s Hour*, 65-66.

<sup>738</sup> Wyler, *These Three*, 1:17:05 – 1:19:30.

could think of doing. **You were ashamed. So was I. But you had trouble worse than that. You were sad at being ashamed.** Ask it now, Joe.

Cardin: I have nothing to ask. Nothing. (*Then, very quickly, turns to her.*) All right. It is—? Was it ever—?

Karen: (*Quickly puts her hand over his mouth, stopping him*). No. Martha and I have never touched each other. That's all right darling, I'm not mad, I'm glad you asked me.

...

Karen: You believe me?

Cardin: (*With force.*) You know I believe you.

**Karen: Maybe you do. But I'd never know whether you did.** And your saying it again won't do it. And it doesn't even matter anymore whether you do believe me. (*Moves away L.*) All that I know is that I'd be frightened you didn't. But that's the way it would be. We'd be hounded by it. You don't get over things by just saying you do.

...

Cardin: (*Moves towards her.*) I don't. I don't.

Karen: (*Softly*) Ah, what happens between people, happens, and after a while it doesn't much matter how it started. But there it is. (*Turns U.S.*) I'm here. You're there. **We're in a room we've been in so many times before. Nothing seems changed. My hands look just the same, my face is just the same, even my dress is old. I'm nothing too much: I'm like everybody else, the way I always was. I can have the things that other people have. I can have you, and children, and I can take care of them, and I can go to market, and read a book, and people will talk to me—Only I can't. And I don't know why.** (*Turns L.*) Go home, darling.

...

**other people tell them to believe.**

Cardin: Well that child certainly did a good job on the three of us.

Karen: If only we could take back these months. Take them back and forget them.

**Look, we're standing here, we haven't changed. Our hands are just the same. My face is just the same. Even my dress is old.**

**We're in a room we've been in so many times before. And it's nearly time for lunch. We're like everyone else. We can**

**have all the things that everyone has. We**

can have a house, we can sit in the sun, we can walk together. We can be together always.

If only we can take back these months. Go to Vienna, Joe. I can't go with you now.

Joe: Karen!

Karen: No, words are no good now. They won't do us any good.

**Joe: I'll always love you. If you could ever believe in me again, I'll be waiting for you.**

(Exit Joe)

<p>Cardin: (<i>After a pause.</i>) There's nothing for me to know. A few weeks won't make any difference—</p> <p>Karen: Please</p> <p>Cardin: I don't want to go.</p> <p>Karen: (<i>Turns L.</i>) Go now, darling.</p> <p>Cardin: What will you do?</p> <p><b>Karen: I'll wait. I'll be all right.</b></p> <p><b>Cardin: (<i>Kisses her hair.</i>) I'll be coming back soon. (<i>Exits, U.C., leaving door open.</i>)</b></p>	
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(Figure 1: Karen and Dr. Joe Cardin's Goodbye Scene. Similarities noted in bold)

In both versions, it was Karen who told Joe to leave, both when he was the possible victim of adultery (*The Children's Hour*) and the possible perpetrator (*These Three*). It is also Joe who keeps the faith in their relationship in both instances. When Karen was the one who could be at fault, he told her that he would come back for her. When Joe was the one who could be at fault, he told her that he would be waiting for her and would always love her, in case she ever found it in her heart to believe him. It is Karen who does not trust the words they said in both versions—in *The Children's Hour* she could not trust that Joe really believed her and in *These Three* she could not force herself to believe Joe. Therefore, even when Joe possibly cheated on Karen, he is seen as the sympathetic character, the victim of Karen's disbelief.

Although Karen forced Joe to leave, Martha begged Karen to go to Vienna and see him. Then, recognizing that *she* was what stands between Karen and Joe's happy ending, Martha confessed that she was in love with Joe, but nothing ever came of it. She then went upstairs and hanged herself. In the play, a confessed lesbian gives in to Dead Lesbian Syndrome and ends her life because society will not permit her existence. In the film, a woman who did not even touch the object of her affection commits suicide because she feels guilty for her impure thoughts.<sup>739</sup> In this way, not only did the film evade censorship, but it also reinforced and overemphasized the

<sup>739</sup> Wyler, *These Three*, 1:25:00.

sin of adultery, an extra gift, intentional or not, to the Christian censors that allowed *These Three* to run in theaters across the country.

In *These Three*, Karen, a good friend to the end, attended Martha's funeral. Then, she took her departed friend's advice and traveled to Vienna. She found Joe at a café across from the hospital and they began their happy ending together. Unlike the play, where Hellman left an ambiguous ending to the relationship between Joe and Karen, the film confirmed that they found each other again. This suggests another layer to the transition: the woman, accused of lesbianism, could never be forgiven enough for the heterosexual couple to be happy. Conversely, the man, accused of adultery, could be forgiven, and the rightful order of cisheteronormativity was easily restored once Martha was gone. The choices Hellman made in her revisions prove Titus' point made earlier in this chapter, "It was instead a profoundly conservative text, one that she wanted to conform to contemporary sexual ideology overtly."<sup>740</sup>

Hellman wrote the screenplay for *These Three* and argued that the central point of her story did not hinge on the homosexuality of the play. However, director William Wyler believed that the compulsory heteronormativity forced upon the ending to get the film passed censors so altered the narrative that, soon after *These Three* was released, Wyler remarked, "Miss Hellman's play has not yet been filmed."<sup>741</sup> Wyler was able to correct this wrong 25 years later, when he and screenwriter John Michael Hayes brought Hellman's original vision to the silver screen. Hayes was a well-known writer at the time, as he wrote four of Alfred Hitchcock's films, including *Rear Window* and *To Catch a Thief*.<sup>742</sup>

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<sup>740</sup> Titus, "Murdering the Lesbian," 223.

<sup>741</sup> Gerald Gardner, *The Censorship Papers: Movie Censorship Letters from the Hays Office, 1934-1968*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1987), 191.

<sup>742</sup> "John Michael Hayes," *International Movie Database*, Accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0371088/>

Up until 1961, the Hays Code, discussed in detail in the next section, forbade Hollywood films from even mentioning “sexual perversion,” the industry’s classification for homosexual activity or identity. In 1961, the classification changed to “sexual aberration,” and the enforced silence was lifted, as long as the films responded to homosexuality negatively. This change came about partly because of the impending film *The Children’s Hour*, starring James Garner, who won the 1958 Golden Globe for New Actor, and two of the leading actresses of the time, both winners of the Golden Globes and Academy Awards by 1961, Shirley MacLaine and Audrey Hepburn.<sup>743</sup> Miriam Hopkins, who played Martha in *These Three*, played the role of Martha’s aunt, Lily Mortar, in the 1961 film.<sup>744</sup>

As with every other movie script at the time, the screenplay for *The Children’s Hour* was sent to the Hays’ Office for review. Geoffrey Shurlock wrote to Wyler to explain:

“Inasmuch as the story deals with the false charge of homosexuality between your two female leads, we could not approve it under the present code regulations, which read, ‘sex perversion or any inference of it is forbidden.’ As I further indicated, your problem stems from the subject matter; we found nothing in the treatment of this subject in the script we felt would seem to be offensive...”<sup>745</sup>

Angered by this response, Arthur Krim, President of United Artists, wrote to Eric Johnston, President of the Motion Picture Association of America, specifically about the topic of homosexuality in three of United Artists’ upcoming films: *The Best Man*, *Advise and Consent*, and *The Children’s Hour*. Due in part to Krim’s complaints, the Hays Code was revised on

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<sup>743</sup> “James Garner,” *Golden Globe Awards*, Accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.goldenglobes.com/person/james-garner>; “Shirley MacLaine,” *Golden Globe Awards*, Accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.goldenglobes.com/person/shirley-maclaine>; “Academy Awards Winners & History, (1950-1959),” *AMC Filmsite*, Accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.filmsite.org/oscars50.html>.

<sup>744</sup> “The Children’s Hour,” *Turner Classic Movies*, Accessed June 9, 2021. <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/70824/The-Children-s-Hour/>

<sup>745</sup> Quoted in Gardener, *The Censorship Papers*, 192.

October 3, 1961, and homosexuality was permitted on screen for the first time in almost 30 years.<sup>746</sup>

Homosexuality could be discussed in film by the end of 1961, but it could not be condoned. To ensure homosexuality was condemned in the movie, *The Children's Hour* regularly referred to Karen's heterosexuality and her relationship with Joe. Conversely, in the film, Aunt Lily Mortar's attacks on Martha were a bit more explicit than in the play.

<i>The Children's Hour</i> (1934) <sup>747</sup>	<i>The Children's Hour</i> (1961) <sup>748</sup>
<p>Mrs. Mortar: ...You're jealous of him, that's what it is.</p> <p>Martha: (<i>her voice is tense and the previous attitude of good-natured irritation is gone</i>) I'm very fond of Joe, and you know it.</p> <p>Mrs. Mortar: You're fonder of Karen, and I know that. And it's unnatural, just as unnatural as it can be. You don't like their being together. You were always like that even as a child. If you had a little girl friend, you always got mad when she liked anybody else. Well, you'd better get a beau of your own now—a woman of your age.</p>	<p>Mrs. Mortar: Something wrong? Why, the whole thing is unnatural. You would think that a healthy woman her age would have a husband or at least an admirer but she hasn't and she never has had. Young men who like her, yes, but not for long because she has no interest in them. Only the school and Karen Wright. (39:10)</p>

(Figure II: Aunt Lily Mortar's Accusations)

In the film, Mrs. Mortar goes on to call Martha's feelings for Karen, "insane devotion," reinforcing the connections between homosexuality and insanity discussed in lesbian literature of the 1930s.<sup>749</sup> The homosexual undertones, though still faint, are a bit more expressive in the 1961

<sup>746</sup> Gardener, *The Censorship Papers*, 193. Krim, who was an active member of the Democratic Party and good friends with President Lyndon B. Johnson, was remembered in his obituary for his activism and support of Civil Rights, equal rights for LGBT Americans, the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, and funding for AIDS research. (Eric Pace, "Arthur B. Krim, 89, Ex-Chief of Movie Studios," *The New York Times*, (September 22, 1994), <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/22/obituaries/arthur-b-krim-89-ex-chief-of-movie-studios.html>)

<sup>747</sup> Hellman, *The Children's Hour*, 20.

<sup>748</sup> William Wyler, director, *The Children's Hour*, (United Artists, 1961), 39:10.

<sup>749</sup> Wylder, *The Children's Hour*, 40:03.

film, suggesting that even though homosexuality was still forbidden, a dialectic around it had emerge.

There is also a slight recognition of homosexual canon. In the play, Martha confesses her love for Karen and says, “I do love you. I resented your marriage; maybe because I wanted you; maybe I wanted you all along; maybe I couldn’t call it by a name...”<sup>750</sup> In the film, Martha tells Karen, “I couldn’t call it by name before,”<sup>751</sup> harkening back to Lord Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde.<sup>752</sup> In this way, a film about homosexuality makes reference to a poem about homosexuality, in the same way that homosexual novels of the 1920s and 1930s previously referred to sexological books and pseudoscientific studies. By 1961, we see the beginnings of a homosexual cultural canon, instead of the overreliance on pseudoscience to establish tradition. “Canons are normally grounded in institutions and make claims to singularity, universality, and authority that go well beyond that of collections.”<sup>753</sup> Marion Zimmer Bradley and Barbara Grier attempted to create an index of every anglophone lesbian novel ever written. Zimmer Bradley was a well-known author of lesbian, science fiction, and fantasy novels, the most famous of which is *The Mists of Avalon*. Grier was the editor of *The Ladder*, the first wide-circulating periodical for women-loving women, founded by the activist group the Daughters of Bilitis in the 1950s. In 1960, Zimmer Bradley and Grier published *Checklist: A complete, cumulative Checklist of lesbian, variant and homosexual fiction, in English or available in English translation, with supplements for the use of collectors, students and librarians*.

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<sup>750</sup> Hellman, *The Children’s Hour*, 71.

<sup>751</sup> Wylder, *The Children’s Hour*, 1:32:22.

<sup>752</sup> “Testimony of Oscar Wilde,” University of Missouri-Kansas City, School of Law, Accessed June 11, 2021. <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/frtrial/wilde/Crimwilde.html>

<sup>753</sup> Matthew Potolsky, “Decadence, Nationalism, and the Logic of Canon Formation,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, (67.2, June 2006, 213-244, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-2005-003>), 220.

John Guillory claims a literary canon of a group of people (mostly country or language based, but in this case, anglophone women-loving women), is really just a list of works. Guillory writes, “The canon achieves its imaginary totality ... not by embodying itself in a really existing list, but by retroactively constructing its individual texts as a tradition.”<sup>754</sup> Zimmerman Bradley and Grier’s *Checklist* was therefore an “imaginary totality” that created tradition by listing books on women-loving women that these two women found and put together in a list. Literary canons were of utmost importance in the 18th and 19th centuries, when nations were solidifying themselves into Anderson’s imagined communities, stitched together across socioeconomic, religious, and political divides through a common print culture rooted in language and literature. By the mid-20th century, each literate anglophone country had its own canon, and, above all, the Western canon, but women-loving women were only beginning to construct their literary canon. As canons were geared towards “defining, documenting, and transmitting national traditions,” by referencing Lord Alfred Douglas’ poem, even in this small way, Hayes and Wylder were transmitting tradition. Reification became increasingly familiar throughout the 20th century, and “the love that dares not speaks its name,” continues to be a known, if outdated, euphemism for homosexuality today.

Unlike the play, the film offered a bit of hope for a cisheteronormative ending in its final scene. Hellman’s story ended with a final goodbye between Karen and Mrs. Tilford, the conservative grandmother who believed her granddaughter’s accusations against Martha and Karen. Hayes’ story went one step further, showing Karen at her dear friend’s funeral. In the distance, Dr. Joseph Corden was shown waiting for Karen. Although this film’s ending was not quite as cisheteronormative as *These Three*, where Karen traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to

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<sup>754</sup> John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 33.



reconnect with Joseph, there was an implication that Martha's death had paved the way for a reunion between Joseph and Karen, a point driven home by the fact that Karen and Joseph would likely have their first conversation since the breakup mere feet from Martha's grave. Although granted permission to discuss homosexuality in 1961, Wylder and Hayes recognized they needed to stick to the cisheteronormative normality of the late postwar era to pass censorship and appease their middle-class, mostly cisheteronormative audiences. In the battle of homosexuality versus the Hays Code, *The Children's Hour* was a pyrrhic victory.

### *The Hays Code and Compulsory Heterosexuality*

But when and how did this decades-long war between homosexuality and the Hays Code begin? In the early 1930s, films with blatant lesbian themes were well-received, including *Morocco* (1930) and *Queen Christina* (1934). Primarily focused on heterosexual male audiences, "The few lesbian images offered by the cinema were created...to appeal to male voyeurism about lesbians and to articulate and soothe male sexual anxieties about female autonomy of independence from men."<sup>755</sup> Marlene Dietrich may have worn a masculine tuxedo and flirted with women in *Morocco*, but the film ends with her forsaking everything to follow her man into the desert. In *Queen Christina*, the masculine Greta Garbo wears pants and kisses her lady-in-waiting, Ebba Spare, but the film ends with her leaving her crown and country behind to chase after a male suitor from Spain.

For both these films, the homosexual spectacles on screen were only strengthened by rumors of both Dietrich and Garbo off screen. Throughout the 1920s, an era known for its sexual liberalism, and the early 1930s, women-loving women lived in relative openness throughout

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<sup>755</sup> Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbian in Film*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 4.

Hollywood. One homosexual man recounted in an interview years later the freedom experienced in Hollywood versus the rest of the country, “Who *didn't* have to lie? Who *didn't* have to pretend? The difference was, in Hollywood, our bosses lied for us. They protected us. We had a whole community, for God’s sake. We had—dare I say it? —power. Where else in America did gays have such a thing?”<sup>756</sup> (emphasis original) Although few men, and fewer women, flaunted their homosexual relationships, “the public [also] largely averted their eyes. *Nobody* wanted to know.”<sup>757</sup> (emphasis original) This early model of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue, Don’t Harass policy was protective, oppressive, segregationist, and isolating—much the same as the military code introduced by the Clintons in 1994. Before and after the McCarthyite years of the Lavender Scare (approximately 1945 to 1970), the concept that homosexuality could be permissible if discreet and acceptable if disavowed, allowed Hollywood to ignore or cover up the homosexual affairs of legends such as Marlene Dietrich, Marlon Brando, and Rock Hudson and, later, Whitney Houston, Kelly McGillis, and Freddie Mercury.<sup>758</sup>

Axel Madsen titled his 1995 exposé on Golden Age lesbianism *The Sewing Circle* as a tribute to the suggestion that all the women-loving women of the 1930s belonged to the “same club,” as *Variety* implied about Dietrich and Garbo in 1932.<sup>759</sup> This title is tongue-and-cheek, as throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Madsen and others explain that no such “club” existed, and often the lesbians of Hollywood were much less likely than their male counterparts to attend all-

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<sup>756</sup> William J. Mann, *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910-1969*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), xi.

<sup>757</sup> Axel Madsen, *The Sewing Circle: Hollywood’s Greatest Secret—Female Stars Who Loved Other Women*, (New York: Open Road Distribution, 2015), ix.

<sup>758</sup> For more information about the Lavender Scare and McCarthyism as related to homosexuality, see Derrick K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>759</sup> Madsen, *The Sewing Circle*, 17.

gay parties or hold secret homosexual meetings.<sup>760</sup> Simultaneously, the last three decades have turned up research proving romantic and sexual connections between Hollywood's women-loving women were professionally advantageous for many of the women involved. Dorothy Arzner, the only woman director in Hollywood during the 1930s, got her start in Hollywood and in sapphism while working under Alla Nazimova, "the most famous lesbian of the silent era."<sup>761</sup> The love scriptwriter Mercedes de Acosta held for Greta Garbo all but guaranteed Garbo the chance to star in boundary-pushing roles, such as her infamous portrayal of Queen Kristina of Sweden, which included dressing in drag and a suggestive relationship between the queen and one of her ladies-in-waiting.<sup>762</sup> Hollywood in itself was an exclusive club, and women found connection and collaboration, as well as jealousy and betrayal, in their same-sex lovers just as readily as in lovers of the opposite sex.

In fact, the women-loving women on set and off could be just as abusive, patriarchal, and homophobic as the men they worked with. Arzner sexually harassed and abused Esther Ralston, a young actress who did not come forward with accusations until after Arzner's death.<sup>763</sup> Mann concludes in his book *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910-1969*, "Arzner could be downright sexist."<sup>764</sup> Meanwhile, Garbo was terrified of being found out. Madsen explores the steps she took throughout her life to avoid the press, and includes a diary entry from Cecil Beaton, a Hollywood photographer, in which Beaton recounts a conversation he had with Garbo. Therein, Garbo tells Beaton there is a certain way people should conduct themselves. "If their sex desires are in a certain direction, they should not be obvious to the

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<sup>760</sup> See Boze Hadleigh's *Hollywood Lesbians* and William Mann's *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910-1969* for further investigation into the non-romantic connections between women-loving women.

<sup>761</sup> Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 59.

<sup>762</sup> Madsen, *The Sewing Circle*, 5, 25.

<sup>763</sup> Graham Fuller, "FILM; The Caring, and Ambiguous, Arzner Touch," *New York Times*, (February 6, 2000, Section 2, 13), <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/06/movies/film-the-caring-and-ambiguous-arzner-touch.html>.

<sup>764</sup> Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 69.

world.”<sup>765</sup> Although they held open the door for women coming after them, many of the women-loving women who made it in Hollywood did so by assimilating into the patriarchal, homophobic culture created by the men directing, producing, and bankrolling the films these women created alongside other queer creators.

Although homosexuality had been forced from the Broadway stage with *The Captive* in 1926, the late 1920s and early 1930s saw a few films that included strong suggestions of same-sex attraction between women. Arzner’s first ‘Talkie’ was *The Wild Party* in 1929. This film was based on Warner Fabian’s novel *Unforbidden Fruit*, which, while not homosexual, focused on homosocial concepts in a women’s college. While Fabian’s novel served a role similar to *Loveliest of Friends*, in warning young women against homosexuality and homosocial environments, Arzner’s interpretation was much more accepting of the women-loving women undertones of the narrative. Judith Mayne explains that, although *The Wild Party* was primarily a love story between a college girl and her male Anthropology professor, it was also an ode to female friendships. “*The Wild Party* insists simultaneously on the importance of heterosexual romantic love and female friendship. This wide range of coupledness is central to Arzner’s work and foregrounds the extent to which the male/female couple exists across a wide range of relationship.”<sup>766</sup>

In fact, *The Wild Party* offers a portrayal of the interwar era shift for women from the homosocial domestic sphere to the heterosocial public sphere. Female friendships of the nineteenth century, which had their own rules and expectations, were seen as harmless, but intense friendships of the 1930s were seen as dangerous. *The Wild Party* juxtaposes Stella’s romantic relationship with Professor Gil with Stella’s intense friendship with Helen. When Stella

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<sup>765</sup> Madsen, *The Sewing Circle*, 38.

<sup>766</sup> Judith Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 112.

finds Helen and her boyfriend George embracing on the beach, Stella tells George that she is “jealous, you see, I love Helen too!” Helen then leaves her embrace of George to embrace Stella. According to Mayne, “Stella is willing to give up everything, her romance with Gil in particular, in order to save Helen's chances of winning the scholarship. Thus, loyalty to her friend comes before romance.”<sup>767</sup> As discussed in Chapter Four, this is exactly why Stella and Helen’s friendship could threaten Stella and Gil’s relationship—even without homosexuality, Helen was the reason Stella was going to leave the school at which Gil was a professor. However, Arzner and screenwriter E. Lloyd Sheldon changed the ending of Fabian’s novel, allowing this decision to be what connects Stella and Gil. While in the novel, Sylvia (Stella) and Giff (Gil) end their relationship because Sylvia leaves the school, the film ends with Stella and Gil starting a life of fieldwork. “In the process, the film enacts a fantasy whereby the realms of female friendship and heterosexual romance are not only compatible, but necessarily intertwined. The importance of such a dynamic coexistence cannot be overemphasized.”<sup>768</sup>

In their adaptation, Arzner and Sheldon show the intense female friendship between Stella and Helen as a benefit to the cisheteronormative romantic relationship between Stella and Gil. Conversely, in the source material, *Unforbidden Fruit*, written in 1928, the intense female friendship between Sylvia and Sara leads to tragedy: Sylvia is forced to leave school and she and Giff break up. Arzner’s film is a *celebration of* female friendships; Fabian’s novel is a *warning against* female friendships. Whereas *Unforbidden Fruit* was primarily a treatise *against* women’s independence and sexual agency, *The Wild Party* celebrated both and starred Clara Bow, one of Paramount’s biggest stars and a recognized sex symbol.<sup>769</sup>

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<sup>767</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>768</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>769</sup> Ibid., 137-138.

Although Arzner later disclaimed any lesbian undertones in *The Wild Party*, this film came out around the same time that Arzner was starting her lifelong romantic partnership with dancer Marion Morgan.<sup>770</sup> Arzner had always been ‘one of the boys’ and shared Garbo’s desire to maintain boundaries between her professional life in Hollywood and her personal life as a women-loving woman.<sup>771</sup> Her covert silence about her homosexuality did not protect Arzner. When the Great Depression hit and bank accounts took a hit, Arzner was among the first in Hollywood laid off. According to Mann, “...Hollywood was in a vice grip: financial panic on one side and increasing calls for censorship on the other. A director whose image screamed ‘lesbian’ in the press and whose pictures explored ‘the fragility of the heterosexual couple,’ was not in the strongest position to bargain. Even with no overt sexism or homophobia behind her break with Paramount, Dorothy Arzner stood apart from the establishment—and in trying times, it’s always the outsiders who are first to go.”<sup>772</sup>

When the Stock Market failed in 1929, the ensuing economic downturn had a major impact on people’s expectations, ethics, and entertainment tastes. As discussed in Chapter Four, the average citizen became increasingly invested in traditional, conservative ethics and the preservation of masculinity for the many men who lost their jobs. By 1932, American citizens “no longer tolerated unconventional living and showy display. Eccentricities that adoring moviegoers had found endearing were increasingly seen as obnoxious...” Still, “Americans idolized the images of actors and never stopped asking: What are the stars really like?”<sup>773</sup> The ‘eccentricities’ were boundless—from adultery to possible murder, Hollywood stars were often

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<sup>770</sup> For more information about the lesbian undertones of *The Wild Party*, Jordan Bernsmeier’s article “Locating the Lesbian Spectator in Arzner’s *The Wild Party*” explores how fashion and physical intimacy suggests homosexuality between the characters of Stella and Helen.

<sup>771</sup> Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 74; Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner*, 138.

<sup>772</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>773</sup> Masden, *The Sewing Circle*, 17.

forced into cover-ups, “lavender marriages” (where a women-loving woman and a men-loving man were forced to marry to maintain appearances), and publicity stunts to distract from homosexual affairs, extramarital sex, and murder.

In the 1920s, actor Roscoe Arbuckle was accused of murder shortly after the highly-publicized Nevada divorce and subsequent shotgun second wedding of Mary Pickford, and both were quickly followed by the California State Board of Pharmacy confirming “over five hundred film personalities were listed on its rolls as drug addicts.”<sup>774</sup> By the end of the decade, women-loving women were becoming bolder about their homosexual inclinations, and in 1931 Joseph Breen and William Hays had a conversation in which Breen told Hays, ““one very prominent lady star told a group of correspondents who were interviewing her that she is a lesbian.””<sup>775</sup> Hollywood was increasingly seen as a cesspool of sexual freedom, financial extravagance, and moral failure. Although most women-loving women stars would not be labeled perverts by the press until the 1950s, the overall atmosphere of indecency and immorality permeated Hollywood culture. The American people were losing faith in their stars.

In 1930, the number of movie-goers in the United States reached a high of 80 million people per week. Within two years, that number had dropped to 55 million, a decrease of over a third. Broadway suffered even more, with entire theater houses shutting down for the duration of the Depression.<sup>776</sup> Mann argues the beginning of financial hardship during the Great Depression created the environment in which censorship and repression flourished.

With many men out of work, their sense of mastery over their lives and their families was threatened, and traditional gender assignments took on a kind of sacredness. Men were supposed to be men and women were supposed to be women, with all that

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<sup>774</sup> Ibid, 124-125; These topics are discussed in-depth in *The Sewing Circle* by Axel Madsen and *Behind the Screen* by William Mann.

<sup>775</sup> Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 79.

<sup>776</sup> Tino Balio, *Grand Design Volume Five: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*, (New York Simon and Shuster, 1993), 13-14.

implied. The excesses of the Twenties were blamed for the hardships the country was enduring, and chief among the culprits were the hedonists and ‘sophisticates’ and queers.<sup>777</sup>

The convergence of the beginning of the Great Depression with the beginning of “talkies” created a double-edged sword for the movie industry. On one edge, society as a whole turned away from emasculating films such as *The Wild Party* (1929), where a man leaves his job for his girlfriend; *Morocco* (1930), where Dietrich performs in a tuxedo and flirts with a woman; and *Queen Christina* (1933), where Garbo dresses in drag, kisses a woman on the mouth, and her Spanish lover dies in the end. On the other edge, Catholic leaders such as Father Daniel Lord believed “‘silent smut had been bad [but] vocal smut cried to the censors for vengeance.’”<sup>778</sup> Adding insult to injury was the tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars stars were paid each year, while unemployment rates outside Hollywood reached as high as 25% and wages for those who were employed rarely reached a hundred dollars a month.<sup>779</sup> As an increasing number of Catholic priests called for congregants to boycott movie theaters across the country, Hollywood felt pressured to act.

Catholics were not alone in their desire to censor Hollywood. As the power of Hollywood grew, an “‘increasingly insecure provincial Protestant middle class sought to defend its cultural hegemony from incursions of a modernist metropolitan culture that the provincials regarded as alien—a word that was often, but not always, a synonym for Jewish.’”<sup>780</sup> Movies were seen as inherently corrosive, the evolution of burlesque and peep shows and, therefore, poisonous to the youth and the poor. For middle class white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, “‘the movie theater was one site at which they felt their values and their children endangered by a newer, urban, immigrant,

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<sup>777</sup> Mann, 122.

<sup>778</sup> Ibid., 122

<sup>779</sup> Gardner, *The Censorship Papers*, xviii.

<sup>780</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 45.



largely Jewish and Catholic culture.”<sup>781</sup> More than a mirror of society, movies were seen as culture creators, a tool of power that could be used to mold society. Balio argues, “censorship in Hollywood was not primarily about controlling the content of movies at the level of forbidden words or actions or inhibiting the freedom of expression of individual producers. Rather, it was about the cultural function of entertainment and the possession of cultural power.”<sup>782</sup> This drive for cultural power is best articulated by Father Lord’s response to Irving Thalberg, producer at MGM Studios, during a series of discussions orchestrated by Republican politician William Hays in 1930. Lord informed Thalberg and Hays that he was looking for the movie industry to not simply prohibit taboo subjects like sex and crime, but also to creating movies which “consistently held up high principles.” Lord argued positive films with the right message would empower movies to “become the greatest natural force for the improvement of mankind.”<sup>783</sup>

Although a production code did exist beginning in 1927, it was largely ignored and had no form of enforcement. As the years of the Great Depression wore on, pressure from religious groups mounted, and tickets sales continued to drop, producers eventually came together to agree on a new, enforceable code, in the summer of 1934. One of the major players in pushing for an enforceable code was Joseph Breen, who arrived in Hollywood in 1932 to serve as a part of Hays’ team at the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. Accompanying Breen’s staunch efforts to purify the movie industry was a threatened tax hike if the movie industry lost its designation as a “necessary recreation.” If movies were deemed harmful by federal legislatures, then production companies could be looking at an increased tax burden at a time when fewer people were going to see their films. Hays and Breen used this reality to

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<sup>781</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>782</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>783</sup> Ibid., 47.

convince Hollywood producers to agree on an enforceable code. In the end, the Hays Code, or the Motion Picture Production Code, was the lesser of all known evils. “It is said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the rest. Self-regulated movie censorship was the worst form of control except all the rest—censorship imposed by the federal government, the states, and the church.”<sup>784</sup>

The impact of the Hays Code was immediate. Although many of the films produced in 1934 were made before the code went into effect, the promise of a morally-sound Hollywood meant fewer protests of theaters and less vitriol from the priests. 1,000 theaters reopened in 1934, a phenomenon largely attributed to the pressure placed on Hollywood by purity organizations such as the Legion for Decency.<sup>785</sup> In *The Magazine of Wall Street*, writer Stanley Devin applauded the Legion of Decency for its work in pushing for “cleaner” pictures. According to the article, “the industry awoke to the fact that the public was much more interested in quality films which neither offended its taste or intelligence.”<sup>786</sup> Throughout the early 1930s, the criticism of Hollywood, while wrapped in morality, also had a deep undercurrent of antisemitism. In a 1932 letter sent from Breen to Catholic reformer Winifred Parsons, he exclaimed “Sexual perversion is rampant,” while also attacking the “lousy Jews,” who ran the industry as the ‘scum of the earth.’”<sup>787</sup> Realizing they were under attack, the Jewish producers turned on their queer laborers. Sidney Kent, a gentile producer who still felt that distancing the Fox production company from homosexuality was necessary to weather the storm of censorship, wrote to his boss William Sheehan “I think the quicker we get away from the degenerates and fairies in our stories, the

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<sup>784</sup> Gardner, *The Censorship Papers*, xvii.

<sup>785</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 30.

<sup>786</sup> Stanley Devin, “Movie Outlook Improving,” (*Magazine of Wallstreet*, 20 July 1935, p. 354) quoted in Balio, *Grand Design*, 30.

<sup>787</sup> Mann, *Behind the Screen*, 125, 128.

better off we are going to be. *I do not want any of them* in Fox pictures.”<sup>788</sup> (emphasis added by Mann) In the end, both the producers in Hollywood and the company owners in New York turned against the non-heteronormative actors they employed. “The moguls, canny enough to know that their own position was being challenged, would no longer be quite so indulgent with those dual-sex boys and lesbos.”<sup>789</sup>

The result was the complete erasure of “sexual perversion” from all future Hollywood films. Under the “Sex” section of the Motion Picture Production Code, sexual perversion, a euphemism for homosexuality, was banned along with miscegenation, white slavery, childbirth, and children’s genitalia.<sup>790</sup> At least in Hollywood pictures, William Hays and Joseph Breen had effectively succeeded where all others had failed: they eliminated lesbianism. The next portrayal of lesbianism on screen would not come until 1961—when Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* had its Hollywood revival, starring Audrey Hepburn and Shirley McLaine. The repeal of the prohibition on homosexuality in Hollywood was the result of a concerted effort by writers and directors of homosexual fiction. Robert Anderson’s *Tea and Sympathy* was a Broadway hit he was asked to turn into a film. His screenplay was heavily censored, erasing the schoolboy’s homosexuality and punishing the older woman’s promiscuity. The story was so altered that a “New York critic advised his readers to leave the movie theater before the last scene.”<sup>791</sup> Meanwhile, Anderson himself was disgusted with the finished product, pronouncing, “I will never again give in. You become convinced your saving a story, but you’re not.”<sup>792</sup> Unwilling to compromise as Anderson had, Arthur Krim, President of Artists United, lobbied Breen

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<sup>788</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>789</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>790</sup> “The Motion Picture Production Code (As Published 31 March 1930),” Arizona State University, Accessed June 21, 2021, 1-4. (<https://www.asu.edu/courses/fms200s/total-readings/MotionPictureProductionCode.pdf>), 2.

<sup>791</sup> Gardner, *The Censorship Papers*, 188.

<sup>792</sup> Ibid., 191.

throughout the year to allow *The Children's Hour* to be told in its entirety—lesbian allegations and all. After almost a full year of ambiguity and persuasion, the censors agreed to permit homosexuality, properly treated, beginning October 3, 1968.<sup>793</sup> Forty years after Hall wrote *The Well of Loneliness*, the love that dared not speak its name was finally allowed to speak on the silver screen.

### *Conclusion*

The class expectations separating movie goers and readers created two different sets of laws governing the silver screen and the book publishing business, with Broadway plays falling into a nebulous jurisdiction somewhere in-between. The fact that books and Broadway tickets cost eight times more than movie tickets empowered cultural gatekeepers to prevent the working and impoverished classes from accessing media about homosexuality. The conversations about sexuality were kept out of the public sphere, and as the 1930s wore on, lesbianism was continuously covered up, killed off, or erased entirely from fictional narratives. Although the previous chapter shows that lesbian fiction novels increased in circulation throughout the 1930s, the decisions of Hollywood and the U.S. government to repress lesbianism among Hollywood starlets, erase lesbianism on screen under the Hays Code, and actively proscribe lesbianism in *Children of Loneliness* suggests a concerted effort by the ruling class to prevent the open conversation of homosexuality among the lower classes.

While the concept of companionate marriage provided a blueprint by which cisheteronormative society expected young men and women to live their lives, the medicalization and monsterization of homosexuality through psychiatric diagnosis, movies like

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<sup>793</sup> Ibid., 193.

*The Children of Loneliness*, and novels which reinforced the connections between homosexual desire, psychosis, and monstrous behavior deterred young men and women from veering off the provide path. For the middle classes especially, those with the literacy skills, financial means, and leisure time needed to purchase and read a novel or attend a Broadway play, the fictional women-loving women of the 1930s were designed to keep real-life women from following in their footsteps. As this chapter and Chapter Four made clear, lesbian novels told women readers that women-loving women were doomed to lives of unhappiness—in psychiatric hospitals, women’s prisons, or, in the more positive portrayal of lesbians provided by Gale Wilhelm, as friendless orphans with only their lover for company. When these messages were not enough, writers turned to more definite warnings against lesbianism, including suicide and accidental death as in *The Children’s Hour* and *Children of Loneliness*, respectively.

While the middle and upper classes were exposed to lesbian storylines in order to scare them away from such behavior, young and indigent Americans could not be trusted with even exposure to such themes. Through eugenics and Social Darwinism that evolved from nineteenth century ideology, the working class was seen as too susceptible to vice to even be allowed to know that it existed, and the Hays Code ensured that America’s cheapest form of fiction was also the most heavily censored by the end of the 1930s. Economics played a major role in the reversal of the sexual revolution of the 1920s, as more Americans struggled to put food on the table they became more repulsed by the grandiose vices actors indulged in both on screen and in their private lives. Homosexuality, a form of sexual pleasure which does not produce the next generation of laborers and rarely resulted in financial transactions, was seen as one of the most wasteful manifestations of Hollywood’s excess. Self-censorship became the easiest and safest

way for Hollywood executives to retain control of their films while adhering to the new, strict demands of the American public and the influence of the Church.

In the 1930s, the connections between homophobia and the failure of capitalism manifested in the rise of the companionate marriage, a renewed emphasis on the nuclear family, and strict censorship of any portrayal of lesbianism available to the public. As men lost their jobs and women had to eschew the femininity of the domestic sphere in order to make ends meet, Dead Lesbian Syndrome ensured newly independent women would not feel empowered to leave their husbands and run away with their best friends. The censorship of *The Children's Hour* best encapsulates the ways in which Dead Lesbian Syndrome was so closely tied to the needs of patriarchal dominance. While an affair between Martha and Karen could never be forgiven, as shown in Hellman's original play, an affair between Martha and Joe was not nearly as problematic for Karen, who seeks Joe out at the end of *These Three*. Unlike Norma Trist, who could be hypnotized into a relationship with a man, or Mary Llewellyn, who could happily marry a man after spending years as a woman's lover, Karen would have been spoiled goods had she cheated on Joe with Martha.

None of the fictional stories presented in Chapter Four or Chapter Five excludes a possible heterosexual male partner for one or both of the women-loving women in the stories. The 1930s cemented not only the concept that all lesbianism must end in tragedy, but also reified the idea that lesbians were indefensible "thie[ves] in society," as Judith self-identifies in *Pity for Women*.<sup>794</sup> The fiction of the 1930s aligned with the capitalist idea of scarcity—even in a society with 2 million 'surplus' women—and insisted lesbians could only prosper at the detriment of men. This concept continues to exist in modern portrayals of lesbian romance, including the

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<sup>794</sup> Anderson, *Pity for Women*, 150.

origin story of Bette and Tina in *The L Word* (2004-2009), the relationship between Piper, Alex, and Larry in *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), and the triangle between Ellie Chu, Aster Flores, and Paul Munsky in *The Half of It* (2020). Progress has been made, however, as all three of these examples end with the women-loving women in romantic relationships with each other, and though they may be seen as “thieves in society” for “stealing” their partners from a cisheteronormative male character, none of these particular modern-day fictional women-loving women end up dead.

## Chapter Six Destroying Lesbianism during World War II

### *Introduction*

World War II offered modern anglophone women unprecedented access into the working world, while simultaneously reinforcing midcentury gender norms. Women could enter the workforce, but were still expected to get married and reproduce; women were encouraged to join the armed forces and be independent, all the while knowing this arrangement was temporary and they would be expected to return to the private sphere at war's end; women were barred from gathering in bars out of fears of sex work, and yet lesbian bar culture became more visible and stable throughout this decade. The 1940s were a time of great growth for women's empowerment and the autonomy of women-loving women, but this decade was also the precursor to the McCarthy Era, the Lavender Scare, and the rise of "the problem with no name," which would help launch Second Wave feminism in the 1960s.<sup>795</sup> This chapter focuses on understanding the paradoxes and tensions of the 1940s, its impact on women-loving women's identities and communities, and the lesbian anglophone fiction that encapsulated the zeitgeist of this era.

Three of the works of fiction discussed in this chapter were published in 1943, when the United States and United Kingdom were engaged in war and much of the fiction available focused on the War Effort and Allied values. Hollywood had just produced films like *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *The Battle of Midway* (1942), and *Casablanca* (1942).<sup>796</sup> Lloyd Webster's biography of Christ's Crucifixion stayed at the top of the *New York Time's* Best-

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<sup>795</sup> "The problem with no name" was introduced in Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2001), 48.

<sup>796</sup> Will Sloan, "Hollywood and WWII: The Kings of Propaganda," *Hazlitt*. March 27, 2014. Accessed December 4, 2021. <https://hazlitt.net/feature/hollywood-and-wwii-kings-propaganda>



Seller's list for twelve months, from October 1942 to October 1943, setting a record that would not be broken until 1992.<sup>797</sup> On Broadway, the patriotic and cisheteronormative staples *Oklahoma!* and *Ziegfeld's Follies* premiered.<sup>798</sup> After the increased censorship of the late 1930s and the march towards patriotism between Pearl Harbor and Normandy, the fact that two lesbian novels and a lesbian play were produced and published in 1943 seems counterintuitive. Even more counterintuitive is the fact that none of these three pieces of fiction even mentions the War. Alfred Knopf published *Two Serious Ladies* by Jane Bowles and *Trio* by Dorothy Baker, both of which included upper middle-class characters in blatant homoromantic situations. *Two Serious Ladies* focuses on two friends who find love and adventure in New York and Mexico in the 1940s. *Trio* tells the story of a love triangle between a French professor, her PhD advisee, and a local theater major. Neither of these books includes themes of patriotism, Christianity, or World War II.<sup>799</sup>

That same year, Australian playwright Wallace R. Parnell registered *College for Scandal* with the United States Copyright Office.<sup>800</sup> Unlike Jane Bowles and Dorothy Baker, whose lives and literary careers are explored further in this chapter, little is known about Wallace R. Parnell. He was the Manager of the Tivoli Theater in Melbourne.<sup>801</sup> He spent time in advertisement in the United States, which ended before he took over the Tivoli Theater in the 1930s and about which he wrote a book in 1940.<sup>802</sup> Eventually, he moved back to the United States and staged his 1943

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<sup>797</sup> John Bear, *The #1 New York Times Best Seller: Intriguing Facts About the 484 Books That Have Been #1 New York Times Bestsellers Since the First List, 50 Years Ago*. (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1992), 5-9.

<sup>798</sup> John Kenrick, "The 1940s," *Musicals 101*, 2000. Accessed December 4, 2021. <https://www.musicals101.com/1940s.htm>

<sup>799</sup> Millicent Dillon, *A Little Original Sin: The Life and Work of Jane Bowles*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1981), 111.

<sup>800</sup> Copyright Office of the Library of Congress, THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS COPYRIGHT OFFICE CATALOG OF COPYRIGHT ENTRIES: PUBLISHED BY AUTHORITY OF THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF MARCH 3, 1891 OF JUNE 30, 1906, AND OF MARCH 4, 1909: PART 1, GROUP 3 DRAMATIC COMPOSITIONS, MOTION PICTURES, Including LIST OF RENEWALS 1943, 16.1, (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1943, <https://books.google.com/books?id=CkBhAAAAIAAJ>), 460.

<sup>801</sup> "Parnell, Wallace R., active 1930s," National Library of New Zealand, 2021, Accessed December 4, 2021, <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/30623782>.

<sup>802</sup> Wallace R. Parnell, *My Advertising Experiences in the United States*, (Melbourne: Verona Press, 1940s), <https://www.abebooks.com/first-edition/Advertising-Experiences-United-States-Parnell-Wallace/15212406543/bd>.

lesbian play *College for Scandal*, which eventually became *The Beaustone Affair*, which ran at Las Palmas Theatre in 1951. He was the president of the Karseal Corporation up until 1954, when he sold his shares. Not long after selling his shares in this corporation, Parnell murdered his presumed mistress Mrs. Beryl Erickson, a 36-year-old divorced mother of three, and then committed suicide.<sup>803</sup> His murder-suicide is, in fact, quite similar to the way *College for Scandal* ended. *College for Scandal* is also the only piece of fiction analyzed in this chapter written by someone who was not a women-loving woman.

The other two pieces of fiction included in this chapter are *The Mesh*, an English translation of a Belgian novel about a middle-class family living in Belgium in 1946, written by Lucie Marchal, and Dorothy Strachey's semi-autobiographical novel about her time at finishing school in France, *Olivia*, which was published by Leonard Woolf in 1949. While *Olivia*'s setting in the late nineteenth century precludes any inclusion of or reference to World War II, *The Mesh* is written in the first-person and ends with the location and date of the fictional narrator: "Amsterdam, October 1946 – July 1947."<sup>804</sup> Although *The Mesh* is a translated book and therefore should not count as an addition to anglophone lesbian literature, this book was not marked as translated when it was published in the United States in 1949, and so readers would not have been aware of the origins unless they researched the novel.

This chapter continues the analysis of the lesbian as a monstrous aberration to societally acceptable romance and the evolution from an ambivalent threat in the 1930s to a malevolent predator in the 1940s. All five of the pieces of fiction in this chapter include death as a central element of the narrative, and the crux of this chapter comes in understanding how the final years

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<sup>803</sup> "Found Dead Together," *The Daily Banner*, (Greencastle, Indiana, 24 May 1954, Accessed December 4, 2021, 6). <https://newspapers.library.in.gov/cgi-bin/indiana?a=d&d=TDB19540524-01&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->.

<sup>804</sup> Lucie Marchal, *The Mesh*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1949), 197.

leading up to the Golden Age of lesbian pulp fiction institutionalized the narrative arc of Dead Lesbian Syndrome. The chapter also evaluates the influence of lesbian fiction on women-loving women readers, through book reviews and discussions from *Vice Versa*, the late 1940s sapphic newsletter.

Dead Lesbian Syndrome had a lasting impact on the way anglophone audiences understood lesbianism, as evidenced by the way women-loving servicewomen and female federal employees were forced from their jobs after the end of World War II. Through evaluating these early roots of the Lavender Scare, we can better understand how the Americans and Brits of the 1940s chose to use lesbian labor to win World War II and then abandon lesbian veterans and workers to the reactionary conservative politics of the McCarthy Congress, the Catholic Church, and the homophobic environments into which many women-loving women were born. Furthermore, by analyzing the women-loving women communities which began to form during the 1940s, including the one carefully researched and catalogued by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis in Buffalo, NY, we can also explore how Dead Lesbian Syndrome and the expected tragedy of the lesbian experience impacted women-loving women of this era.

*The Evolution of the Lesbian from Ambivalent Threat to Malevolent Predator*

In much of the women-loving women fiction of the 1930s, the women-loving woman character was a threat to companionate, heterosexual marriage through her mere existence. In *Queer Patterns*, Nicoli ruins the marriage of Sheila and Phillip because Sheila falls in love with her, not because Nicoli actively pursued Sheila. Martha in *The Children's Hour* kills herself before she could do so much as look at Karen in a lustful manner, let alone actively try to destroy

Karen and Joseph's relationship. Even the monstrous Kim from *Loveliest of Friends* is not actively trying to destroy Audrey's marriage, and in the end, Kim returns to her own cisheteronormative marriage. The monsters in 1930s lesbian fiction created a threat to companionate marriage by existing, not through active efforts to destroy cisheteronormativity. Conversely, the lesbians of the 1940s were more predatory, aware of their ability to compete with cisheteronormative marriages, and took active measures to seduce and keep the young women to whom they were attracted. The fiction of the 1940s therefore serves as a bridge between the ambivalent threat of the 1930s and the vampiric lesbian seductresses of the 1950s and 1960s, who would fornicate with married women and ruin their victims' lives, such as in *Young and Innocent* (1959) by Edwin West and *Duet in Darkness* (1965) by Rea Michaels.<sup>805</sup>

*Two Serious Ladies* by Jane Bowles begins with violence. Young Christina Goering takes her friend Mary to the riverside and forces her into a violent baptism. Although neither girl is harmed, Mary is terrified of the water and the chapter ends with Miss Goering regretting the torture she inflicted on her friend.<sup>806</sup> While Miss Goering is 13 in the first chapter, the rest of the novel takes place when she and her friend, Friede Copperfield, are middle-aged. However, the cruelty of both characters is similar to Miss Goering's earlier antics. Miss Goering asserts a predatory possessiveness over her roommate Lucy Gamelon. When Miss Goering decides to leave New York City and moved to a farmhouse in the boroughs, she convinces Lucy to come with her, announcing: "When I have given you up, I shall have given up more than my house, Lucy."<sup>807</sup> Although the novel never suggests Lucy and Miss Goering are lovers, this predatory

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<sup>805</sup> "Young and Innocent," *The Lesbian Pulp Fiction Collection @ Mount Saint Vincent University*, Nova Scotia, CA, 2022, Accessed January 3, 2022, <https://msvulpf.omeka.net/items/show/812>; "Duet In Darkness," *The Lesbian Pulp Fiction Collection @ Mount Saint Vincent University*, Nova Scotia, CA, 2022, Accessed January 3, 2022, <https://msvulpf.omeka.net/items/show/650>.

<sup>806</sup> Jane Bowles, *Two Serious Ladies*, (New York: Woolf Haus, 2020, Kindle), Kindle Locations 40-103.

<sup>807</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle Location 423.

language and the fact that both women remain unmarried through the end of the novel suggests they have, at the very least, a queerplatonic relationship which blurred the lines between friendship and romance.<sup>808</sup> Their relationship mirrors the romantic friendships of the nineteenth century, in which two women depended on one another for companionship but had, ostensibly, a sexless relationship. Still, Miss Goering's predatory and possessive nature is the same as many of the women-loving women characters of the 1940s. Furthermore, her characterization was that of a single, middle-aged, and middle-class woman who stayed out all night, slept with strange men, and, in the end, accidentally became a sex worker before, presumably, finding her way back home to Lucy. While not tragic, her restless and reckless nature still made her a bogeyman for readers, as a warning of what one could become if one chose not to get married and have children.

The other "serious lady" from *Two Serious Ladies* was Mrs. Friede Copperfield, who is off on a trip to Central America with her husband. Early in their trip, Mrs. Copperfield decides that she should be allowed to do as she pleases, as, "After all, it's mostly my money," she said to herself. "I'm footing the bulk of the expenditures for this trip."<sup>809</sup> The wife being the more financially lucrative would have been enough of an aberration from societal norms, but as the novel progresses, we learn Mrs. Copperfield is also much more interested in women than in men. Despite this, she does not want to end her marriage. When a predatory woman-loving woman approaches Mrs. Copperfield at a bar, she asks for Mrs. Copperfield to call Mr. Copperfield and tell him not to come to the bar. The woman, Peggy Gladys, actively tries to come between the Copperfields. She asks, "Couldn't you telephone him and tell him not to come?"<sup>810</sup> This is an

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<sup>808</sup> Stefani Goerlich, "Queerplatonic Relationships: A New Term for an Old Custom," *Psychology Today*, September 6, 2021, Accessed December 5, 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/bound-together/202109/queerplatonic-relationships-new-term-old-custom>.

<sup>809</sup> Bowles, *Two Serious Ladies*, Kindle Location 537.

<sup>810</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle Location 1524.

active attack on their marriage, in which Peggy is trying to keep Mrs. Copperfield for herself. Eventually, Mr. Copperfield abandons Mrs. Copperfield—he wants to move on to another Central American city and she refuses to leave the new romance she has begun with a local young sex worker, Pacifica.

While the stories of Miss Goering’s move to the borough and Mrs. Copperfield’s romance with Pacifica are told in two separate chapters, their lives converge upon Mrs. Copperfield’s return to New York City. She is without her husband but has brought Pacifica with her. Mrs. Copperfield explains the arrangement to Miss Goering with, “This is Pacifica. She is with me in my apartment.”<sup>811</sup> Despite Mrs. Copperfield’s love for Pacifica, the young woman has found herself a boyfriend. When Miss Goering suggests that Mrs. Copperfield allow Pacifica to pursue this romance, Mrs. Copperfield is immediately offended. The conversation continues:

“Don’t be insane,” said Mrs. Copperfield. “I can’t live without her, not for a minute. I’d got completely to pieces.”  
 “But you have gone to pieces, or do I misjudge you dreadfully?”  
 “True enough,” said Mrs. Copperfield, bringing her fist down on the table and looking very mean. “I have gone to pieces, which is a thing I’ve wanted to do for years. I know I am as guilty as I can be, but I have my happiness, which I guard like a wolf, and I have authority now and a certain amount of daring, which, if you remember correctly, I never had before.”<sup>812</sup>

When Miss Goering pushes back against Mrs. Copperfield, the married woman continues: “You will contend [...] that all people are of equal importance, but although I love Pacifica very much, I think it is obvious that I am more important.”<sup>813</sup> For Mrs. Copperfield, her desire to keep Pacifica outweighs any desires Pacifica may have for a cisheteronormative courtship. In fact, when faced with the idea that Pacifica may leave her and move in with the young man, Mrs.

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<sup>811</sup> Ibid., Kindle Location 2888.

<sup>812</sup> Ibid, Kindle Location, 2909.

<sup>813</sup> Ibid, Kindle Location 2920.

Copperfield tells Miss Goering, “But the beauty of me is that I am only a step from desperation all the time and I am one of the few people I know who could perform an act of violence with the greatest of ease.”<sup>814</sup> She actively fights to keep Pacifica, and is victorious, putting an end to the cisheteronormative courtship by the end of the novel.<sup>815</sup>

The novel ends with Miss Goring contemplating the differences between her own life and Mrs. Copperfield’s life. “‘Certainly I am nearer to becoming a saint,’ reflected Miss Goering, ‘but it is possible that a part of me hidden from my sight is piling sin upon sin as fast as Mrs. Copperfield?’ Miss Goering thought this latter possibility to be of considerable interest, but of no great importance.”<sup>816</sup> In weighing her own discretions—including premarital sex, incidental sex work, and consorting with married men—against those of Mrs. Copperfield—including adultery and lesbianism—Miss Goering found that, while Mrs. Copperfield may have been eviler, it seemed inconsequential in the end. Mrs. Copperfield’s lesbianism is never outright discussed, and while Miss Goering suggests she is sinful at the end of the novel, her lesbianism does not lead to tragedy. In the end, Mrs. Copperfield keeps her money, gets the girl, and celebrates her victories by buying a round for the whole bar.

The narrator throughout the book withholds judgement of the two serious ladies. It is only Peggy Gladys’ attempt to end Mrs. Copperfield’s marriage which is shown in a distinctly negative light. The casual acceptance of lesbianism and extramarital sex could have stemmed from Jane Bowles’ own life, in which she and her husband Paul had an open marriage and Bowles often shared her bed with women. She spent much of her adolescence and early twenties in downtown Manhattan, visiting lesbian bars and engaging in romantic and sexual relationships

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<sup>814</sup> Ibid., Kindle Location, 2930.

<sup>815</sup> Ibid, Kindle Location 2944.

<sup>816</sup> Ibid., Kindle Location 2960-2971.

with women.<sup>817</sup> After her mother and aunts found out about her lesbianism in 1935, when Bowles was 18, they insisted it was an adolescent phase and she would eventually get married.<sup>818</sup> This was around the time that she met Paul Bowles, with whom she spoke about marriage, about her affairs with women, and his affairs with men and women both. They determined a marriage was not possible for either of them, unless it was an open marriage in which fidelity was nonexistent and neither was expected to be heterosexual. Not long after getting married, the Bowles moved to Paris for Paul to work on his music, and Jane spent time at bars alone, especially The Monocle, a lesbian bar.<sup>819</sup>

In 1940, the sexual element of the Bowles' marriage fell apart after he physically abused her for a second time in only a handful of years. They lived mostly apart for the next eight years, and Bowles spent much of this time with her woman lover, Helvetia Perkins, who was older than her and independently wealthy.<sup>820</sup> According to Bowles' biographer, Monica Dillon, Paul knew about his wife's affair, "Yet between Paul and Jane and Helvetia everything was conducted in a polite and pleasant fashion."<sup>821</sup> Although the triangle between Mrs. Copperfield, Mr. Copperfield, and Pacifica was a bit different, the themes were the same: Mr. Copperfield and Mrs. Copperfield became permanently estranged prior to Mrs. Copperfield taking up with Pacifica; Pacifica is attracted to an older woman, just as Bowles was attracted to Perkins; and Pacifica and Mrs. Copperfield ended up living together in New York City, just like Helvetia and Bowles.<sup>822</sup>

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<sup>817</sup> Dillon, *A Little Original Sin*, 28.

<sup>818</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>819</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-56.

<sup>820</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-96.

<sup>821</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>822</sup> Mrs. Copperfield remarks to Pacifica, "I was once in love with an older woman...She was no longer beautiful, but in her face I found fragments of beauty which were much more exciting to me than any beauty that I have known at its height. (Bowles, *Two Serious Ladies*, Kindle Location 707).



These were the circumstances under which Jane Bowles wrote *Two Serious Ladies*: she was estranged from her husband for most of it, living with a woman where she did not eat nor sleep much, and dealing with internalized misogyny. In his correspondence with biographer Dillon, Paul Bowles recalled a conversation he had with his wife, where she discussed giving a man oral sex for money. “‘It didn’t mean a thing,’ she said to Paul. She was just glad when it was over. ‘There’s nothing disgusting about men,’ he remembers her saying to him, but then she added ‘in an almost religious way,’ ‘There is something disgusting about women.’”<sup>823</sup> The result was a novel in which both women protagonists were sinners, and much of the narrative focuses on the ways in which they refused to adhere to societal norms. In a *New York Times* review of the book, Edith Walton, the reviewer, remarked: “My feeling is that Mrs. Bowles has developed—an exploited—her own brand of lunacy and that she is, perhaps fortunately, unique.” Walton continued, “What does, however, link both the “Two Serious Ladies” and the other characters in the book is their mad, their wayward, their bizarre aberrations, in which they indulge with so reasonable an air.”<sup>824</sup> For this contemporaneous reviewer, the strangest part of the novel was not that characters indulged in extramarital sex and lesbianism—it is that no one remarks on or judges these characters for their sins. While modern readers may see Mrs. Copperfield and Pacifica’s ending to be a happy one, contemporary readers like Walton may have seen Pacifica’s ending as a tragedy—robbed of a good man, damned to a life of perversion, and drowning in vice and sin.

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<sup>823</sup> Dillon, *A Little Original Sin*, 60.

<sup>824</sup> Edith H. Walton, “Fantastic Duo: TWO SERIOUS LADIES. by Jane Bowles. 271 Pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50.” *New York Times*, (May 09, 1943, Section BR, 14).

*Two Serious Ladies* is unique among lesbian fiction of the 1940s because no one dies. However, the predatory nature of both Mrs. Copperfield towards Pacifica and Peggy Gladys towards Mrs. Copperfield is shared by other women-loving women characters of this decade's fiction, suggesting that the concept of lesbianism as a threat was evident in *Two Serious Ladies* even if its women-loving woman author did not succumb to the virus of Dead Lesbian Syndrome. The antagonist of *Trio* by Dorothy Baker, published the same year and by the same publisher as *Two Serious Ladies*, was also possessive and demanding of her younger lover. *Trio* tackles a common experience in both lesbian fiction and the real lives of women-loving women: college romance. Women's colleges were homosocial environments in which women were expected to rely on one another for emotional support. During World War II, women college students had even less access to eligible bachelors. Given these parameters, it makes sense that many women-loving women of the middle class found brief dalliances, seductive professors, and life partners at women's colleges.

Perhaps the most famous real-life example of this type of romance is the relationship between Mary Woolley, the President of Mount Holyoke College from 1901 to 1937, and her "devoted companion" Jeannette Marks. Woolley was a professor in the Biblical History and Literature Department when she met Jeannette Marks, a student in her classes, in the 1890s. Marks became the Chair of the English Department after Woolley became the college's president, and they worked and lived together until Woolley's retirement in 1937, at which point Woolley moved into Marks' home in Westport, NY. The two women were twelve years apart in age and Marks graduated the same year Woolley accepted the role of President. After Marks retired in 1941, both women were active members of the National Women's Party. They both

lived long, successful lives—Woolley died at the age of 84 and Marks at the age of 88.<sup>825</sup> Their romance was recently reimagined in the off-Broadway play *Bull in a China Shop* by Bryna Turner.<sup>826</sup>

M. Carey Thomas, the first woman to serve as President of Bryn Mawr College, lived on campus with Mamie Gwinn, an English professor. They lived together in the same house in relative openness from around 1883, when Thomas became an educator at Bryn Mawr, through 1904, when Gwinn married.<sup>827</sup> Neither of these relationships—nor many of the others that led Faderman to remark, “Love between women in the early decades of the women’s college was a noble tradition”—ended in suicide or death, and Gwinn was able to marry a man without Thomas first dying. Yet, in *Trio*, the 1943 novel Dorothy Baker wrote about this “noble tradition” of women’s colleges’ lesbian relationships, the professor, Pauline Maury, commits suicide and the novel ends before we learn if the protagonist, Janet Logan, was able to marry the man she loved, Ray.

Women’s colleges appeared to be posing a serious threat to cisheteronormative marriages in the early decades of the 1900s. In 1895, 36 years after opening, Vassar found that less than half of the 1,082 graduates had gotten married.<sup>828</sup> The college was unable to explain this

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<sup>825</sup> “Mary and Jeannette” in *Mary Woolley & Jeannette Marks: Life, Love, and Letters* at the Digital Exhibits of the Archives and Special Collections at Mount Holyoke College. 2015. Accessed December 6, 2021.

<https://ascdc.mtholyoke.edu/exhibits/show/woolleymarks/aboutmj>.

<sup>826</sup> “Bull in a China Shop,” *Concord Theatricals*. 2021. Accessed December 6, 2021.

<https://www.concordtheatricals.com/p/62556/bull-in-a-china-shop>

<sup>827</sup> Lillian Faderman, “Forward,” in Anne McKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar: Lesbian & Gay Experiences 1930-1990*, xi-xv, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), xiii.

<sup>828</sup> The interplay between women pursuing higher education and women’s roles within late nineteenth and early twentieth century American society is both an exploration of homosocial environments including romantic friendships, Boston marriages, and women-loving women relationships and the economic independence afforded educated women. For more information, see Peter Bronski, “A Woman’s Place,” *Vassar: The Alumnae/I Quarterly*, (107.1, Winter 2011, <https://www.vassar.edu/vq/issues/2011/01/features/a-womans-place.html>); Lynn D. Gordon, “The Gibson Girl Goes to College: Popular Culture and Women’s Higher Education in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920,” *American Quarterly*, (39.2, Summer 1987, 211-230); Barbara Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America*, (New Haven, Connecticut.: Yale University Press, 1985); and Ann Karus Meeropol, *A Male President for Mount Holyoke College: The Failed Fight to Maintain Female Leadership, 1934-1937*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014). Meeropol’s work shows the impact of the end of First Wave Feminism on women’s power in higher education, as well as the impact of an openly women-loving

phenomenon, but further research showed that the figures were similar for other women's colleges in the United States.<sup>829</sup> Although the colleges claimed to be confused, history shows us that women's romantic relationships were understood at these colleges, and many of the teachers—who came from graduating classes—remained unmarried throughout their tenure. Instead, they created lasting partnerships with other women, of which few documented cases ended in suicide or death.

Yet all the pieces of fiction written in the 1940s that focused on women-loving women relationships in homosocial educational environments ended in the death of the lesbian character, who was shown to be a malevolent predator at one point or another, or the victim of a malevolent lesbian predator. *Trio's* Pauline Maury, *Olivia's* Mlle. Cara, and *College for Scandal's* Miss Grange are all educators who commit suicide to solve issues they have with the women they claimed to love. In *Trio*, Pauline Maury is a French professor who takes on Janet Logan as her assistant while Janet works to complete her studies and become a French professor as well. For three years, the two women live together and have, presumably, a sexual relationship. It comes to an end when Janet meets a young man she wants to marry. Threatened with exposure as both a fraud and a lesbian, Pauline commits suicide.

Baker sets the stage for the tumultuous relationship of Janet and Pauline early in the novel, but this is soon overshadowed by Janet's staunch support of her professor in the face of bad reviews of Pauline's new book. As early as page eleven, Janet tells Pauline: "It's bad for me to know you." Pauline responds condescendingly: "So?" The narrator goes on to explain:

The question waited, and a moment later Janet Logan answered it with an easy and ironic flow of reasons. It is always bad for

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woman as President of Mount Holyoke College pushed the college towards male leadership after Mary Emma Woolley's retirement in 1937.

<sup>829</sup> McKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, 7.

students to come close to teachers; just as it is bad for the young ever to face the revelation that a priest's life may not be, to the last detail, exemplary, or that a doctor, who ought to know the chemical effects of poisons, should himself resort to narcotics. These things are always shocking to the young. They prefer to admire. They hate to acknowledge fallibility in those they look up to. They resist believing that all teachers are not intensely interested in reading all that their students have to say.<sup>830</sup>

Soon after this interaction, one of Pauline's superiors, Dean Kennedy, insults her new book on French poets, and Logan finds herself defending her professor. During this exchange, the novel explores the influence of homosexuality on greatness. According to Dean Kennedy, Pauline's book homes in on the negative aspects of the French poets:

Miss Maury, in making a series of brilliant analyses of some very complicated poems, starts by examining the lives of the poets themselves, and finds them to be decadent, disorderly, and, to the lay mind, evil. She then expands a good deal of loving care on this evil. She plays it up for as much as, or more than, it's worth. This is what these men were, she says, they were drug addicts, and homosexuals, and sadists, to name a few of the things they were.<sup>831</sup>

This analysis suggests that the French poets were great writers *because* they were drug addicts, homosexuals, and sadists. Dean Kennedy argues, instead, that this is a *post hoc ergo proctor hoc* fallacy, in which the poets' vices were not connected to their art. He insists, "It's much too easy... We could make a grand tour of all the jails right now, and find a thousand drug addicts and homosexuals who never wrote a line of poetry in their lives and never will. It isn't because of those things that her poets were great, it's in spite of them."<sup>832</sup>

In the end, the novel does not tell us whether Dean Kennedy or Pauline Maury is correct: Pauline is found to be a fraud who did not write her own book, but the book's actual author was her woman lover, who shared her vice of homosexuality. *Trio* poses the question: Is a writer

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<sup>830</sup> Dorothy Baker, *Trio*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1943), 11.

<sup>831</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>832</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

great because they are different from everyone else, or are they, though strange, just as good as everyone else and thus able to write? This topic comes up again after Janet tells her boyfriend, Ray, that she was in a sexual relationship with Pauline. He asks her, “Did you ever hear of a fairy that wasn’t artistic? The main thing wrong with the arts is that they attract so many degenerates.”<sup>833</sup> The novel does not comment further on this topic, leaving the reader to produce an answer themselves.

Throughout the novel, it becomes obvious that Janet does not want to be with Pauline. She has settled into her role as student, caretaker, and lover to the professor because she respects her research and wants a career. However, upon meeting Ray she realizes she does not want to be with Pauline for the rest of her life. She tells Ray, “Until you came along there wasn’t any reason. I’ve got to get out now, because I’ve got to be with you.”<sup>834</sup> Confused by her simultaneous love for him and refusal to get engaged, Ray accuses Janet of having an affair. This prompts Janet to tell Ray the truth: she has been in a sexual relationship with Pauline Maury the whole time. The conversation continues: Ray asks, “What do you mean, lived with her? Do you mean you’re in love with her?” To which Janet responds, “I hate her... You know I hate her.”<sup>835</sup> With this sentence, Pauline Maury transitions from being a lover to being a predator, Janet Logan transitions from being a woman in love to a woman preyed upon by her older, more powerful professor. The narrator describes one interaction between the two women as, “Pauline Maury had kept her eyes fixed on Janet so steadily that she had begun to take on the air of a hypnotist.”<sup>836</sup> Janet feels trapped in the relationship. She explains that she followed Pauline to

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<sup>833</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>834</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>835</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>836</sup> Ibid., 86.

the school willingly when Pauline offered Janet a position in the French graduate program, but “But I didn’t know what it was.”<sup>837</sup> She tells Ray:

I had to tell you. Don’t think I liked it, living there in that glass house. Don’t think I stayed there because I wanted to. I tried to get away that first year, and she caught me and brought me back, and then she went to work on me, and I cracked up and had to be taken to the sanitarium. And after that she had me, because she made it known I could never hold a job or earn a living except with her. All I’ve tried to so since then is hang on to myself and make the best of it.<sup>838</sup>

Throughout this final section, Pauline is made to look even more monstrous. Readers learn that Pauline stole the idea, research, and much of the pages in her book from her dead ex-lover and passed it all off as her own. She also regularly kept Janet drunk and exhausted, in hopes of getting Janet to reach a “higher morality” or a “sublime state of something.”<sup>839</sup> Still, Pauline thinks only of herself. When she finds out that Janet has told Ray about the sexual relationship between Pauline and Janet, Pauline ignores the fact that Janet is losing the man she loves. “He hates you and you’re going home, aren’t you? That’s the way you do it. You go away, and you leave me here to face him, and everyone he’ll tell, and all the unjust and rotten accusations he’ll bring against me.”<sup>840</sup> Pauline is more afraid of her colleagues learning that she is a lesbian and a fraud than of losing Janet and Janet’s love. This suggests that love between these two women could not be real love, because of Pauline’s selfishness. Pauline’s eventual suicide is not an act of sacrifice, but of selfishness. Unwilling to deal with being outed as both a lesbian and a fraud, Pauline took her own life and left the cleanup—of all her problems—to Janet Logan.

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<sup>837</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>838</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>839</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>840</sup> Ibid., 142.

Lisa Ben, the author of *Vice-Versa*, reviewed *Trio* in the fourth issue of her magazine. Therein Ben reports, “The characterization of the lesbian as a selfish, deceitful woman is not very likely to go far in promoting tolerance towards lesbianism by the general public.”<sup>841</sup> However, two other reviews were a bit more positive. Maxwell Geismar, who reviewed the book upon its publication in July 1943, remarks, “The complex people in “Trio” are handled well; a rather difficult theme is treated honestly.”<sup>842</sup> In a later review, also published in *The New York Times*, Orville Prescott called *Trio*, “an unpleasant but expert little study of sexual inversion.”<sup>843</sup> Despite these less than effusive reviews, *Trio* stayed at the top of *The New York Times*’ “Best Sellers List” in San Francisco for most of 1943. Still, it was not Dorothy Baker’s most successful book. This honored belonged to her first published novel, *Young Man with a Horn*, which was originally published in 1938 and for which she won a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship.

*Young Man with a Horn* is often considered the world’s “first jazz novel” and one of the earliest to portray interracial friendships in a positive light.<sup>844</sup> In the novel, Rick, a young, talented white musician, marries Amy, a bisexual college student who had previously been in a sexual relationship with Rick’s Black best friend’s sister. Their relationship starts fast and dies off fast—Rick wants a stable home life built around his schedule, while Amy wants to return to school and keep hours and friends that do not align with Rick’s performance schedule. Eventually, they separate, and Amy returns to sexual escapades with both men and women.

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<sup>841</sup> Lisa Ben, “Bookroom’s Burrow: ‘Trio’ by Dorothy Barker,” *Vice Versa*, (1.4, September 1947, 3, <https://queermusicheritage.com/viceversa4.html>), 3.

<sup>842</sup> Maxwell Geismar, “Academic Pastiche: TRIO. by Dorothy Baker. 234 Pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. \$2.50,” in *New York Times*, (July 4, 1943, BR 1), BR 1.

<sup>843</sup> Orville Prescott, “Books of the Times,” in *The New York Times*, (August 10, 1948, 19), 19.

<sup>844</sup> “Young Man with a Horn,” *New York Review of Books*, 2021, Accessed December 11, 2021. <https://www.nyrb.com/products/young-man-with-a-horn?variant=1094933177>



Rick, however, is bereft and eventually becomes sick and dies.<sup>845</sup> In this novel, Amy is not a predator, but her presence still causes problems. Amy was a problematic spouse who did not mean to break her husband's heart, Pauline was a predator who took her dead lover's work to make a name for herself and used her younger lover's dependency on her to convince Janet Logan to take care of the house, grading, and Pauline's cat. Baker's evolution of women-loving women characters encapsulates the change from ambivalent threat of the 1930s to malevolent predator of the 1940s.

Wallace Parnell's *College for Scandal* was first performed in 1943 at a small theater in Los Angeles, where "Lisa Ben" was able to watch the performance and then report on it for the readers of *Vice Versa*. *Vice Versa* was the brainchild of Edythe Eyde, a Northern California transplant to the Los Angeles area. Born in 1921, Eyde took a job with RKO Studios in the late 1940s. "[H]er boss instructed her to "look busy" even when she had no work to do," so Edythe began writing and distributing *Vice Versa*. Although the magazine only lasted for nine issues, from June 1947 to February 1948, it is remembered in LGBTQ history as the first distributed women-loving women newsletter. Eyde used the pseudonym "Lisa Ben" and focused on circulating a limited number of each issue among friends and friends-of-friends in order to avoid going public with her sexuality. The magazine included book and play reviews, discussions with readers about lesbian language and identities, and original poetry by Eyde. It came to an abrupt stop when Eyde lost her job in early 1948—not because she was outed, as many others

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<sup>845</sup> Emily Cooke, "To be like us isn't easy," *London Review of Books*, (35.12, June 20, 2013, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v35/n12/emily-cooke/to-be-like-us-isn-t-easy>).

experienced and as detailed below, but because her boss sold the business—and she no longer had access to a printing machine.<sup>846</sup>

Ben's decision to recount so much of the plot of *College for Scandal in Vice Versa* was fortuitous, as no printed version of the play is available on this side of the Pacific Ocean. According to Ben's summary, the play is based in the fictional Beaustone's School for Girls near London, hence the later renaming of the play to *The Beaustone Affair*. The main character, Miss Grange, is the head of the school. She is not well-liked among her students because of her habit of picking a new "favorite" each semester, a young girl on whom she dotes lovingly and who is the only person allowed in her private rooms. The play begins with Miss Grange introducing her new favorite, Sheila Clarkson, when one of the students interrupts with news that Miss Grange's previous favorite, Lucy, is both pregnant and suicidal. When Maisie convinces Lucy to come to see Miss Grange, Lucy insists that she will kill herself if the father of her unborn child does not come forward. By the beginning of act two, Lucy is dead.<sup>847</sup>

It is in act two that we begin to see the monstrous nature of Miss Grange. While much of the scene is focused on figuring out how Lucy died, the scene ends with Miss Grange attempting to seduce Sheila Clarkson. At first Sheila gives in, but as soon as she realizes she is kissing her woman teacher, Sheila runs from the bedroom, crying. Although Lucy's death was originally ruled a suicide, Inspector Brooks realizes at the start of act three that Lucy was pushed backwards through the window—the same way Clare Kendry died in Nella Larsen's 1929 novel about women who could have been women-loving women, *Passing*. Miss Grange's assistant sneaks into Miss Grange's private rooms in hopes of uncovering some new

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<sup>846</sup> "Vice Versa at RKO Studios," *ONE Archives at USC Libraries*, 2021, Accessed December 4, 2021. <https://one.usc.edu/archive-location/vice-versa-rko-studios>.

<sup>847</sup> Lisa Ben, "Drama Review: 'College for Scandal,'" *Vice Versa* (1.1, June 1947, 3-8), <http://queermusicheritage.com/viceversa1.html>, 3-4.

information about Lucy's case, when she accidentally sees Miss Grange and Sheila Clarkson profess their love for one another. According to Ben, "Mary Wright, listening to their conversation, is incensed and outraged. With the attitude of scorn all too prevalent of her ilk, she comes out into the open stormily denouncing Janet Grange as 'an unnatural monster' and 'an abomination in the sight of God.'"<sup>848</sup>

Murderously angry, Miss Grange then strangles Mary Wright to death to keep her quiet. The noise of Mary Wright dying leads the police to enter Miss Grange's room and catch her in the act. About to be arrested, Miss Grange runs to the window and flings herself out of it, falling to her death. Ben concludes the story with, "Some of us will be happy to learn the solution to the mystery reveals that Janet Grange was a man, wanted for criminal conduct." Miss Grange started the school to hide from the authorities but could not keep her desire for young women concealed. She impregnated Lucy and killed the young girl to keep her quiet, then killed herself instead of facing the consequences of her actions.<sup>849</sup> Like Pauline Maury, Miss Grange is both a fraud and selfish, and willing to die to avoid the consequences of her actions.

Mlle. Cara of *Olivia* is also a very selfish antagonist, though it is never quite clear which of the three older women involved in this book is the malevolent predator. In his introduction to the novel, André Aciman writes, "The novel told me something I had always suspected but had never quite known before: that we fear the very ones we love, that fear freezes us, that we'll stalk them and know their habits...that we always catch ourselves begging fate to let that one person cross our path again—and this time, this time, we swear, we won't be so timid, we'll

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<sup>848</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>849</sup> Ibid., 8.

speak, the worst they can say is no.”<sup>850</sup> While Aciman was most likely referring to Olivia’s feelings for Mlle. Julie, this fear is also prevalent in the relationship between Mlle. Julie and Mlle. Cara, as Mlle. Julie is constantly afraid for Mlle. Cara’s health. When Olivia finally asks her Italian teacher, Signorina, about the relationship between Mlle. Cara and Mlle. Julie, Signorina explains that they have been together for about fifteen years. “They were a model couple, deeply attached, tenderly devoted, the gifts of each supplementing the deficiencies of the other. They were admired and loved. They were happy.”<sup>851</sup> However, when they hired Frau Reisner, their relationship began to fall apart. Frau Reisner convinced Mlle. Cara that she was constantly ill, while encouraging Mlle. Julie to go into town and be the public-facing leader of the school. Reflecting on the issue, Signorina remarks: “‘I believe,’ said Signorina slowly and reflectively, ‘I believe it was so at first, or love of power rather than of mischief. But now I think what she really wants is to drive Mlle. Julie away and step into her shoes.’”<sup>852</sup> For Signorina and the other students at the school, Frau Reisner is the malevolent predator of the novel. For Olivia, however, Mlle. Julie is very much the villain of the story.

Signorina, as Olivia’s confidante, notices early that Olivia is jealous of everyone Mlle. Julie speaks to. Signorina warns Olivia, “‘I strongly advise you to get over that little failing or else—’ her voice dropped, did it tremble? ‘—you’re in for a bad time.’”<sup>853</sup> Describing her love for Mlle. Julie, Olivia asks her friend Laura: “Does your heart beat when you go into the room where she is? Does it stand still when you touch her hand? Does your voice dry up in your throat when you speak to her? Do you hardly dare raise your eyes to look at her, and yet not succeed in turning them away?”<sup>854</sup> This was the fear Aciman refers to in the introduction, and

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<sup>850</sup> André Aciman, “Introduction,” in Dorothy Strachey, *Olivia*, xi-xxi, (New York: Penguin Classics, 2020), xx.

<sup>851</sup> Dorothy Strachey, *Olivia*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 2020, Kindle), 45-47.

<sup>852</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>853</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>854</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

while *Olivia* may have been the first to address this type of student-teacher crush so vividly, *Olivia*—and perhaps *Dorothy Strachey*—was not alone.

In the oral history collection *Boots of a Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* compiled by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, a woman named *Dee*, born c. 1920, remembers having a crush on a twenty-year-old woman when she was a pre-adolescent. “*Rita* would take me out for ice cream sodas and sundaes, and one night we were coming home from somewhere, and she kissed me on the forehead and said, ‘Read *The Well of Loneliness* when you get a little older and I don’t want to see you until you’re eighteen.’”<sup>855</sup> *Rita* recognized *Dee*’s affection as a sapphic crush and tried to mentor her as a young woman-loving girl. Although historians have often written off such crushes as non-sexual or as practice for a heterosexual union, *Martha Vicinus*’ research in girls’ boarding school romances suggest these relationships were often reciprocated and included lustful desire. *Vicinus* explains that young girls were encouraged to practice self-control in their feelings towards an older student or teacher, “...the emphasis on self-control encouraged the intense and erotically charged crush on an older and more experienced student or teacher as a girl’s most significant emotional experience.”<sup>856</sup> Like *Olivia*, these young girls were taught to repress their desire, which could lead to feelings of intensity. Regardless of whether the attentions were returned, “The distance between the lover and the loved one was bridged not through consummation but rather through a unity of sorrow and self-sacrifice.”<sup>857</sup>

Mlle. *Julie* was very much the object of *Olivia*’s affections, and *Olivia*’s sorrow and self-sacrifice came from realizing she was not Mlle. *Julie*’s only favorite. When Mlle. *Julie* bent

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<sup>855</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of a Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 330-331.

<sup>856</sup> *Martha Vicinus*, “Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships,” *Signs*, (9.4, Summer 1984, “The Lesbian Issue,” 600- 622, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173613>), 604.

<sup>857</sup> *Ibid.*, 608.

down to kiss the shoulder of another student, Olivia remembers it as: “She put her hands on Cécile’s bare arms and as she twisted her round, bent down and kissed her shoulder. A long deliberate kiss on the naked creamy shoulder. An unknown pang of astonishing violence stabbed me. I hated Cécile. I hated Mlle. Julie.”<sup>858</sup> If this imagery were false, then Olivia’s jealous imagination turned an innocent gesture into a predatory molestation. If this imagery were true, then Mlle. Julie was most definitely using her power to molest her students. According to Mlle. Cara’s accusations, Olivia’s recollection was correct. Caught between a raving Mlle. Cara and a distraught Mlle. Julia, Olivia remembers, “Her voice rose to a shriek. I thought she was demented. I had never seen a person in hysterics before. I was terrified by the shrill choking, sobbing laughter, but those insane words.” The words Mlle. Cara flung in accusation were, ““One of your favourites, one of your darlings, one of your victims!...Oh yes, you go to their rooms at night—Cécile’s, Baietto’s and now hers! You do, you do.””<sup>859</sup> While Frau Reisner may have been the mastermind behind the dissolution of Mlle. Cara and Mlle. Julie’s relationship, it was Mlle. Julie who bore the role of villain in the narratives of both Mlle. Cara and Olivia.

From this point of accusation onward, it becomes clear that Mlle. Cara sees Mlle. Julie as the reason for her illness and her heartache. When Mlle. Cara overdoses on one of her medications and dies, Mlle. Julie and Frau Reisner are both suspects, continuing the theme of the real predator (Frau Reisner) being confused with the scapegoat (Mlle. Julie). Either way, Mlle. Julie breaks Olivia’s heart soon after Mlle. Cara’s death. She refuses to speak with Olivia on her final day at the school. When Mlle. Julie does not come to Olivia’s room to say goodbye, all hope Olivia had for Mlle. Julie’s love is destroyed. “Ha! That was better. The noxious

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<sup>858</sup> Strachey, *Olivia*, 59.

<sup>859</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

creature was dead now. It would undermine me no longer. I was free at last from its insidious burrowings. I could be calm now and brace myself to endure.”<sup>860</sup> Mlle. Julie and Signorina move to a school in Canada, where Mlle. Julie dies four years later. Writing to Olivia to tell her of the news, Signorina explains how she has been Mlle. Julie’s caretaker as she has died, taken for granted by the educator and never loved. Signorina tells Olivia, “Your share has been something more. But you have had to pay for it.”<sup>861</sup> Getting attention from the favorite teacher comes with a price, and this is something both Olivia and Lucy from *College for Scandal* were forced to learn through sorrow and sacrifice.

The pain and horrors of *Olivia* would be terrible enough had they been true, but the infection of Dead Lesbian Syndrome is worsened by Dorothy Strachey’s decision to fictionalize her own two teachers, Mlle. Marie Souvestre and Mlle. Caroline Dussaut, and changed the trajectories of their lives to make Mlle. Souvestre look like the reason Mlle. Dussaut committed suicide and that Mlle. Dussaut’s death was the reason Mlle. Souvestre left the school they shared. Based on Strachey’s age and Mlle. Souvestre’s timeline, Strachey would have been one of the last students Mlle. Souvestre taught alongside Mlle. Dussaut at Les Ruches in Paris before moving to teach at Allenswood in London.<sup>862</sup> While in the novel, both Mlle. Julie and Mlle. Cara are Olivia’s godmothers, it was Mlle. Souvestre who grew close with Strachey’s mother in the 1870s, when Lady Jane Strachey met Mlle. Souvestre in Italy. Beginning in 1871, Mlle. Souvestre began writing letters to Lady Strachey, many of which referenced Mlle. Dussaut and her ongoing health battles. According to a descendant of the Souvestre family who has done extensive genealogical research in Paris, Mlle. Dussaut met Mlle. Souvestre at some

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<sup>860</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>861</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>862</sup> Russell Freedman, “Souvestre, Marie (1830? France – 30 March 1905, London, England)” in *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, eds. Maurine Hoffman Beasley, Holly Cowan Shulman, Henry R. Beasley, 488-490, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001), 488.

point in the late 1850s or early 1860s. They opened Les Ruches together and taught there until they separated in 1883, with Mlle. Souvestre moving to London. Mlle. Dussaut became the sole headmistress of Les Ruches after Mlle. Souvestre left, teaching at Les Ruches until 1887, when she died of, presumably, a drug overdose.<sup>863</sup>

The fictionalized version of the breakup between Mlle. Souvestre and Mlle. Dussaut includes a villain, Frau Reisner, who succeeds in taking the school from Mlle. Julie after Mlle. Cara's death. This new villain, who is never shown to be intimate with Mlle. Cara but whom Mlle. Julie appears to be jealous of throughout the novel, is a predator who wants to force out the school's original founders and declare it her own. In a school with no man at the helm, this overthrow is easily accomplished after the death of Mlle. Cara. Strachey infected her novel with Dead Lesbian Syndrome by killing off Mlle. Cara four years earlier than Mlle. Dussaut actually died and making her death the reason for Mlle. Julie's decision to leave France. Furthermore, Strachey made Mlle. Julie a recluse in the end, unwilling to spend time with Strachey or her other favorite, Laura. In reality, Mlle. Souvestre moved to Allenswood and hired Strachey to work there for a few years and stayed in touch with the woman many believe inspired the character of Laura: First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.<sup>864</sup>

Strachey's narrative of the sapphic experiences of a young adolescent woman drew from her own experiences, but as fiction it suffered from Dead Lesbian Syndrome: both the teachers were dead by the end of the novel, though in reality both were still alive at the time Dorothy Strachey left school in the 1880s. *Olivia* also suffered from a common ailment of 1940s lesbian fiction: the malevolent predator. By adding these elements to her novel, Strachey committed the

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<sup>863</sup> Emilie Souvestre, "Caroline Dussaut," *Portraits of Emilie Souvestre's Family and Friends*, 2021. Accessed December 12, 2021. <https://ouestfigureshistoriques.wordpress.com/famille-souvestre/caroline-dussaut-1833-1887/>

<sup>864</sup> Freedman, "Souvestre, Marie," 488-490.



same sins as Radclyffe Hall—she painted sapphic love to be much more tragic than it was in her own experiences, reifying the tragic and unhealthy beliefs many of her readers had been fed about lesbianism prior to reading.

In *The Mesh*, written in the late 1940s, the mother is the malevolent predator throughout the novel, preying on her son's affection and using his economic dependence on her to keep him away from his new wife. While the mother is never proclaimed to be a women-loving woman, there are moments throughout the novel in which her masculinity is pointed out. The protagonist, Madeline, proclaims her mother to be a wonderful woman, to which her cousin corrects, ““You mean a wonderful man.””<sup>865</sup> The novel begins with Madeline wanting to move out of her mother's house into her own apartment and her brother, Charles, wanting to marry her recently widowed young neighbor, Noemi Josserand. Upon learning of Charles' plans, Mother calls Noemi a sex worker, cuts Charles off financially, and moves out of the family house to live on the farm of her housekeeper's brother.<sup>866</sup>

When Mother returns after a few months of punishment, she immediately hates Noemi and Noemi's dog, taking out her anger at the former on the body of the latter. Madeline notices early in Noemi and Mother's acquaintanceship that Noemi submits to all abuse like a martyr. She rhetorically asks, ““What had happened to make her, like a resigned Iphigenia, such easy prey?””<sup>867</sup> However, it is Noemi's beloved dog Michel who ends up being sacrificed so the plot could move forward, not Noemi. When Noemi leaves the house to spend time with her family, Mother attacks the unprotected dog. ““You masquerade of a dog! She sneered. ‘You circus act!

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<sup>865</sup> Marchal, *The Mesh*, 11.

<sup>866</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-70.

<sup>867</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

You're what the vice squad is after! Look at me, you emasculated coward!"<sup>868</sup> She then throws Michel out the window, forcing him into the unsafe world. He is soon run over by a car, and Noemi carries his bloodied body home. Bereft, she faints, and then turns to Madeline to comfort. The two women profess their love to one another and make plans to leave the house and live together.

By the end of the novel, Madeline and Noemi have found a way to escape the malevolent predator that is Mother. Except, as Madeline passes her dressing table, she "stopped short, startled. A few feet away, as [she] looked at [her]self in the mirror in the dying light, the face of [her] mother seemed to gaze back at [her]."<sup>869</sup> The idea that Madeline is turning into her mother is further expanded upon when Madeline pushed Charles into a yearly income for Noemi, using money as a tool to control Charles' relationships with others in a way that echoes Mother's early decision to cut Charles off financially until he decided to divorce Noemi. Reflecting on her feelings for Noemi, Madeline explains: "I loved her with the whole untapped reservoir of my tenderness. What no man had known how to win from me, what Mother had neither wanted nor even understood, I now offered Noemi, multiplied a hundred times. All that I had to give was hers. I was assuming full responsibility for her life and happiness."<sup>870</sup> As Mother was obsessed with Charles and kept him under her control, could it be Madeline was about to do the same to Noemi? Would the heroine live long enough to be the malevolent predatory villain? Unfortunately, there was no sequel to *The Mesh*, so the readers never learn if the union of Madeline and Noemi was a happy one, or a tragedy.

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<sup>868</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>869</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>870</sup> Ibid., 191.

When the book was reviewed in *The New York Times* in 1950, Edith Efron considered it a psychological thriller. She decides the book ends “unhappily,” which belies a cisheteronormative lens, as the two women who are in love end up together in the end. According to Efron, the ending, which allows Noemi and Madeline to move out of the house together, leaving Charles and Mother to live happily ever after together, is unsatisfactory. “They are allowed by their determined creator, Lucie Marchal, a Belgian writer, to settle permanently and awfully into their psychiatric bog.”<sup>871</sup> Efron’s main complaint is that Madeline’s family is a closed circuit filled with psychopaths. She argues that while characters like the Hunchback of Notre Dame, Mr. Hyde, or Frankenstein’s monster are recognized by the rest of each novel’s cast as evil, when all four characters in the novel appear to be psychotic, the novel is rendered uninteresting. “The madness or neurasthenia of these individuals was a living force which affected profoundly the lives of those around them. But there is something acutely preposterous in a novel about a closed corporation of madmen who get on each other’s nerves, and whose peregrinations are of no importance to any one besides themselves.”<sup>872</sup> Despite Marchal’s decision to give the two women in this novel a relatively happy ending, the first reviewer—on a national platform no less—determined the novel was about a family of psychopaths.

The role of the malevolent predatory lesbian appears to be a constant throughout fiction of the 1940s and existed specifically as a counterweight to the heroic male of most 1940s fiction. According to an essay by James Baldwin written in 1949, all fictional women of this time were shown to be villains. “The woman, in these energetic works, is the unknown quantity, the

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<sup>871</sup> Edith Efron, “The New Fiction: Three Novels of Interest: Assorted Jitters Old Australia Covered-Wagon Days,” *New York Times*, (Feb 05, 1950, 191), 191.

<sup>872</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

incarnation of sexual evil, the smiler with the knife.”<sup>873</sup> In lesbian fiction, where there was no man to tame these “smilers with knives,” fictional lesbians became evil and violent. By painting lesbians as malevolent and violent, writers and publishers could push the narrative of tragic love into the second half of the twentieth century, ensuring the lesbian villain would continue to serve as a monster to prevent women from pursuing lesbianism for years to follow. Still, the malevolence was not enough. The threat of lesbianism continued to press too strongly upon the borders of society, preventing society’s desire to keep women from becoming too masculine during their work for World War II and to return women to the domestic sphere upon returning home. As such, the malevolent predator had to die in the end—of the five pieces of fiction in this section, three of them end with the predator dead: Pauline Maury, Miss Grange, and Mlle. Julie all die before the last page.

For Mrs. Copperfield and Madeline—the malevolent predators who survived—they were carefully paired off and considered insane in reviews about the novels. More importantly, the early reviews of these novels suggest that the women-loving women who survived until the end were psychopathic. With *Two Serious Ladies*, Edith Walton concluded that Jane Bowles had “her own brand of lunacy” and created characters who lived with “their mad, their wayward, their bizarre aberrations, in which they indulge with so reasonable an air.”<sup>874</sup> Meanwhile, Edith Efron believes all of the characters in *The Mesh* to be suffering from “madness or neurasthenia,” existing in “a closed corporation of madmen who get on each other’s nerves, and whose peregrinations are of no importance to any one besides themselves.”<sup>875</sup> Both of these reviews suggest the two novels are about characters who cannot harm anyone outside of their “closed

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<sup>873</sup> James Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence,” in *Collected Essays*, Toni Morrison (ed.), 594-600, (New York: Literary Classics of the US, Inc., 1998), 598.

<sup>874</sup> Walton, “Fantastic Duo,” 271.

<sup>875</sup> Efron, “Assorted Jitters,” 191.

systems,” and therefore are, seemingly, non-threatening to anyone who is not Pacifica in *Two Serious Ladies* or Noemi in *The Mesh*. A malevolent predator on the loose is a terrifying monster that needs to be killed—Pauline Maury destroyed the lives of two women before she committed suicide, Miss Grange killed Lucy and hurt Sheila before she committed suicide, and Mlle. Cara complained about the many victims of Mlle. Julie. A malevolent predator who only preys on one specific person—as Mrs. Copperfield does to Pacifica and Madeline does to Noemi—is contained, and therefore non-threatening. This is a new, and less violent, way of reducing the threat of the lesbian. One woman, in this case, Noemi or Pacifica, is sacrificed to keep others safe.

*Suicidal Martyrdom: Realized and Deferred*

While the malevolent lesbian predator became a common trope in the 1940s, the emergence of this character did not end Dead Lesbian Syndrome. Of the six predators discussed—Mrs. Copperfield, Pauline Maury, Miss Grange, Mlle. Julie and Mlle. Cara, and Madeline—four of them are dead before the final page of the novel, with at least half of the dead lesbians committing suicide. The malevolent predator trope did not save lesbian characters from dying in the end, it simply made them more detestable and dangerous than their predecessors. For Pauline Maury, Miss Grange, and Michel the dog, their deaths were necessary for a possible happy ending, in the same way Martha’s suicide in *The Children’s Hour* made room for Karen and Joe to marry, or the same way Stephen Gordon’s sacrifice of her love for Mary ensured Mary and Martin could be together. The lesbian character, now made into a controlling and manipulative monster, still had to die as sacrifice for the eventual cisheteronormative happy ending.

Pauline Maury's suicide at the end of *Trio* is the clearest manifestation of malevolent predatory lesbian committing suicide as a step towards a cisheteronormative happy ending.

When Janet explains her relationship with Pauline to Ray, she asks:

“Do you want to know how much I hate her?” she said. “I pray for her to die, because I haven't got the nerve to kill her.”

Ray's eyes opened wide, and Janet went on talking in the same way, fast and low and out of control. “She won't die, of course. She'll live to be a thousand and probably I will too. But if she doesn't die, I can't live. I can't, and that's all. I can't stand it.”<sup>876</sup>

Soon after learning that Janet wants to leave her for Ray, Pauline also realizes she cannot hide the plagiarism of her book, the work stolen from Pauline's dead lover, Claire Blanchard. Pauline is about to lose both the woman she claims to love and the job she fought hard to get, and she will most likely never get another teaching job once her plagiarism and her lesbianism are revealed. When this realization hits, Janet is looking into Pauline's eyes, which were similar to those of “a dog caught in the middle of a boulevard with traffic coming both ways.”<sup>877</sup> There is no way out of her predicament, except death.

The author makes it a point to note that Pauline does not have any connections outside of Janet. “You can't be angry. You can't, because you're all on earth I've got left. You're all that matters to me. You're the only one who knows me, the only one I can tell the truth to.”<sup>878</sup>

Pauline is an isolated, predatory lesbian who deserves to be destroyed. Ray confirms the justification for her death when he says, “You think she ought to be grateful to you. She ought to give you a blast between the eyes. And if she did, there isn't anybody in the world that would blame her. Do you understand that?”<sup>879</sup> Pauline seems to accept that she is unworthy of both

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<sup>876</sup> Baker, *Trio*, 101.

<sup>877</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>878</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>879</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

Janet and her teaching appointment and retires to her room in disgrace. Four pages later, she kills herself with a single bullet. Her death brings Ray and Janet back together, with Ray trying to protect Janet from the reality of the death: “‘You’d better get out of here,’ he said, but she pulled away from him and went and picked the gun up off the floor and looked at it and then down at the thing it had killed.”<sup>880</sup> Now dead, Pauline is no longer a woman or a lesbian or even a predator, she is a thing that has been killed, a monster that has been vanquished, a danger that has been rendered obsolete. Though Ray and Janet do not immediately kiss above her dead body as the cisheteronormative couple does in *The Children of Loneliness*, *Trio* ends with possibility: freed from Pauline, Janet is free to marry Ray, if he can forgive her for having been with a woman before him.

Like Pauline Maury, Miss Grange in *College for Scandal* was trapped with no way out. At the beginning of the play, Miss Grange murders Lucy—unbeknownst to the other characters or the audience—because Lucy is pregnant with Miss Grange’s baby. When Miss Grange’s secretary realizes that Miss Grange is having sexual relations with her favorites *and* was possibly the murderer of Lucy, the secretary cries out, getting the attention of the police. Caught trying to strangle her secretary to death, Miss Grange knows if the police take her alive, then they will find she was Assigned Male at Birth and, possibly, learn about her criminal past. Miss Grange had a long history of criminal conduct and created the persona of Janet Grange to open a school for girls and hide from the authorities. Unwilling to be taken alive, she flings herself out of her bedroom window and crashes to her death.<sup>881</sup> While Miss Grange’s death does not empower a cisheteronormative couple to live happily ever after, as Pauline Maury’s suicide did, the

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<sup>880</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>881</sup> Ben, “Drama Review: ‘College for Scandal,’” 8.

educator's suicide allows the police to wrap up the case and ensures that all the current students at Miss Grange's school are safe from her predatory attentions and her murderous rage.

In *Olivia*, the death of neither Mlle. Julie nor Mlle. Cara is considered suicide, though when it comes to a drug overdose, as in Mlle. Cara's case, it is difficult to know for sure if the overdose was purposeful or accidental. Their deaths also do not result in any grand happy ending for a cisheteronormative character, though Mlle. Julie's cold treatment of Olivia after Mlle. Cara's death and then Mlle. Julie's own death allow Olivia to move on from her schoolgirl crush on Mlle. Julie. The love between Mlle. Julie and Mlle. Cara, though according to Signorina was long-lasting and genuine, is shown to be slowly killing Mlle. Cara. Signorina and Olivia believe the pains Mlle. Cara suffers began with the arrival of Frau Reisener, who convinced Mlle. Julie to spend more time away from the school. When Mlle. Julie is away and Mlle. Cara is in charge, her health is strong, but "The very day Mlle. Julie came back, so did the migraines."<sup>882</sup>

Signorina believes that Mlle. Cara gets sick on purpose, to worry Mlle. Julie, and Frau Reisener encourages Mlle. Cara's hypochondria to create rift between the two women. According to Signorina, "She says she's dying, that we're all killing her. I listened at the door the other day. It was dreadful. 'You don't love me,' she kept repeating; 'nobody loves me.'"<sup>883</sup> Like Pauline Maury, both Mlle. Cara and Mlle. Julie are painted to have no connections of love beyond one another. Strachey makes note of this twice after Mlle. Cara's death. The night of Mlle. Cara's death, Mlle. Julie was, "Alone with a dead body—with the only person she had ever loved. A dead past behind her. A dreary future of exile before her..."<sup>884</sup> Later on, "She had remembered the only person she had ever loved was the dead woman on the bed."<sup>885</sup> Like many

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<sup>882</sup> Strachey, *Olivia*, 34.

<sup>883</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>884</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>885</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.



of the lesbian novels that came before it, *Olivia* suggests that women-loving women will only have each other, no friends or family, and their relationship will end in tragedy.

Michel, the little white dog whom Noemi loves and cuddles throughout *The Mesh*, is sacrificed in the end to ensure Noemi and Madeline can be together. As explained above, *New York Times* book reviewer Edith Efron did not see Noemi and Madeline's ending as a happy one, instead painting it as a tragedy for everyone involved. Within the confines of the book, where Madeline is the first-person narrator, the ending is a hopeful one that makes all the characters therein happy—Mother and Charles get to live together, as they wish, and Noemi and Madeline get to live together, as they wish. Madeline also achieves her initial desire to leave the home she shares with Mother and Charles, while Charles is able to stay married to Noemi, while simultaneously choosing his mother over his wife. Michel, therefore, is another example of death transference. The death of Noemi's small dog signifies the death of the compulsory heteronormativity Noemi and Madeline have both functioned under throughout the novel. Michel's death also creates a complete shift for Madeline's feelings towards Noemi, she calls her "darling" for the first time and promises they will run away together—a far cry from the beginning of the novel, where Madeline wanted nothing to do with her brother's wife.<sup>886</sup>

To place Michel in the role of a sacrificial martyr for Noemi and Madeline's happiness, it is important to keep two things in mind. First, Michel actually *is* the "dog caught in the middle of a boulevard with traffic coming both ways" that Janet connects Pauline Maury's desperation to in *Trio*—both metaphorically and then in actuality in the end. Noemi loves Michel, dressing him up in elaborate outfits that, according to Charles, make him look like "a prostitute's lapdog."<sup>887</sup> As Charles grows to resent Noemi and the fact that she has caused a schism between himself and

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<sup>886</sup> Marchal, *The Mesh*, 187.

<sup>887</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

Mother, Charles takes his anger out on Michel. He tells Madeline, “I take out my resentment on that dog, as I did a few minutes ago; it relieves me a little. I’m not really cruel, but—would you believe it—I sometimes feel I could gladly strangle that animal!”<sup>888</sup> Once Mother returns, “The animal got all Noemi’s beatings. He had acquired the importance of a symbol in our house.”<sup>889</sup> Mother would wait for him to do something bad so she could be justified in beating him, unleashing some of her hatred for Noemi on the body of Michel. When Noemi is not home, Madeline believes that Michel “wanted to die” and that Mother began to realize “She could kill him so easily.”<sup>890</sup> When finally Mother cracks and throws Michel out the window, “He gave the yell of a beast being slaughtered.”<sup>891</sup> Through his death, Michel is able to provide a solution to the troubles of each member of Madeline’s family: Charles is able to reconcile with Mother, Mother is able to keep Charles to herself, Madeline is able to become independent, and Noemi finally finds someone who she can love.

Second, Michel can also be seen as a sacrifice to the universe to restore order.

Throughout the novel, Charles is regularly focused on money and its impact on his ability to provide for Noemi. He also complains to Madeline that losing Mother to marry Noemi was too high a price.<sup>892</sup> When Mother agrees to move back home, Charles remarks, “We’ll begin to live again!” as if the last few months with his wife were some sort of purgatory or half-life.<sup>893</sup> In order to keep Noemi, Charles had to sacrifice Mother and the life he loved with her. In order to find happiness, the family was forced to sacrifice Michel. After Michel’s death, Madeline and Noemi decide to leave the house that evening and live together, away from Charles and Mother.

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<sup>888</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>889</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>890</sup> *Ibid.*, 150, 182.

<sup>891</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>892</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-102.

<sup>893</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

It solved all their problems, as Noemi and Madeline were in love and, “Charles would enjoy life again at the cost of paying Noemi a yearly income. It was not too high a price.”<sup>894</sup> Although the conclusion did not reinforce a cisheteronormative happy ending, it did reduce the danger of Noemi and Madeline’s lesbianism by removing them from the house and it allowed the cisheteronormative characters—Mother and Charles—to find happiness.

Suicide, murder, and accidental death ran rampant in the pages of women-loving women fiction of the 1940s, and some of it was inspired by the real-life experiences of women-loving women, the suicidal ideation of the authors of women-loving women fiction, and society’s desire to destroy the encroaching homosexual threat—that which in the ensuing decade would be known as the “Lavender Menace.” Death, while final, allowed for an escape, as evidenced by Pauline Maury’s decision to commit suicide rather than face retribution for her plagiarism and her lesbianism. The reality of living as a women-loving woman was, at times, even more harrowing than swallowing a bullet or jumping out a window.

For the working-class women-loving women of Buffalo, NY, there were a variety of ways people experienced and responded to being women-loving women in the 1940s. Toni, an active member of the lesbian bar culture of the 1940s and 1950s, remembers: “Occasionally there’d be people who’d slit their wrists out in the alley. Nobody ever died and nobody ever was in intensive care, it was more just the way people behaved then. That occasionally somebody would slice their hand or break a glass with their hand and bleed, or go in the bathroom and cut their wrist and go out in the back alley and bleed.”<sup>895</sup> This type of non-suicidal self-injury is common among at least a fifth of American adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to a 2018 study

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<sup>894</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>895</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 267.

in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychology*, approximately 16% of all Americans will engage in non-suicidal self-injury in their lifetimes, and women are almost twice as likely as men to engage in this behavior.<sup>896</sup> A 2010 study in *Social Work Research* found that 22.3% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth and young adults (up to age 22) surveyed had attempted suicide in the last year and 47.2% had engaged in “intentional cutting” in the last year.<sup>897</sup> This study found, “female respondents are significantly more likely to engage in cutting behavior than male respondents.”<sup>898</sup> This aligns with Toni’s assessment: “Nobody ever died and nobody ever was in intensive care, it was more just the way people behaved then.” Perhaps the self-injury was a request for attention, or a way to relieve pain, or a distraction. Whatever the goal, non-suicidal self-injury was not suicide, and did not align with the sheer amount of suicidal behavior prevalent in women-loving women fiction of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For DJ, another women-loving woman who was part of the lesbian community of Buffalo, NY in the 1940s, women-loving women fiction appears to be accurate in its portrayal of isolation and loneliness.

See *The Well of Loneliness* can apply to every lesbian going or any gay boy or anything that’s in this life. Because the gay life in itself is a very lonely life. There’s no security, very few really get along in years of relationships, it’s a dead-end thing, it really is and I know it for fifty-three years. And you end up you have nothing. I have nothing to show for my fifty-three years of being homosexual. Outside of experiences here and experiences there, but nothing really to put my hand on and say, ‘I accomplished something,’ which I haven’t... You can go with somebody for a length of time, and then what have you go? Now this can happen in

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<sup>896</sup> D. Gillies, MA Christou, AC Dixon, OJ Featherston, I Rapti, A Garcia-Anguita, M Villasis-Keever, P Reebye, Christou, N Al Kabir, PA Christou, “Prevalence and Characteristics of Self-Harm in Adolescents: Meta-Analyses of Community-Based Studies 1990-2015,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychology*, (Oct 2018, 57.10:733-741, doi: 10.1016/j.jaac.2018.06.018).

<sup>897</sup> N. Eugene Walls, Julie Laser, Sarah J. Nickels, and Hope Wisneski. “Correlates of Cutting Behavior among Sexual Minority Youths and Young Adults,” *Social Work Research*, (34.4, 2010: 213–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42659767>), 218-219.

<sup>898</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

regular life too, in fact it's even happened in my own family. You can live with someone for a certain length of time, get divorced. But [gay life] is a different setup altogether, because you have too many obstacles to cover.<sup>899</sup>

This loneliness is reminiscent of the sense of isolation Pauline Maury, Miss Grange, and Mlle. Julie all share. However, DJ said this while sharing her experiences with the lesbian bar culture of Buffalo, NY in the 1940s—a culture in which women-loving women built lifelong friendships, spent weekends together, and reminisced about fondly throughout Kennedy and Davis' research.

Furthermore, memories from students at Vassar College show there were deep connections between students, even when family acceptance was difficult to keep. According to Nancy Dean, who graduated in 1952, “the Vassar culture was single-sexed, confident, and proud of the intellectual level at the college. It wasn't until I got into difficulty that I realized I was to some extent protected by women who were probably my sisters.”<sup>900</sup> When Nancy realized she was in love with a fellow student, she did not fear death or become suicidal. Instead, “when I realized the erotic element in my feelings for Anne, all those powerful parental rejections surfaced.”<sup>901</sup> A fellow classmate, Pat Wilber, attended Vassar the same years as Nancy and Anne. Unlike Nancy and Anne, Pat chose to come out to her roommates and friends.

One of my roommates (there were two) was so concerned I might be expelled that she suggested I visit the college psychiatrist (a famous shrink who testified at the Alger Hiss trial—Dr. Carl Binger.) I convinced her to go in my stead, as she appeared more distraught than I. When she returned from her visit we were both relieved—he had told her not to worry as my expulsion would also require the expulsion of 10% of the student body.<sup>902</sup>

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<sup>899</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 272.

<sup>900</sup> Here, “sisters” means fellow women-loving women. Anne McKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar: Lesbian & Gay Experiences 1930-1990*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 35

<sup>901</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-40. Nancy and Anne were together through their college years, before separating and marrying men.

<sup>902</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

As a junior, Pat entered a relationship with a senior Vassar student. Though the two women separated, and the girlfriend went on to marry a man, the woman named her daughter after Pat, and the two remained close friends. Furthermore, at the time of writing, Pat was celebrating 24 years with her girlfriend.<sup>903</sup>

Self-destructive behavior, suicidal ideation, and feelings of isolation and loneliness exist in both the real and fictional lives of women-loving women. In this way, the fiction of the 1940s accurately models the reality of many of the women-loving women individuals and communities it replicates. However, by ensuring tragic endings for each of the women-loving women characters—including *Two Serious Ladies*' Pacifica, who appears to be dependent on Mrs. Copperfield in a way that makes consensual love improbable—the writers of the 1940s continued to reinforce the need to destroy the lesbian threat. Dead Lesbian Syndrome remains a constant in novels of the 1940s, even those published after World War II. However, it should be noted that the one novel written after World War II—the is, *The Mesh*—does not include Dead Lesbian Syndrome, but rather employs death transference to kill off an unhuman character and ensure a happy, though possibly enmeshed, ending for Madeline and Noemi.

#### *Where is the War?*

There are five pieces of women-loving women fiction analyzed in this chapter, and not one of them mentions World War II. While *College for Scandal* and *Olivia* can perhaps be excused as they are set in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the other three works, *Two Serious Ladies*, *Trio*, and *The Mesh* all appear to take place in the 1940s, well into or right after the United States' involvement in the War. Although the War is not mentioned in any of these three novels, it is

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<sup>903</sup> Ibid., 41.

there on the peripheries: in *Two Serious Ladies*, Mr. and Mrs. Copperfield end up in Central America because travel to Europe is impossible during the War; the reader is never told why Pauline Maury left France, but perhaps it was because of the War; and Charles from *The Mesh* could not have served in the War because of his disabled leg. World War II may not have been named or recognized by these fictional characters, but it crept into the writing nevertheless, an important element of the zeitgeist of each book.

Still, it is strange that none of these women-loving women novels focus on a War which many consider a watershed moment for lesbian community in the United States.<sup>904</sup> The War had a major impact on women's ability to find likeminded friends and lovers and build community—something that seems to be severely lacking for women-loving women prior to the War, looking at both lesbian fiction and women-loving women oral and written histories from the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this chapter, alone, isolation was a major theme for fictional characters like Pauline Maury and Mlle. Julie, and for real-life women-loving women like DJ from Buffalo, NY and Nancy Dean from Vassar College. In writing about Vassar College during the war years, McKay explains: “Lesbianism, of course, was *not* a possible choice then. Any lesbian who found love during those years was very quiet about it. Most went through difficult times falling in love with friends who were either straight or could not acknowledge their feelings. Some ended up in the infirmary with illnesses or “breakdowns;” a few chose suicide.”<sup>905</sup> The permeating loneliness of the women-loving women experience of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century suggests women-loving women were hungry for community when World War II started, and the contingencies of winning the War—women working in factories, women serving in the military, and women banding together at home to keep the world turning while the men were

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<sup>904</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 118-119.

<sup>905</sup> McKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, 15.

away—allowed for women-loving women to form communities that laid the groundwork for queer liberation.

As an increasing number of novels, scientific studies, and articles about homosexuality entered mainstream American culture, the isolated individual women-loving women began to see themselves as part of a community. “Moreover, by revealing that millions of Americans exhibited a strong erotic interest in their own sex, the reports implicitly encouraged those still struggling in isolation against their sexual preference to accept their homosexual inclinations and search for sexual comrades.”<sup>906</sup> Anderson’s imagined communities play an important role in this development—women-loving women began to see themselves as part of a community of women-loving women *before* they actually moved to cities like Buffalo and found lesbian bars and groups of likeminded women or joined the military and found themselves surrounded by queer women of all sexualities who were interested in building relationships outside of the cisheteronormative requirements of America’s small towns. In many cases, these *imagined* communities were the impetus women needed to go out and search for *real* groups of women who would accept them and give them the security and stability of community.

Women-loving women built the communities they needed to escape isolation. In so doing, “individuals ended the crushing isolation of lesbian oppression and created the possibility for group consciousness and activity.”<sup>907</sup> For the women of Buffalo, NY, this culture was built in public at local lesbian bars. For many women of the 1940s, however, such opportunities were limited. The Temperance Movement and Prohibition had legally pushed women out of bars and taverns, making it almost impossible to create lesbian bars in many cities across the country.

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<sup>906</sup> John D’Emilio. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, Second Edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 37.

<sup>907</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 29.



Throughout World War II, major cities, including Chicago, banned unescorted women from bars, with the justification that this would stop the spread of venereal diseases. The bars that permitted unescorted women, and thus could be transformed into lesbian bars, were in the working class and impoverished areas, such as Buffalo and Pittsburgh, where moral licentiousness was permitted because these areas existed on the margins of society.<sup>908</sup> Pushed out to the liminal spaces already filled with society's undesirables—sex workers, People of Color, and alcoholics—women-loving women found communities where they were permitted to be themselves. Thus, Stephen Gordon from *The Well of Loneliness* appears to have been correct in her assessment: a woman could come out and openly love another woman, as long as she was willing to sacrifice her place in society for it.

For the women of Buffalo, NY, enlisting in the military was unnecessary for building community, as the lesbian bars had opened the previous decade. Some of these women expressed a fear of *losing* community if they enlisted and moved away. These women were working-class and had been working in factories, shops, and offices since their adolescence. Despite being in the middle of the Great Depression, the women interviewed in Kennedy and Davis' study did not express a fear of unemployment. The researchers concluded, "In their minds, the important effect of the war was to give more independence to all women, thereby making lesbians more like other women and less easy to identify."<sup>909</sup> However, the War existed on the periphery here as well. Many of the industries where these women worked were connected to the War effort, and with men away fighting there was less scrutiny of groups of women going out to bars without male

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<sup>908</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 31; Allan Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 113.

<sup>909</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 38-39. On joining the military: "One woman thought about it but didn't want to join alone. She couldn't get any of her friends to go with her. 'They said, "we can't leave our girlfriends.'" Others never seriously considered the armed forces. 'I didn't want to go. I was making a lot of money; having a lot of fun. I didn't want to go into something I didn't know anything about'. For most Buffalo lesbians, the armed forces has little offer."

escorts. The War, in short, made possible much of the life women-loving women created at home.

For those women who did join the military, port cities and major cities near their base camps sometimes served as safe spaces to meet other women-loving women. *Mona's* in San Francisco was a well-known lesbian bar throughout the War, and serviced many women connected to the Pacific Theater. According to Pat Bond, who served near San Francisco, the city's welcoming of women-loving women provided "a sense of being somewhere finally where everybody was gay, not just you."<sup>910</sup> World War II helped women-loving women find likeminded friends, lovers, teachers, and mentors; regardless of whether or not the woman was in uniform.

While many women-loving women across the country found community during the War, women-loving women who were in uniform soon found themselves in the middle of a witch hunt. The Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) and later the Women's Army Corps (WAC) faced conservative interrogation from the beginning. Citizenship, as it was understood in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, relied on "the privatized gender relationships between women and men in the 'home' and the particular asymmetrical relationship between the male protector and the female protectee."<sup>911</sup> In fighting against the creation of the WAAC, New York Congressman Andrew Lawrence Somers remarked: "A Women's Army to defend the United States of America! Think of the humiliation. What has become of the manhood of America, that we have to call on our women to do what has ever been the duty of men?"<sup>912</sup> Even feminist groups

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<sup>910</sup> Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps during World War II*, (New York: Columbia University, 1996), 167.

<sup>911</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>912</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

focused on women's service as a "temporary aberration" that would eventually end with women returning to their homes and kitchens.<sup>913</sup> For many Americans, women joining the military was an act of desperation, not a decision made to increase equality between genders. Women in the military were not provided dependency allotments, which would have provided for stay-at-home husbands in the way male soldiers were able to provide for their wives. This disparity helped combat the fear of an emasculated unemployed husband dependent on his defeminized soldier-wife to provide for the family.<sup>914</sup> During the War, women in the military were permitted to take on men's jobs and cash men's paychecks, but they were not permitted to take on men's roles as providers.

There were approximately 61,000 women in the US military by May 1943, 85% of which were single, separated, divorced, or widowed. Furthermore, at least 40% of the women who enlisted grew up in rural areas, far away from the burgeoning women-loving women communities of Buffalo, New York City, San Francisco, or Pittsburgh.<sup>915</sup> As women were not drafted, these 61,000 women had all made the choice to sign up. The military offered a chance to escape family life and expectations, a chance to make money for oneself without relying on a husband or father, and a chance to meet other women who shared these ideals. It was, in short, the perfect environment to embrace sapphism, experiment with other women, and accept themselves for who they were.

In the early years of the War, few homosexuals in either the United States or the United Kingdom were prohibited from service. Although the scientific and legal communities were still unsure about the origins of homosexuality, most of civilian and military society saw

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<sup>913</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>914</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>915</sup> Ibid., 73.

homosexuality as a moral shortcoming, one which could be cured with “discipline, exercise and three square meals a day.”<sup>916</sup> For those who believed homosexuality was congenital and incurable, the concept of “equality of sacrifice” meant everyone had to serve and no one should be exempt.<sup>917</sup> While homosexuality was not permitted in the U.S. military, early WAAC and WAC manuals encouraged officers to avoid “‘witchhunting or speculating,’ to ignore ‘hearsay,’ and to approach the problem with an ‘attitude of fairness and tolerance.’”<sup>918</sup> In fact, an early pamphlet from the War Department tried to minimize the danger of lesbians, claiming “‘They are exactly as you and I, except that they participate in sexual gratification with members of their own sex.’”<sup>919</sup> For openly homosexual servicewoman, like Rita Laporte, the illegality of their sexuality posed little threat to their service. D’Emilio explains: “The army needed women in its ranks. It could not afford the loss of personnel or the scandal that would result from stringent enforcement of its own regulations.”<sup>920</sup> For the WAC, bad press could be damning. If word got out that lesbians made up a sizable contingent of servicewomen, the reputation of the whole Corps would be under attack and staffing the increasing needs of the WAC—and the US military overall—would be an impossible task. For the first year of the WAAC/WAC programs, the military assumed a policy similar to the Clinton-Era “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” initiative, preserving the reputations of both the individual women-loving servicewomen and the WAC as a whole.

However, by September 1943, WAC Director Oveta Culp Hobby and Dr. Margaret D. Craighill were able to convince the rest of the Administration that screening for homosexuality

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<sup>916</sup> E. Vickers, “Same-sex desire in the British Armed Forces, 1939-1945,” in *Homosexuel-le-s en Europe pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, R. Schlagdenhauffen, (ed.), 205-225, (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, September 3, 2021, <http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/6826/>) 206.

<sup>917</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>918</sup> War Department, *Sex Hygiene Course*, pp. 24-28 quoted in D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 28.

<sup>919</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>920</sup> D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 28.

and rooting it out of the WAC was necessary. Although heterosexist policies were now encoded in WAC policy, on-the-ground recruiters and examiners often bypassed these rules in order to fill ever-growing quotas.<sup>921</sup> The following year, the Administration published the “WAC Recruiting Stations Neuropsychiatric Examination” pamphlet, which warned examiners to “‘be on guard against the homosexual who may see in the WAC an opportunity to indulge in her sexual perversity...and cause no end of difficulty.’”<sup>922</sup> From 1944 onward, lesbianism was viewed as a contagion which had to be kept out of the WAC through psychological evaluation prior to enlistment and vigilant removal of the women-loving women who sneaked through the exam process. Despite this, the U.S. military was not clear on what made a lesbian undesirable for service. In 1948, psychiatrist William Menniger published *Psychiatry in a Troubled World*, for which he interviewed military personnel. “‘We cannot go so far out on a limb,’ confided an Army psychiatrist to another medical officer in 1944, ‘as to say that, generally speaking, homosexuals have no place in the Army.’ Some of the ‘most efficient and admirable women’ in the Women’s Army Corps, added Brig. Gen. William Menninger after the war, were lesbian.”<sup>923</sup>

In the United Kingdom, women could not be prosecuted for homosexuality, as men in the military were prosecuted under civilian laws that prohibited homosexuality, and such laws did not exist for women.<sup>924</sup> While the WAC in the United States was focused on preserving their reputation, the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) in the United Kingdom was more focused on efficiency. “Violet Trefusis-Forbes, the Director of the service, believed that only lesbians who were disrupting their own work and that of other servicewomen should be dealt with.”<sup>925</sup>

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<sup>921</sup> Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 157; Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 31.

<sup>922</sup> Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 158.

<sup>923</sup> William Menninger, *Psychiatry in a Troubled World*, (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 106. Quoted in Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 34.

<sup>924</sup> Vickers, “Same Sex Desire in the British Armed Forces,” 215.

<sup>925</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

Homosexual relationships were diminished as “schoolgirl crushes” and women were only disciplined or removed from service if they did not fit in with the rest of their troop. In the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), another women’s branch of the UK military, Letitia Fairfield, a senior medical officer, did not recommend removal at all. Instead, women who could not be distracted from their lovers should be reassigned to another location. Furthermore, Fairfield insisted that working class women regularly shared their beds with other women at home, and such practices should not be considered indicative of homosexual behavior—even when there were enough bunks to go around.<sup>926</sup>

As the War ended, the witch hunts against lesbianism increased. No longer worried about recruiting women to the WAC, the Administration did not sidestep investigations and court-martials to hide the number of lesbians in the US military. As the need for efficiency waned, so too did the leniency lesbians enjoyed in the UK military. Originally seen as a temporary aberration to the normal course of women’s lives, the WAC now offered an alternative to marriage, children, and homemaking. This clashed with the conservative ethics of the late 1940s and early 1950s, so much so that even though women only made up 1% of the postwar US military, they faced disproportionate heterosexist attacks.<sup>927</sup> Margot Canaday explains, “‘Unfortunately,’ two military psychiatrists concluded, it was the ‘masculinized female’ who found ‘a home in the army’ and ‘stay[ed] on for a career.’ The military’s growing brutality toward women it perceived to be lesbians, then, was a manifestation of the ambivalence of its leadership toward the women who would make a permanent home in the military after the

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<sup>926</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>927</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 175.

war.”<sup>928</sup> These women functioned in direct opposition to what U.S. culture expected of women: they were independent when society wanted dependency; they were the protectors in uniforms when society wanted them to play the damsel in distress; and they were unmarried and barren when society wanted them to be married and pregnant. Even those who were not lesbians posed a threat to cisheteronormative existence. They were dangerous and needed to be removed and returned to their rightful place in society—that is, as wives and mothers.

Investigations in women’s social lives became invasive. “Military authorities seemed to take pornographic pleasure in such work.”<sup>929</sup> The male agents sent to investigate took notes on lesbian weddings, including what brides and guests were wearing. They made note of friendship networks and daily routines. As one ex-servicewoman remarked, ““They knew every damn move I made.””<sup>930</sup> The women lost all sense of privacy, had their names and occupations exposed in local and national newspapers, and found it hard to gain employment after being discharged from the military or fired from the federal government. Canaday’s research shows that some of these women, unable to provide for themselves and stripped of their sense of self, committed suicide.<sup>931</sup> Looking at the attention to detail provided in both investigators’ notes and victims’ confessions, Canaday asks:

*Is this a criminal investigation or a pulp novel? Did the authorities need to know that it was raining, that the rain made the women think of the song ‘Pennies from Heaven,’ that they got ‘dreamy eyed’? The excess of detail was a way for the writer to construct a mood, to remember an affair, perhaps to make it something good rather than shameful. Yet to say that some women sometimes found their own purposes in drafting their confessions is not to deny the presence of the state in the manufacturing of such*

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<sup>928</sup> Canaday, *The Straight State*, 208; MD Hogan and RE Anderson to CG, Third Army, ‘Fort McClellan, Mental Hygiene Consultations Service Report,’ September 14, 1956, box 64, background papers, Women’s Army Corps 1945-1978, Records of the Army Chief of Staff, RG 319, quoted in *The Straight State*, 208. (Emphasis added)

<sup>929</sup> Canaday, *The Straight State*, 192.

<sup>930</sup> Ibid, 196; Interview with Loretta ‘Ret’ Collier, in Mary Ann Humphrey, *My Country, My Right to Serve: Experiences of Gay Men and Women in the Military, World War II to the Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 13.

<sup>931</sup> Ibid., 198.

statements.<sup>932</sup> [Emphasis Added]

Real life lesbianism thus became entertainment for the male gaze, as men pornified the daily lives of women-loving women. This fascination, coupled with a growing interest in lesbian fiction, is part of the reason the ensuing decades were the “Golden Age of Lesbian Pulp.” The other major ingredient to produce this Golden Age was the newfound popularity of paperback novels after World War II, risqué books that sold at 25 cents each and covered taboo subjects including homosexuality, adultery, and murder. “Before the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the explosion of soft- and hard-core pornographic magazines that came in its wake, paperback books were pretty much the only game in town when it came to explicit portrayals of sexuality in the mass media.”<sup>933</sup> In fact, it was a novel about women-loving servicewomen that started the “golden age of lesbian paperback originals,” as Tereska Torres’s *Women’s Barracks* (1950) was the first of many lesbian paperbacks published by Fawcett and other publishers willing to risk censorship throughout the next two decades.<sup>934</sup> Soon after, books like *The Well of Loneliness* (Perma Books, 1951), *Queer Patterns* (Avon, 1952), and *We Too are Drifting* (Berkley Books, 1955) found new life as paperback novels sold in drugstores and newsstands.<sup>935</sup>

The War, in short, played a major role in the production of women-loving women fiction, both those novels produced during the War and afterwards. Jane Bowles’ life experiences in the late 1930s and early 1940s illustrate the impact of the War on a women-loving woman writer and her women-loving women novel, *Two Serious Ladies*. In the spring of 1939, Bowles’ dear friend, Miriam Levy, arrived in New York, where Miriam visited with Bowles. Both Levy and her husband were deeply involved in trying to bring Jewish refugees from Europe to the United

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<sup>932</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>933</sup> Susan Stryker, *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001), 8.

<sup>934</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>935</sup> Ibid., 50-53.



States. Levy later recounted her discussion about the refugee crisis with Bowles to biographer Millicent Dillon:

‘When I spoke to her about the refugee problem, she sat there with a half-surprised look on her face—it’s a look many nearsighted people have—and I remember her chin was cupped in her hand. I spoke very seriously because it was of great importance to me, but I had the feeling the whole thing didn’t exist for Jane—either the war that was coming or the thing with the Jews. In her response to me there was a sense that she had no interest in Jewish things, as if being a Jew was only an accident of her birth.’<sup>936</sup>

Bowles’ apparent disinterest did not prevent her from experiencing the War. Her husband, Paul Bowles, joined the Communist Party at the start of the War, which would eventually result in both Paul and Jane living in Morocco throughout the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>937</sup> Though she feigned disinterest to Miriam Levy, Paul Bowles remembered his wife would often say, “she had no right to live while others were dying.”<sup>938</sup> Most importantly for the production of her book, however, was the fact that the Bowles had to leave Paris in the mid-1930s, as Jewish Americans afraid of the antisemitism of neighboring Germany, and could not travel to Europe at all during the War. Instead, they spent months at a time in Central America, visiting Texaco, Mexico City, and other locales which influenced Bowles’ writing.<sup>939</sup> In the end, women-loving women novels of the 1940s could not escape the influence of World War II, even if the war was never mentioned in their pages.

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<sup>936</sup> Dillon, *A Little Original Sin*, 73-74.

<sup>937</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>938</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>939</sup> According to Dillon, “She found Taxco much more to her liking. It is a hill town, not far from Mexico City, known for its silver workshops. Americans who at another time would have gone to Europe, but couldn’t because of the war, had discovered it.” (*Ibid.*, 88)

*Censorship of the Lesbian in Literature and Life*

World War II offered women-loving women unprecedented freedom to live independently of men, earn their own income, and create community with other likeminded women. When the War ended in 1945 and women began to muster out or lose war-industry jobs, the country worked hard to return women to their “rightful” place as wives, mothers, and homemakers. In 1948, psychiatrist William C. Menninger published an article entitled “How’s Your Family?” in *Parents Magazine*, where he wrote, “Much of the world's sickness is due to home sickness...To insure the social well-being of this nation and the mental health of its individual citizens, we've got to re-evaluate family life and understand its influences.”<sup>940</sup> Single women choosing not to marry, married women choosing to divorce, and widowed women choosing not to remarry made many people fear the dissolution of the nuclear family, a keystone of America’s capitalist society.<sup>941</sup> During the War, women who claimed too much independence and fiction which eternalized the independence of wartime were both seen as detrimental to the American way of life. Women’s involvement in the War was, according to white feminists at the time, a “temporary aberration,” which would end the moment peace was achieved, allowing women to return to their rightful place as wife and mother.<sup>942</sup> As society looked towards returning women to domesticity, the independent women-loving woman became a specter of Wartime that would not go away. In response, federal, state, and local governments responded with laws and censorship measures to rid society of these undomesticated, independent women.

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<sup>940</sup> Jane F. Levey, “Imagining the Family in U.S. Postwar Popular Culture: The Case of *The Egg and I* and *Cheaper by the Dozen*,” *Journal of Women's History* (13.2, 2001: 125-150, doi:10.1353/jowh.2001.0069), 125.

<sup>941</sup> For more about divorce rates and single women in the postwar years, Katherine L. Caldwell, “Not Ozzie and Harriet: Postwar Divorce and the American Liberal Welfare State,” in *Law & Social Inquiry*, (23.1, Winter 1998, 1-53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/828761>).

<sup>942</sup> Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 179-180.

One of the first laws passed against homosexuals that included women was a 1941 state law in California which allowed for the “asexualization,” or sterilization, of all homosexuals convicted of a crime.<sup>943</sup> In 1942, 43 women were arrested for “lewdness” in St. Louis, MO—the highest number up to that point.<sup>944</sup> In Philadelphia’s first year with a morals squad, 60% of the arrests made were of queer people, and the following year morals squad members were arresting an average of 200 queer people each month.<sup>945</sup> As the federal government continued its witch hunts of queer people in both the US military and in government jobs, the fear of being discovered as a “homosexual” made women-loving women susceptible to blackmail. This created a “self-fulfilling prophecy whereby homosexuals were persecuted, in part, because they were untrustworthy and susceptible to blackmail, traits made possible because of their illegal status.”<sup>946</sup>

While grifters, sex workers, and other mostly working-class people found themselves booked for lewdness and locked up for homosexuality, the federal government targeted middle-class queer people when it made homosexuality a fireable offense for both military personnel and members of the government. In February 1950, Deputy Undersecretary of State for the Eisenhower Administration, John Peurifoy, had to testify before the U.S. Senate that 91 of the people fired from the government for “moral turpitude” were classified as homosexuals.<sup>947</sup> Between 1947 and 1950, “1,700 job seekers were denied employment because of homosexuality...[and] During the late 1940s discharges for homosexuality had averaged slightly more than 1,000 per year.”<sup>948</sup> While it is important to note that only two of these 91 individuals

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<sup>943</sup> William N. Eskridge, *Gaylaw: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 62.

<sup>944</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>945</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>946</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>947</sup> D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 41.

<sup>948</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

were women, it is also important to recognize that women almost never faced legal consequences for homosexuality in the past. In fact, when Kinsey investigated the history of women's homosexuality, he was unable to find even a single instance of conviction for female homosexuality from 1696 to 1912.<sup>949</sup> As the number of homosexuals fired or arrested increased—and the names and locations of these homosexuals made the news and cost people jobs and livelihoods—queer people were forced even further into the margins. However, they were also forced into the margins *together* and so in trying to eradicate the “threat” of lesbianism, American society effectively enabled the growth of women-loving women communities throughout the postwar era.

As the working and middle classes began to fall victim to heterosexist policies at work and when socializing, people in one of the highest echelons of American society also felt the pressure to conform to the cisheteronormative narrative. Hollywood stars entered into lavender marriages, where one or both of the spouses is not heterosexual, and the marriage is used to protect their reputation(s). While lavender marriages were more commonly used to protect male stars from emasculation in the press, some women-loving women, like Barbara Stanwyck, found these marriages were beneficial for their own careers. By pushing women-loving women into cisheteronormative marriages, Hollywood was able to reduce the threat of lesbian and bisexual role models, who may have inspired young women across the country to engage in homosexual behavior. Other women-loving women stars, such as Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, took

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<sup>949</sup> Canaday, *The Straight State*, 174-175.

great care to maintain very private lives away from the press, though even they fell victim to rumors.<sup>950</sup>

Barbara Stanwyck was born to working-class Irish American parents in Brooklyn, NY. After being orphaned at the age of three, she became a “Ziegfeld girl,” one of the dancers in Florenz Ziegfeld Jr.’s popular Broadway show, *Ziegfeld’s Follies*, at only fifteen years old. After finding success on Broadway, she moved west and made it big in Hollywood. While in public and on screen she played romantic and comedic leading ladies, her true self was kept out of the public eye. According to Axel Madsen, renowned Hollywood biographer, “Her thirty-year friendship with her publicist, Helen Ferguson, was framed within the bounds of a working relationship that no one could question.”<sup>951</sup> She refused to answer questions about her sexuality—from either friends or the press—and she maintained a public courtship with known homosexual actor Robert Taylor that eventually resulted in a lavender marriage in 1939.<sup>952</sup> Desperate to prove his manliness, Taylor enlisted in World War II almost immediately after the U.S. entered the War. Through Taylor’s service, and Stanwyck’s already conservative ethics, the married couple became leading generals of the fight to return morality to Hollywood.

While Taylor prepared for the War, Stanwyck became a major fundraiser and supporter of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, which Madsen describes as “a virulently right-wing organization that was as much a backlash against the guilds that had unionized Hollywood as a reaction to the robust leftism of intellectuals and artists of the New Deal.”<sup>953</sup> Taylor took his dedication to McCarthyism a step further in 1947, when he became the

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<sup>950</sup> For more on Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, see Axel Madsen, *The Sewing Circle: Hollywood’s Greatest Secret: Female Stars Who Loved Other Women*, Los Angeles: Open Road Distribution, 2015 and Boze Hadleigh, *Hollywood Lesbians: From Garbo to Foster*, New York: Riverdale Avenue Books LLC, 2016.

<sup>951</sup> Axel Madsen, *The Sewing Circle: Hollywood’s Greatest Secret: Female Stars Who Loved Other Women*, (Los Angeles: Open Road Distribution, 2015), 105.

<sup>952</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-108.

<sup>953</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

only actor to expose homosexuals and communists (i.e. “name names”) in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee.<sup>954</sup> Due to Taylor’s testimony and research done by the FBI, Salka Viertel, the screenwriter on many of Greta Garbo’s plays, was placed on a list of communist sympathizers and was forced out of her job at MGM by 1951. Viertel was denied a passport to visit her dying husband in Europe in 1953, but eventually left the United States and found refuge in Switzerland. In the wake of Taylor’s testimony and the blacklisting of the “Hollywood Ten,” many other women-loving women followed Viertel’s path. “[Mercedes] de Acosta, [Greta] Garbo, and other old loves visited. [Viertel’s] friend Eleanora von Mendelssohn committed suicide in New York. Dorothy Arzner became a recluse.”<sup>955</sup>

In an interview with journalist Boze Hadleigh in 1978, Dorothy Arzner addressed the formulaic nature of films in the 1930s and 1940s—right after the implementation of the Hays Code and how it was strengthened during it the Great Depression and war years by a growing anticommunist sentiment among the American populace. According to Arzner, the Hays Code forced women “to do.” Unable to show women as mistresses, girlfriends, or sex workers, writers were forced to give women jobs, interests, and personalities beyond their bust size. While this was momentarily empowering, each of the movies had to end the same way, a fadeout implying a cisheteronormative ending: “At fadeout there had to be a man and woman, newly joined or about to be, with a future full of traditional gender roles.”<sup>956</sup> Later in the conversation, Arzner brought up another point: independent women were always dangerous in these films. She explained to Hadleigh, “Also, notice that any woman on her own is threatening or even villainous. If she is a villain she must be extirpated.” When Hadleigh asked for an explanation of

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<sup>954</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>955</sup> Ibid., 197-198; Boze Hadleigh, *Hollywood Lesbians: From Garbo to Foster*, (New York: Riverdale Avenue Books LLC, 2016), 94. For more on Salka Viertel’s life, see Donna Rifkind, *The Sun and Her Stars: Salka Viertel and Hitler’s Exiles in the Golden Age of Hollywood*, New York: Penguin, 2020.

<sup>956</sup> Hadleigh, *Hollywood Lesbians*, 100.

the word *extirpated*, Arzner clarified with “Destroyed.”<sup>957</sup> While this conversation was not a clear or objective declaration of the existence of Dead Lesbian Syndrome (or at least, Dead Gender-Nonconforming Woman Syndrome), it did allow one of the foremost women creatives of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to articulate the restrictions and demands placed upon writers and directors to create palatable, cisheteronormative, and marriageable fictional women characters.

In an interview with Barbara Stanwyck in 1987, Hadleigh told her, “A tragically disproportionate number of gay and lesbian teenagers kill themselves partly because they have no role models.”<sup>958</sup> Was this an attempt to force Stanwyck to admit her own fault and take responsibility for the disappearance of strong, independent women from the silver screen in the late 1940s? Perhaps. However, the earlier conversation with Arzner confirms that Stanwyck would not have been permitted to play a women-loving woman on screen in the 1930s or 1940s, regardless of any personal views on morality. It was not her heterosexist public image nor her desire to hide her women-loving inclinations that made Stanwyck stand out from other women-loving women in Hollywood in the 1940s. Instead, what set her apart was her decision to join the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals and support her homosexual husband as he implicated other members of the Hollywood elite in communist, fascist, and “anti-American” behavior.

It should be noted that the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals did not include explicitly heterosexist or misogynist language. Instead, the crux of their creed was, “Motion pictures are inescapably one of the world's greatest forces for influencing public thought and opinion, both at home and abroad. In this fact lies solemn obligation. We refuse to permit the effort of Communist, Fascist, and other totalitarian-minded groups to pervert

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<sup>957</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>958</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

this powerful medium into an instrument for the dissemination of un-American ideas and beliefs.”<sup>959</sup> This organization, which was instrumental in enforcing the Hays Code throughout the 1940s and 1950s, included such famous individuals as Walt Disney and Sam Wood. According to *The New Republic*, which published an article decrying the organization soon after it published its Statement of Principles in 1944, the members of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (the Alliance) joined to distance themselves from the other creators in Hollywood, who were under suspicion from Congress. *The New Republic* surmises, “In their Statement they declared their belief in the American way of life, exclusive of all other forms.”<sup>960</sup> Comparing the Motion Picture Alliance and another group formed in Hollywood at this time—the more internationally-focused Free World Association of Hollywood (the Association), *The New Republic* explained, “Both organizations decry communism and fascism, but the Alliance dearly regards this opposition as a weapon, and the Free World Association as a shield.”<sup>961</sup> The Alliance wanted to force “American ideals,” as they understood these ideals to be, onto the American public and international audiences, whereas the Association wanted to work towards, “an end to American isolationism and to that species of false ‘nationalism’ which history shows has always been used to overthrow democracy.”<sup>962</sup> While the Alliance hoped to rid Hollywood of the suspected “Communists, radicals, and crackpots,” on surveillance lists in Congress, the Association wanted to continue to create films for American and international audiences that supported democratic ideals without infringing on the rights of others.

The Alliance’s work to find and disempower “Communists, radicals, and crackpots” in Hollywood forced “radicals” like foreign-born Viertel, left-leaning Lillian Hellman, and women-

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<sup>959</sup> The Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, “Statement of Principles,” The Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers, 2005, Accessed December 31, 2021, [https://www.cobbles.com/simpp\\_archive/huac\\_alliance.htm](https://www.cobbles.com/simpp_archive/huac_alliance.htm)

<sup>960</sup> Cinematicus, “Politics in Hollywood,” *The New Republic*, (110.26, June 26, 1944: 847–48), 847.

<sup>961</sup> *Ibid.*, 848.

<sup>962</sup> *Ibid.*, 847.



loving woman Greta Garbo through greater scrutiny. Viertel and Garbo faded from the spotlight, while Hellman was forced to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1952. Unwilling to incriminate any of her fellow Hollywood creatives, Hellman wrote a letter to Congress in May 1952, promising to answer any questions they had about her *own* activities, as long as she was not questioned about the activities of *others*. Congress refused these terms, and Hellman invoked her fifth amendment right during her hearing. In the letter, Hellman explained, “I am not willing, now or in the future, to bring bad trouble to people who, in my past association with them, were completely innocent of any talk or any action that was disloyal or subversive.” Furthermore, she wrote, “I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year’s fashions.”<sup>963</sup> Although homosexuality was not explicitly listed as a symptom of being a communist sympathizer, as the “Lavender Menace” increasingly convinced the public of connections between homosexuality and communism, creatives like Hellman recognized they could incriminate their friends and coworkers as traitors to the country based solely on who these people slept with or, even more so, were friends with.<sup>964</sup> For women-loving women creatives, the anti-Communist, anti-Fascist, anti-radical zeitgeist of the postwar country forced them deeper into the closet, lest their attraction to other women be cause for the world to label them “communists” and blacklist them for life.

Another powerful force behind the censorship of independent women and women-loving women was the growing strength of the Catholic Church. From the mid-1930s to the early-1960s, the Catholic Church was successful in its efforts to end abortion services, install the first

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<sup>963</sup> ““I Cannot and Will Not Cut My Conscience to Fit This Year’s Fashions”: Lillian Hellman Refuses to Name Names,” *History Matters*, George Mason University, 2021, Accessed December 31, 2021, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6454>.

<sup>964</sup> For more information about the connections between homosexuality and McCarthyism, see David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Catholic President of the United States, and censor books and magazines that did not foster Catholic morals.<sup>965</sup> Catholic censorship of independent women came to the forefront of American conversations early in the 1940s, when the Catholic Central Verein of America and the National Catholic Women's Union labelled the WAAC/WAC and women in war industries as “a serious menace to the home and foundation of a true Christian and democratic country.”<sup>966</sup> The Catholic *Brooklyn Tablet* called the WAC/WAAC “no more than an opening wedge, intended to break down the traditional American and Christian opposition to removing women from the home and to degrade her by bringing back the pagan female goddess of desexed, lustful sterility.”<sup>967</sup> With this view of servicewomen painting the Catholic view of World War II, it follows that the Catholic Church would be at the vanguard of returning women to domesticity after the War’s end. One of the tools the Catholic Church utilized to ensure the return to status quo was the National Organization for Decent Literature, founded in 1938 as a subsidiary of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States.<sup>968</sup>

The National Organization for Decent Literature (NODL) included homosexuality on its list of forbidden topics and used pressure on Catholics at every level of government—and politicians who needed the Catholic vote—to enforce the de facto censorship of this topic, in lieu of legal recourse. Local members of the NODL also used door-to-door methods to convince shop

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<sup>965</sup> Una M. Cadegan explores the power of the Catholic church to censor books and influence American culture in *All Good Books Are Catholic Books: Print Culture, Censorship, and Modernity in Twentieth-Century America*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Anne Klejment, “‘Catholic Digest’ and the Catholic Revival, 1936-1945,” *US Catholic Historian*, (21.3, Summer 2003, 89-110) looks at the impact of the Catholic Church on American culture in during the Great Depression and World War II. Also see Gregory D. Black, *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies, 1940-1975*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored. Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Frank Walsh, *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>966</sup> “Religion: Catholics v. WAACs,” *Time Magazine*, Monday, June 15, 1942, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,795847,00.html>

<sup>967</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>968</sup> Thomas F. O’Connor, “The National Organization for Decent Literature: A Phase in American Catholic Censorship,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, (65.4, October 1995, 386-414, <https://doi.org/10.1086/602821>), 386.

owners not to sell books forbidden by the NODL.<sup>969</sup> According to D’Emilio, “[t]o avoid trouble, publishers and newspaper editors engaged in a form of self-censorship that kept homosexuality virtually out of print.”<sup>970</sup> One of the reasons for the development of the NODL was the decision of U.S. courts to permit the publication of *Ulysses* by James Joyce in 1933-1934, and the continued march towards a general end to legal print censorship throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Catholics utilized a 1917 code of canon law which gave Catholic authorities (i.e. the pope, cardinals, and bishops) “the power to prohibit books or other works after their publication. Prohibited books could not be sold, lent, read, or kept by Catholics without the permission of ecclesiastical authorities.”<sup>971</sup> This empowered Catholic bishops and priests to dictate the books their congregants were permitted to read—and threaten damnation or excommunication for those who would not comply. The NODL’s code, created in 1939, banned literature which: “(1) glorifies crime or the criminal; (2) is predominantly 'sexy'; (3) features illicit love; (4) carries illustrations indecent or suggestive; and (5) carries disreputable advertising.”<sup>972</sup> While this list does not explicitly include “homosexual love,” this theme falls under “illicit love” and *The Well of Loneliness* was one of the first books prohibited by the NODL.<sup>973</sup>

The NODL was formed in the winter of 1938, after discussions led by Bishop John F. Noll of Fort Wayne, Indiana inspired Catholics across the country to combat “dangerous” literature. The NODL believed Catholic censorship was needed to fill the void created by “the general decline in moral standards, the commercialization of sex, and the increasing leniency of the courts toward obscene literature.”<sup>974</sup> Furthermore, Noll followed in J. Edgar Hoover’s

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<sup>969</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>970</sup> D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 19.

<sup>971</sup> O’Connor, “The National Organization for Decent Literature,” 389.

<sup>972</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>973</sup> Ibid., 401.

<sup>974</sup> Ibid., 390.

footsteps, claiming connections between lewd literature and juvenile crime, taboo topics and communism, and licentious magazines and unemployment.<sup>975</sup> Noll also followed the ideology of past censors by focusing his efforts primarily on the working class—the NODL did not target libraries because they held predominantly hardcover books, which Noll considered outside of the organization’s purview.<sup>976</sup>

The American Library Association (ALA), although not directly targeted by the NODL, fought back against the onslaught of censorship from the NODL and likeminded regional organizations with the Library Bill of Rights, first approved in 1939, which allowed librarians to choose an unbiased and balanced collection of books for their libraries. In 1940, librarians established the Intellectual Freedom Committee, which focused on keeping ALA members informed of censorship issues across the country and ways to oppose censorship by “volunteer arbiters of morals or political opinion or by organizations that would establish a coercive concept of Americanism,” a sentiment included in the revised 1948 version of the Library Bill of Rights.<sup>977</sup> The ALA’s stance on censorship may help explain how so many women-loving women of the 1930s and 1940s were able to access *The Well of Loneliness* and other lesbian fiction during a time when morality, McCarthyism, and the Monsignors of their local Catholic church were actively trying to keep such books out of public circulation.

The culmination of these three forms of censorship—federal, Hollywood, and religious—directly impacted two of the pieces of lesbian fiction discussed in this chapter: *Trio* by Dorothy Baker and *Olivia* by Dorothy Strachey. In the 1943 *New York Times* review of *Trio*, Maxwell

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<sup>975</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>976</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>977</sup> Ibid., 401-402.

Geismar determined Baker's book was one in which "a rather difficult theme is treated honestly."<sup>978</sup> However, the honesty of the novel was not enough to give the theatrical version of the story a clear path to Broadway. A few months after the book was published, Lee Sabinson commissioned a play based on the novel, to be written by Baker and her husband, Howard.<sup>979</sup> The following August, the play appeared to be on track, as the Columbia Theater Enterprises' first order of business was financing this play's performance on Broadway. A director and scenic designer were already selected by August 1944, though the top choice for Janet, Judith Anderson, was "acting for the troops."<sup>980</sup> Although everything appeared to be going smoothly in August, by November the issue of censorship had arisen. After a few weeks of previewing and workshopping the *Trio* play in Philadelphia, Sabinson was prepared to premiere the Broadway production when he found out the proposed venue was unwilling to stage performances of a play involving women-loving women themes. According to journalist Lewis Nichols, *Trio* was meant to open at the Cort Theater in November 1944. "After the Philadelphia opening, however, Lee Shubert, who operates the Cort, felt that he did not wish to take a chance on the play's subject-matter, because of the so-called "padlock clause" of the Wales Law. This stipulates that not only the producers and the players but also the owners of lessees of the house may be found guilty of misdemeanor over dramas or plays dealing with degeneracy."<sup>981</sup>

The Wales Padlock Law mentioned here was passed in 1927 as a result of *The Captive* and other sexual plays released in the mid-1920s, coupled with increased pressure from the public and legislators like District Attorneys Joab H. Banton of New York and Charles H. Dodd

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<sup>978</sup> Geismar, "Academic Pastiche: *Trio*," 1.

<sup>979</sup> Sam Zolotow, "Opening on Dec. 2 of 'Carmen Jones': Billy Rose Musical Booked for Broadway—Three Plays Dropped by USO," *New York Times*, (November 23, 1943, 28), 28.

<sup>980</sup> "Gossip of the Rialto," *New York Times*, (August 20, 1943, DRAMA 1), 1.

<sup>981</sup> Lewis Nichols, "The Case of 'Trio': Censorship Still is Possible for Broadway under the Wales Law," *New York Times*, (November 19, 1944, DRAMA 1), 1.

of Brooklyn and Senator B. Roger Wales—for whom the law was named. This law ignored the rulings of the 1920s which required novels to be judged holistically. Instead, “any part or line of a play may be considered to determine whether the show is indecent,” and everyone connected to the play was held responsible. The result of breaking the Wales Padlock Law was the “padlocking” of the theater which hosted the production for a full year. In 1928, this meant a loss of approximately \$58,000 for the theater owner—almost \$1 million in today’s money, not including the increase in demand for Broadway plays.<sup>982</sup> “Hence, the theater owner respects the padlock law.”<sup>983</sup>

Except, the Wales Padlock Law was not implemented to stop the production of *The Children’s Hour*, which premiered on Broadway in 1934. In fact, this article on *Trio* in November 1943 is the first time the *New York Times* reported the Wales Padlock Law being used against a production since the 1920s. The title of the news article about *Trio* is “The Case of ‘Trio’: Censorship Still is Possible for Broadway under the Wales Law,” implying the community had either forgotten about the Wales Law or believed the law was no longer in effect. Journalist Lewis Nichols does reference *The Children’s Hour* in his reporting: “All the principals in the case, as well as a good many voluble outsiders, have agreed that “Trio” was not written nor produced to earn a few dollars simply as a sensation. It is agreed that it comes outside the theory of the ‘padlock clause’ in the same ‘The Children’s Hour’ came outside it.”<sup>984</sup> Nichols goes on to report that theatergoers who made the trip to Philadelphia to see *Trio* prior to its arrival in New York believed the play to be “a serious and an honest work.”<sup>985</sup>

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<sup>982</sup> CPI Inflation Calculator, Accessed December 31, 2021, <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1928?amount=58000>

<sup>983</sup> “New Kind of Censorship puts Padlock on a Theater: New York’s Producers and Owners Consider their First Encounter with the Wales Law,” *New York Times*, (March 11, 1928, 123), 123.

<sup>984</sup> Nichols, “The Case of ‘Trio,’ 1.

<sup>985</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

Finally, in late December, almost a month after its scheduled premiere, *Trio* debuted on Broadway. Now able to watch the play, Nichols concluded, “‘Trio’ is not a censorable play. It is honest and it treats its subject with dignity and restraint. The faults lie quite aside from this.”<sup>986</sup> He thought the play to have a thin plot with underdeveloped characters. He explains, “Because of the attention ‘Trio’s’ booking troubles earned it, Mr. Sabinson was afraid sensation seekers might seek out the play. They will find nothing there to amuse them. ‘Trio’ is straight-forward and unsensational; it just isn’t a very good play.”<sup>987</sup> In this way, Nichols’ defense of *Trio* and the Bakers is similar to the defense provided by Hogarth Press and the Bloomsbury Group when they defended *The Well of Loneliness*, despite the fact that Leonard Woolf found the novel “a failure” and a “ragbag.”<sup>988</sup> They did not care that the book (or in *Trio’s* case, the play) was horrible—they were defending the right of the writers to produce a piece of work about women-loving women, regardless of quality, and submit it to the public to consume.

Hogarth Press reentered the conversation about women-loving women literature in 1949, when they published *Olivia* by Dorothy Strachey. Originally written in 1934, this novel was subjected to one of the most effective and insidious forms of censorship: self-censorship. After writing the manuscript, Strachey kept it in a drawer for the next fifteen years. When Strachey showed the manuscript to a friend in 1948, Rosamond Lehmann informed her, “It is a work of literature, she said, far too good to lose. It must be published.”<sup>989</sup> With this encouragement, Strachey put aside her own doubts about the novel and finally permitted it to be published. After it was finally published in 1949, “The novel was an instant success, both in England and across

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<sup>986</sup> Lewis Nichols, “‘The Play’: ‘Trio,’ from the Novel by Dorothy Baker, Finally Opens on Broadway, at the Belasco,” *New York Times*, (December 30, 1944, 14), 14.

<sup>987</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>988</sup> Leonard Woolf, “*Nation & Athenaeum*, August 4, 1928,” in Doan and Passer, *Palatable Poison*, 53-54

<sup>989</sup> “Dorothy Bussey to André Gide, February 23, 1948,” in Richard Tedeschi, “The André Gide -Dorothy Bussy Letters: A Selection.” *Salmagundi*, (46, Fall 1979, 127-165), 162.

the Atlantic in America, where it was published the same year. In 1951, it was released as a French film.”<sup>990</sup>

According to women-loving women who grew up in the 1940s, accepting one’s desire for another woman was “so unacceptable and frightening that most women could not move from attraction to a real lesbian love.”<sup>991</sup> One woman who would have been a teenager the year Strachey wrote *Olivia* explains, “I felt passionately toward one of my classmates, but I was prettified someone would find out, and wound up in the infirmary every once in a while at the edge of some kind of breakdown.”<sup>992</sup> At the same time, women-loving women readers who were able to find books describing lesbian love found connection through these novels. One anonymous Vassar student who graduated in 1948 recalls finding Djuna Barnes’ 1935 novel *Nightwood* at the college’s co-op. She recalled: “What a beautifully written, sad, tormented book. But it said that women did love each other, and I think this was my first step to saying, yes, I am different. I really do love women. It took three more years to come to the final moment of understanding and acceptance.”<sup>993</sup> By writing a book on unrequited lesbian love at a school for girls, Dorothy Strachey was able to give voice to the feelings many teenage girls and young women were feeling in 1949. By publishing it, Leonard Woolf continued Hogarth Press’ dedication to supporting women-loving women fiction, a commitment that spanned decades and outlived both Radclyffe Hall and Virginia Woolf by the time *Olivia* hit the bookshelves in 1949.

Dorothy Strachey’s decision not to publish *Olivia* until 1949 may have been a decision not to “come out” or reveal her own homosexual inclinations until this point. On both sides of

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<sup>990</sup> Aciman, “Introduction,” xii.

<sup>991</sup> McKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, 15.

<sup>992</sup> Lenore Thompson, who attended Vassar College from 1936 to 1940, quoted in McKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, 24.

<sup>993</sup> Anonymous, who attended Vassar College from 1944 to 1948, quoted in McKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, 26.



the Atlantic Ocean, being open about one's sexuality had serious consequences. D'Emilio's research shows that editors of newspapers published women's names, addresses, and occupations after they were rounded up by police in a bar raid.<sup>994</sup> As the federal government's practice of firing people for their homosexuality trickled into private business, women-loving women tried to hide their sexuality out of fear for their jobs and their livelihoods. Baker's character Pauline Maury references this fear when she accuses Ray of wanting to declare her love for Janet publicly: "He'll do it the other way. He'll do it as publicly as he can. There are all kinds of ways of killing, and that's the one he'll choose."<sup>995</sup> Strachey's Olivia complains that the adults would have seen her love for Mlle. Julie as a joke. "And yet I had an uneasy feeling that, if not a joke, it was something to be ashamed of, something to hide desperately."<sup>996</sup> Homosexual inclination for fictional women was a topic of silence, secrets, and fear.

The silence, secretive nature, and fear were true for real life women-loving women as well. McKay remembers, "When I was at Vassar the silence about homosexuality was immense. No one mentioned some of our best female writers' sexual preferences or acknowledged that some of "Vincent's" [Edna St. Vincent Millay's] love poems were to ladies. Every year there was a new story about roommates that were 'too close' and had to be separated, a few giggles about the faculty, but the rest was silence."<sup>997</sup> The problem of hiding one's sexuality was, in a way, limited to the middle and working class, as many rich women-loving women did not fear for their jobs (of which they had none) nor society's approval (as money created a buffer for them). "But this privilege also meant that their ways of living had limited benefit for the majority of working lesbians."<sup>998</sup> Middle class women-loving women found themselves silenced out of

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<sup>994</sup> D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 39.

<sup>995</sup> Baker, *Trio*, 145.

<sup>996</sup> Strachey, *Olivia*, 3.

<sup>997</sup> McKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, 156.

<sup>998</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 2-3.

fear for their jobs as teachers, nurses, and other careers which put them in direct contact with community members and which they could lose if the community turned against them. Working class women often held jobs that did not rely on community approval—the careers of the women in Buffalo include factory work and manual labor, as well as some office jobs that required discretion similar to that of the middle class. Class played a major role on how women-loving women censored themselves and if and when these women were able to be open about who they lived with, who they loved, and what it meant to be a women-loving woman in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For some young women who lived with their parents or guardians, a mutual understanding of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” worked until the women-loving daughter was able to move out. According to Leslie, a young woman who worked and socialized in Buffalo in the 1940s, “My mother never mentioned it, but it was the kind of thing that was held over my head, so that I would feel that I owed my mother something.”<sup>999</sup> Another women-loving woman from this era confided that she believed women-loving women *should* conform to the cisheteronormative society and hide their sexuality. “Cause to me, we live in a straight society and we should have to conform.”<sup>1000</sup> The decision on whether or not to censor your love life could also be a topic of contention between couples in the 1940s. Sandy, another women-loving woman from the Buffalo region, explains:

Relationships didn’t last long, then, because there was so much against you that if one felt like, well I don’t care if people know, maybe your partner did. Maybe there was a family situation or a job situation, public situation, they couldn’t be seen with you... You had to sneak and hide and pretty soon you thought, well, what the hell, I went to be me... So you go and find someone else. You[‘d] be with them for a while, until they go nervous.<sup>1001</sup>

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<sup>999</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>1000</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>1001</sup> Ibid., 263.

And so, a code of silence existed among the women-loving women of the 1940s, keeping them from admitting or revealing their true desires to family and friends.

However, as the heterosexist, anti-Communist movement of the late 1940s permeated society, cisheteronormative governments and law enforcement were no longer willing to allow homosexuals to live their lives discretely “in the closet.” “The postwar antihomosexual campaign sought not only to deny homosexuals any public space (i.e., the prewar philosophy) but also to pry them out of their closets and expose and punish them.”<sup>1002</sup> At the same time that cisheteronormative society became more interested in finding and punishing queer people, queer people felt emboldened by Kinsey’s research, increased queer fiction, and communities created during World War II to reveal their sexuality to others in hopes of finding community. Often unable to *prove* homosexuality, society offered queer people a form of self-censorship that would ensure women-loving women (and men-loving men), could continue to participate in society. The “mutually protective closet” was “a compromise: we don’t ask about your sexuality, you don’t tell us about it. Both witch-hunters and tolerant liberals contributed in the 1950s to an apartheid of the closet, whereby homosexuals were segregated from civilized society, not physically, but psychically and morally.”<sup>1003</sup> While the closet allowed queer people to engage with society as long as they assimilated to cisheteronormative demands, it did not wholly appease either the homophobes or the homophiles. “From a homophobic perspective, the closet protected enemies of the people who threatened America’s youth and national security. From a homophile perspective, the closet was a prison-refuge purchased at the price of both freedom and integrity.”<sup>1004</sup> Although the closet offered some reprieve from the vice squads, moral censors,

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<sup>1002</sup> Eskridge, *Gaylaw*, 58.

<sup>1003</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

<sup>1004</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

and military witch hunts in the 1940s, by the 1950s heterosexist forces like McCarthyism, the House Un-American Activities Committee, and vice squads were hard at work pulling queer Americans out of the closet by force and couching their heterosexism as necessary in the war against communism and for the protection of American children. The closet, while still an invention that has stood the test of time, has never completely ensured safety—for neither the homosexual trying to survive in the heterosexist world nor the heterosexist society trying to paint the homosexual as an irredeemable monster.

### *Conclusion*

Prior to the 1940s, Dead Lesbian Syndrome was a foregone conclusion in many novels and plays, essential to evade censorship, proscribe lesbianism, and ensure that young tomboys grew into respectable cisheteronormative wives, mothers, and homemakers. There was not, necessarily, a reason behind the death of many of the women-loving women characters in fiction prior to the 1940s. While this trend continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century—especially with the random and unjustified murders of characters like Willow from *Buffy*, Susan from *Seinfeld*, and Lexa from *The 100*—the 1940s reified a trope for lesbian characters that was just as old as Dead Lesbian Syndrome but had not been as often utilized: that of the monstrous lesbian, the malevolent predator.

According to TVTropes.com, the villainous lesbian falls under the “Psycho Lesbian” trope, which occurs in over 100 pieces of fiction listed on their website.<sup>1005</sup> The “Psycho Lesbian” pulls on the ideas of the 1930s, in which many women-loving women characters were either in asylums or believed themselves to be in need of psychological intervention while also

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<sup>1005</sup> “Psycho Lesbian,” *TV Tropes*, 2021, Accessed December 31, 2021, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PsychoLesbian>.

providing justification for the lesbian's death by the end of the piece. *Trio*, *College for Scandal*, and, to a lesser extent, *Olivia*, *Two Serious Ladies*, and *The Mesh* all introduce "psycho lesbians" whose deaths could be seen as justifiable based on the mores of the time. Dead Lesbian Syndrome in the 1940s suggested that women-loving women deserved death; these stories were no longer proof that life as a lesbian would end tragically, but instead that the death of a lesbian had a positive influence on the cisheteronormative people around her.

As characters whose deaths are justified, the choice Pauline Maury, Miss Grange, and (possibly) Mlle. Cara make to take their own lives suggests they recognize the need for their deaths for other characters to have happy, cisheteronormative endings. With these malevolent predators out of the picture, Janet, Sheila, and Olivia are able to move forward in life, towards the acceptable future of marriage, motherhood, and homemaking. The fact that many real-life women-loving women were also making the decision to commit suicide brings us back to Geertz's belief that models are both *of* the social action and *for* the social action.<sup>1006</sup> The portrayal of women-loving women as suicidal did not predate women-loving women committing suicide because of the isolation and terror associated with being a queer person in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In some ways, these narratives simply modeled the choices many women-loving women made at this time, as a manifestation of classical mimesis, or the idea that art imitates life. In other ways, these narratives provided a tragic model for women-loving women readers and audience members, who saw the suicide of these characters as a way out of the isolation and terror they felt. Although the research has not been done to show direct causation between exposure to Dead Lesbian Syndrome and an increase in suicidal ideation among women-loving women, enough evidence exists to at least warrant such a study in the future.

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<sup>1006</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 93.

This chapter shows that World War II exists largely outside of the pages of women-loving women fiction of the 1940s, and yet still directly influenced both the fictional narrative arcs and the lives of real-life women-loving women of this decade. In both fictional and factual lesbian lives, there was a desire to reduce and destroy the threat of lesbianism throughout this decade, perhaps even stronger than previous decades, as women now understood they could live independently from men, should they be willing to do the work and contend with societal ostracism. Dead Lesbian Syndrome, through rarely realized in death in the military witch hunts, influenced the decisions to criminalize women-loving servicewomen within the military and make homosexuality a fireable offense in the federal government, Hollywood, and private industry. Furthermore, the fear of lesbianism and the desire to destroy the concept—if not always the women who lived their lives as lesbians—had an impact on the increased censorship of the decade.

After the relative freedom of the 1930s, decisions like the initial censorship of *Trio* and the growth of the National Organization for Decent Literature show the 1940s were reactionary: to the emasculation of men during the Great Depression, the independence of women during World War II, and the rise of “anti-American activities” among creatives who dared to push against the margins of society’s status quo in the postwar era. As publishing houses across the country began to explore the possibilities of paperback novels, pulp fiction, and promiscuous stories uncensored by law, the Dead Lesbian Syndrome of the 1940s is both an evolution of the deadly strains that came before it and an artificially enhanced strain influenced by McCarthyism, the NODL, and the demand for a return to the status quo at the end of the War. This new strain, which both villainized and killed women-loving women characters, has continued to infect women-loving women fiction for decades, and will continue to kill off beloved women-loving

women characters and provide tragic models for lesbian love unless there is intervention across all creative media. As the women-loving servicewomen, factory girls, and Hollywood starlets of the 1940s all proved: women-loving women alone can fight for community and connection, but they cannot change a heterosexist culture that fights against them at every turn. It is only by addressing the causes and symptoms of Dead Lesbian Syndrome across creative fields that we can ensure future women-loving women readers, theatergoers, and movie watchers will see models of lesbian love that are fulfilling, loving, and—most importantly—alive.

## Conclusion

### Dead Lesbian Syndrome—Epidemic, or Endemic?

#### *The Root Causes of Dead Lesbian Syndrome*

Although queer publications have cited *The Well of Loneliness* time and again as the first anglophone lesbian novel or the best-known 20<sup>th</sup> century lesbian novel, anglophone lesbian fiction existed for over thirty years prior to this novel's publication.<sup>1007</sup> Decades before Radclyffe Hall took ideas from the real-life adventures of women-loving women in World War I, authors such as Dr. John Wesley Carhart, Mary R.P. Hatch, and Mary Wilkins Freeman drew inspiration from the real-life murder trial of women-loving woman Alice Mitchell. Mitchell's murder of her lover Freda Ward and the subsequent trial received coverage in newspapers across the country and drew interest from sexologists both close to home and across the Atlantic.

Chapter One explored both the coverage of the Ward-Mitchell murder trial, Mitchell's subsequent death at the Tennessee State Insane Asylum, and the three novels Mitchell's story inspired. Dr. Carhart's *Norma Trist*, Hatch's *The Strange Disappearance of Eugene Comstocks*, and Wilkins Freeman's *The Long Arm* all incorporated elements of Mitchell's story, which, of course, included the murder of one women-loving woman (Freda Ward) and the imprisonment of another women-loving woman (Alice Mitchell) in an insane asylum and her subsequent mysterious death. These stories created the foundations of lesbian fiction. Alice Mitchell slit Freda Ward's throat in broad daylight and tried to escape. When she was arrested and brought to trial, she claimed she killed Freda out of love. The first three anglophone lesbian novels drew

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<sup>1007</sup> Lisa Ben calls *The Well of Loneliness* "the best known, and the most beautiful and comprehensively written" of all lesbian fiction through 1947 in issue two of *Vice-Versa* (Lisa Ben, "Bookworm's Burrow: 'The Well of Loneliness,'" in *Vice-Versa*, 1.2, July 1947, <https://queermusicheritage.com/viceversa2.html>, 3). Article titles and subjects similar to Beatriz E. Valenzuela's "'The Well of Loneliness' the first lesbian book published in the US," in *Q Voice News* are not uncommon in queer media. (Beatriz E. Valenzuela, "'The Well of Loneliness' the first lesbian book published in the US," *Q Voice News*, December 9, 2019, Accessed January 1, 2022, <https://qvoicenews.com/2019/12/09/the-well-of-loneliness-the-first-lesbian-book-published-in-the-us/>).



inspiration from a violent murderess from the upper class, and each of them echoed Mitchell and Ward's story in some way. Norma Twist also attacked her beloved violently when the other woman began to entertain male attention. Though Norma's victim survived the encounter, Norma was also subjected to psychiatric intervention as Mitchell had been. In *The Strange Disappearance of Eugene Comstocks*, Rosa/Gustave was also a member of the upper class who hoped to live as a man despite being Assigned Female at Birth. As explained in Chapter One, Rosa/Gustave's successful passing as a man and marriage to a woman—what Mitchell had aimed to do but failed—made Rosa/Gustave an ultimate lesbian threat. Rosa/Gustave's suicide set forth the blueprint that the lesbian threat could be destroyed, at least in fiction, through death.

*The Long Arm's* Phæbe Dole's life is also an attempt to follow Mitchell's dream for a life with Freda Ward *ad absurdum*—Phæbe is able to live with her beloved, another woman, Maria Wood, for decades before the death of Mrs. Fairbanks left Phæbe's adversary, Mr. Fairbanks, widowed and able to remarry. Killing Mr. Fairbanks, instead of Maria Wood, allowed Phæbe to do away with the threat to her longstanding relationship with Maria. However, while the novel allowed the lesbian relationship to exist for decades, in the end Phæbe was arrested and eventually died in prison, just as Mitchell did. *The Long Arm* also introduced the concept of the salvageable bisexual. Maria Wood lived with Phæbe Dole for decades but was ready and willing to leave their relationship behind the moment Mr. Fairchild showed interest in renewing his courtship of Maria. Although these salvageable women are never shown to be bisexual—often jumping from their relationship(s) with women into the arms of a man without looking back—they do allow for even women-loving women characters to be “saved.” In this research, 61% of the works of fiction include at least one instance of a woman being “saved” from a life of lesbianism through a relationship with a cisheteronormative man.

These early women-loving women novels show that, sometimes, a woman could be saved through the work and love of a cisheteronormative man—Norma Trist is saved through Dr. Jesper’s hypnosis and the love of Frank Artman; Gracia Hilton is saved from accidentally marrying a gender non-conforming individual (Rosa/Gustave masquerading as Eugene Comstock) through the love and determination of Sidney Howland; and Maria Wood is able to escape decades of homosexual relations when Mr. Fairchild proposes, and it is his murder which eventually leads to Maria’s captor, Phæbe Dole, getting arrested. However, two of the three 1895 novels inspired by Alice Mitchell’s life still end with the death of a women-loving woman character. For Norma Trist, the one women-loving woman character who survives to the end of the novel, the threat of lesbianism is destroyed through the “cure” of hypnotism. Along with the suicide of Rosa/Gustave from *The Strange Disappearance of Eugene Comstocks* and the mysterious death of Phæbe Dole after she was arrested for murder, the eradication of Norma’s lesbianism through hypnosis means all three novels end with the lesbian threat eradicated and a happily ever after for the cisheteronormative couples involved in the story. The blueprints set forth by these novels include three essential elements: lesbianism is a direct threat to cisheteronormative society, lesbianism makes women violent, and the lesbian threat must be destroyed for the good of individuals and society as a whole—through psychiatric intervention, imprisonment, or death.

Dead Lesbian Syndrome was, therefore, an American invention, introduced by American women-loving women fiction at the beginning of this genre. The women-loving women characters of these novels faced circumstances similar to those of tomboys in nineteenth century fiction. Louisa May Alcott’s Jo March, from *Little Women*, is a part of the transition from the “wayward tomboy” to the “villainous lesbian.” Jo detested the concept of marrying a man and

leaving the “Little Women” throughout the entirety of the first book of the two-book *Little Women*. However, in the time between the first book and the second, Alcott received pressure from both her publishers and her fans to marry Jo to her best friend and neighbor, Laurie. Unwilling to provide this cisheteronormative ending, Alcott wrote in her diary: “Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life. I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please any one.”<sup>1008</sup> As a way to bridge the fiercely independent and anti-marriage young Jo March and the married mother Mrs. Josephine Bhaer, Alcott kills Jo's sister, Beth, an act which changes Jo's demeanor and her outlook on life. Beth's death changes Jo's trajectory from the “literary spinster” Alcott had hoped her to be to Mrs. Josephine Bhaer, who almost never wrote and devoted her life to her husband and her sons—a far cry from the all-women environment she so treasured in her youth.<sup>1009</sup>

This research used the term “death transference” to categorize and track the technique of using another character's death to alter the personality of a main character. In the 28 fictional works analyzed in this research (inclusive of *Little Women*), death transference occurred five times, changing the trajectory and perspective of queer characters from Jo and Beth March in 1868 through Naomi and her dear dog Michel in 1949. In three of these examples of death transference, the narrative arc ends with a cisheteronormative happy ending. Gale Wilhelm used death transference in both of her 1930s lesbian novels. In the earlier book, *We Too Are Drifting*, Kletkin's death causes Jan's downward spiral, which leads to her loss of Vic by the end of the novel and Vic's ability to marry the man she was dating and continue with her cisheteronormative narrative. *Olivia*, the last novel discussed in this research, also includes death

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<sup>1008</sup> *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters, and Journals*, Edited by Ednah D. Cheney, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1898, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38049/38049-h/38049-h.htm>), 202.

<sup>1009</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *Selected Letters*, ed. by Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy. Boston: Little, Brown and Company (1987), 125.

transference where the victim is a lesbian. Through the death of Mlle. Cara, Olivia is able to get over her crush on Mlle. Julie and, eventually, lead a cisheteronormative adulthood after leaving school.

In the other two novels that utilized death transference, the death of a minor character led to the happy ending of two women-loving women characters. Wilhelm's second lesbian novel, the 1937 work *Torchlight to Valhalla*, begins with the death of the protagonist's father, Fritz Teutenberg. Professor Teutenberg's death sets in motion his daughter's journey of self-discovery, which eventually results in her partnership with another women-loving woman, Toni. Lucie Marchal's *The Mesh*, published in 1939, includes the death of Naomi's dog, Michel. It is Michel's death which enables Naomi and Madeline to confess their love for one another and construct a plan to leave Charles and Mother to live together. Death transference made death a central part of lesbian narratives even in instances where Dead Lesbian Syndrome was not employed. Of the 28 fictional analyzed in this research, only 3 of them included endings where the two women-loving women characters are together. Two of these happy endings were dependent on the death of a beloved minor character, and the third, *Two Serious Ladies*, does not clarify if the younger woman, Pacifica, was actually happy in the relationship.

The tomboy narratives of the Victorian Era, newfound study of sexology, and Alice Mitchell's trial were all instrumental in creating the earliest strains of the Dead Lesbian Syndrome virus. Dating back as far as 1895, to the earliest anglophone novels, Dead Lesbian Syndrome has been a part of women-loving women fiction since the very beginning, evolving with each new fictional work to address the specific societal fears of the time in which the work developed. By analyzing how Dead Lesbian Syndrome created new variants with each ensuing decade between 1895 and the end of the 1940s, this research emphasizes the ability of Dead

Lesbian Syndrome to thrive in environments with or without legal or industry censorship, in novels written by both cisheteronormative men and women-loving women, and across the changing landscape of the first half of the twentieth century. Parasitic and powerful, Dead Lesbian Syndrome created monsters out of women-loving women, forced tragedy upon their narratives, and told women-loving women readers—and the heterosexist society around them—that the best way to deal with the lesbian threat was to eradicate it. By any means necessary.

*Diagnosing Dead Lesbian Syndrome: Patients from the First Half-Century*

Although *The Well of Loneliness* received much more press attention, the first British novel about lesbianism to face legal censorship was *Despised and Rejected* by Rose Allatini. After censoring Maud Allan and *Salome*, one of Oscar Wilde's salacious plays, the British Government continued its crusade against both homosexuality and sexually liberated women by stopping the production and circulation of Allatini's novel about pacifists during World War I. Although the official reason for censoring *Despised and Rejected* under the Defense of the Realm Act was fear the pacifism of the novel would impede recruitment and enlistment of more young British soldiers at the tail-end of the War, the main character was a sexually confused woman who fell in love with another woman and then with a homosexual man. While the man, Dennis Blackwood, is much more obviously attracted to his own sex throughout the novel, the protagonist, Antoinette, admits to having feelings for other women throughout her life. "It had seemed disappointing, but not in the least unnatural, that all her passionate longings should have been awakened by women, instead of by members of the opposite sex."<sup>1010</sup> Unlike the novels of the 1890s, Antoinette's attraction to a man was not enough to save her from the danger of

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<sup>1010</sup> A.T. Fitzroy, *Despised and Rejected*, (London: GMP Publishing, 1988), 217-218.

homosexuality. According to Blackwood, since Antoinette fell in love with him, a congenital invert, she still isn't capable of cisheteronormative love. "No normal woman could care for me, I'm sure. You only do, because you are what you are, and I am what I. It's 'like to like,' as I said."<sup>1011</sup> The novel ends with Antoinette still in love with Blackwood, who has left her to go to prison and be with the man he loves. There is neither Dead Lesbian Syndrome nor the salvaging of a women-loving woman through the love of a man in this novel, yet it still ends in tragedy.

The trial of *Despised and Rejected* was one of three that took place towards the end of World War I and the beginning of the interwar era that dealt specifically with the topic of women-loving women. A few months before this trial, *Salome* was forced out of production basically bringing an end to the long and storied career of performer Maud Allan. Allan tried to sue a local Member of Parliament, Noel Pemberton Billing, for his article about the salaciousness of her play and the perverted nature of her audience. During the trial, Pemberton Billing, acting as his own legal counsel, asked Maud Allan: "Are you aware that there are people in this country who practice unnatural vices?" to which Allan responded, "There are everywhere, but I am not responsible for that."<sup>1012</sup> This trial was the first in the United Kingdom to link women to homosexuality, and kicked off a decade-long discussion about the necessity of understanding and policing women-loving women in Britain's public spheres.

The last of these three trials was that of Radclyffe Hall, who brought forth a libel suit against St. George Lane Fox-Pitt, a member of the Society for Psychological Research, when he tried to use her sexuality to prevent Hall from joining the Society. Una Troubridge, Hall's partner, had left her marriage to Admiral Sir Ernest Troubridge to be with Hall, and Fox-Pitt accused Hall of being the 1920 version of a homewrecker. Through legal means and pressure applied by Una

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<sup>1011</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>1012</sup> Hoare, *Oscar Wilde's Last Stand*, 116.

Troubridge, Fox-Pitt was found guilty of libel and Hall was able to join the Society. Although the taboo nature of Hall's relationship with Una Troubridge could have been the reason for national coverage of this case, most of the newspapers focused almost primarily on the strange topics studied by the Society for Psychical Research, including divination and communing with the dead. In all three trials, the press minimized discussion of homosexuality as much as possible—in the newspapers Maud Allan's case was primarily a discussion of loyalty during the War, Rose Allatini's book's main problem was its pacifism during prime recruitment times for soldiers, and Radclyffe Hall's most interesting predilection was her desire to speak with the dead.

The 1920s were very much a time of push and pull between the new freedoms women received in the United Kingdom and the United States and the governments' desires to retain the status quo and return to the patriarchal norms that dominated society prior to the War. This was the creative tension which helped create *The Captive* by Edouard Bourdet (1926), *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself* by Radclyffe Hall (1926), *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall (1928), *Extraordinary Women* by Compton Mackenzie (1928), *The Wild Party* (1929) directed by Dorothy Arzner, and *Passing* (1929) by Nella Larsen. Four of these six works include the actual or the implied death of a women-loving woman character and four of these works include marriage to a man as a way for women to escape homosexuality. *The Captive* is unique as it includes a cisheteronormative marriage at the beginning of the work, but this marriage dissolves by the end of the play so the main character can go be with her lesbian lover during the lover's final moments. For Mary in *The Well of Loneliness*, Stella in *The Wild Party*, and Irene in *Passing*, their relationships with and—actual or implied—marriages to men save them from a life of homosexuality. The women-loving women who die in these novels are those who appear

in every way unsalvageable—Mme. d'Aiguines from *The Captive* is not only a women-loving woman, but also seduces a married woman and keeps her from happiness; Miss Ogilvy not only wants to be with a woman, but wants to be a man; Jamie and Barbara from *The Well of Loneliness* have overcome every other obstacle but, as lesbians, cannot be permitted a happy ending and so Barbara dies of tuberculosis and Jamie commits suicide instead of living with her broken heart; and Clare Kendry dies in *Passing* because she is too much of a threat to the happily married Dr. and Mrs. Redfield. These women-loving women are all painted as threats to the cisheteronormative institution of marriage—Mme. d'Aiguines and Clare Kendry because they may lure a married woman away from her husband and Miss. Ogilvy, Barbara, and Jamie because they dare to believe women-loving women can love one another as completely and beautifully as a cisheteronormative couple.

The trials of *The Captive* and *The Well of Loneliness* in the late 1920s helped craft the future of women-loving women fiction in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the United Kingdom, the censorship of *The Well of Loneliness*, coming on the heels of a failed bill to criminalize female homosexuality and the trials of Pemberton Billing, Rose Allatini, and Fox-Pitt, made it almost impossible for lesbian fiction to circulate on the British Isles for the next half-century. Conversely, the disunity between the trials of lesbian fiction in the 1920s—both novels and plays—meant that publishing houses and performers were willing to continue to try and bring lesbian stories to the American public throughout the 1930s and 1940s. However, the fact that all of the stories of the 1920s end in tragedy should not be overlooked. Dead Lesbian Syndrome, or at least the warning that lesbianism would end in tragedy, allowed most of these works of fiction to pass censorship trials. *The Captive* was the only piece of fiction that did not evade censorship in the United States. It was, unsurprisingly, also the only piece that allowed the



two women to be together in the end. Even with Mme. d'Aiguines slated to die soon after the curtains closed, the story was too happy of an ending for the women-loving women. *The Well of Loneliness* in England and *The Captive* in the United States served stark reminders to creatives: women-loving women characters were not permitted to find happiness with other women.

It is Dead Lesbian Syndrome that turns lesbian literature of the 1920s into survival literature throughout the mid-century. For many women-loving women, isolation and ostracization went hand-in-hand with their sexual awakening. Novels, plays, and movies that featured women-loving women proved that there were other women out there who felt the same way they did. As DJ, a butch living in Buffalo in the 1930s and 1940s explains, “See *The Well of Loneliness* can apply to every lesbian going or any gay boy or anything that’s in this life. Because the gay life in itself is a very lonely life.”<sup>1013</sup> This loneliness led many to drink or engage in both suicidal and non-suicidal self-injury. Survival literature empowered lesbian stories to create imagined communities among their readers, especially women-loving women.<sup>1014</sup> At the same time that women-loving women novels were instrumental in building imagined communities, and inspiring women-loving women to travel to larger cities to create actual communities in places like Buffalo and Harlem or San Francisco and Los Angeles, the fiction itself lost its descriptions of lesbian communities. Only five of the 17 works studied between 1930 and 1950 include any mention of a women-loving woman community, and two of these works are based in homosocial environments like prisons or schools. The women-loving women characters in these novels are depicted as mostly isolated and surrounded by

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<sup>1013</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 272.

<sup>1014</sup> Karen Michele Cadora explained the connections between the Benedict Anderson’s conceptualization of “imagined communities” and the importance of books in the lesbian community in her 1999 dissertation, “The Limits of Lesbiana: Race and Class in Twentieth Century Lesbian Genre Fiction.” (PhD Diss. *Stanford University*, 1999). Cadora argues, as “the idea that cheap, popular editions can create and mobilize reading publics for both profit and politics is a useful one for understanding why books are at the core of modern lesbian identity” (2).

cisheteronormative society. Perhaps this made them more relatable to the women-loving women who read the novels, even if they did not give much hope of finding community outside of their own imaginations.

A major evolution of Dead Lesbian Syndrome in the 1930s and 1940s is the new element of the Great Depression, which was a double-edge sword. On the one hand, the Great Depression showed women that their relationships with men did not necessarily guarantee economic stability. As men lost their jobs at higher rates than women throughout the Depression, the concept that marriage would ensure safety and stability slowly eroded, giving women the opportunity and impetus to become independent wage-earners.<sup>1015</sup> At the same time, this reality served to emasculate men, and society pushed hard against the idea that marriage was no longer the end goal for all young women. The 1930s and 1940s saw new forms of censorship emerge, from the Hays Code in Hollywood to the NODL in the Catholic Church, ensuring the fiction people accessed told stories that upheld the status quo, even as the structures which upheld capitalism and nuclear families fell apart beneath the surface.

Save for the aberration that was Gale Wilhelm's work, in which the women-loving women characters were at least given a chance at love and happiness, works of lesbian fiction in the 1930s were primarily focused on lesbianism as a form of psychosis and marriage (or at least cisheteronormative partnering) as a salve for romantic, mental, emotional, and financial instability. Three-quarters of the lesbian fiction produced between 1930 and 1940 and analyzed in this research include some manifestation of lesbianism as a form of psychosis, and a quarter of these works make the lesbian out to be actively evil, or at least malevolent in her attentions towards another women-loving woman character. Works like *Loveliest of Friends* (1931), *Hell*

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<sup>1015</sup> Ruth Milkman, "Women's Work and Economic Crisis Revisited: Comparing the Great Recession and the Great Depression."

*Cat* (1935), *Nightwood* (1936), and *Pity for Women* (1937) make the insanity permanent. In *Loveliest of Friends*, Kim, the evil women-loving woman character, drives Audrey to such insanity that she tries to kill herself using pills and alcohol. Audrey ends up in a psychiatric hospital twice due to her relationship with Kim, and at the end of the novel she ends her marriage to John because she is unable to get over her love for Kim. While Leslie from *Hell Cat* does not require stay in an insane asylum, she is still seen as monstrous and in need of intervention. Believing Leslie is trying to seduce the protagonist, Scoot, one of the male characters thinks to himself, “Women like Leslie Gates should be hamstrung for getting a girl as pure and clean-minded as this one into her repulsive, unnatural grasp.”<sup>1016</sup> *Nightwood* ends with Robin barking on the floor like a dog and seemingly incapable of ending her psychosis, while *Pity for Women* ends with Ann completely catatonic—right as she was about to make marriage-like vows to Judith. The psychosis of the 1930s is a weaker strain of Dead Lesbian Syndrome—unable or unwilling to live their lives in cisheteronormative relationships, these women are damned to tragic existences in psychiatric hospitals and under psychiatrists’ care. They do not have any chance at happiness.

The concept of the companionate marriage, which had become well-accepted throughout the United States by the 1930s, hoped to convince women that cisheteronormative marriage *did* provide a chance at happiness. As the economic argument for marriage became increasingly less compelling throughout the Great Depression, companionate marriage promised women that they could have their emotional, romantic, and platonic needs fulfilled if they found “the right man” and worked hard to create a happy, sexually satisfying marriage. In this environment, the seductive lesbian became even more threatening, as it was believed women understood one

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<sup>1016</sup> Williams, *Hell Cat*, 99.

another at deep levels and therefore had an advantage over men. Characters like Nicoli in *Queer Patterns* and Martha in *The Children's Hour* represented the kind of lesbian threat which, even without meaning to, could destroy a "happy marriage." Nicoli did not make any effort to cause Sheila to leave her husband and live with her, and yet by the end of the first chapter Sheila was divorced and ready to start her life with the female director. Martha never made a move on Karen, and even worked hard to be friends with Joe and appear happy for her friend's engagement, but even the idea that Martha *may* be a lesbian and *may* be romantically interested in Karen was enough for Martha to commit suicide.

It was the 1940s which took this a step further, making the lesbian threat malevolent instead of ambivalent. Pauline Maury in *Trio*, Mrs. Copperfield in *Two Serious Ladies*, Miss Grange in *College for Scandal*, and Mlle. Cara in *Olivia* were obsessive and controlling, wanting to keep their female lovers for themselves, even when it meant Janet and Pacifica were expected to give up happiness with an acceptable cisheteronormative man, Lucy and Sheila were expected to give up their whole lives to run away with Miss Grange, and Mlle. Julie was to be miserable her whole life. The lesbian villains were shown to be seductresses, unwilling to allow their lovers out of their "repulsive, unnatural grasp[s]." <sup>1017</sup> For the lesbian villains of 1940s fiction, death was no longer happenstance, it was now justifiable.

The 1930s and 1940s also bore witness to changes in how legal and extralegal censorship methods addressed homosexuality. In the first half of the 1930s, lesbianism could be addressed, as long as it was done with the air of tragedy. Even after the Hays Code strengthened in 1934, the government, exempt from this censorship code, produced its own film on lesbianism in 1937, *Children of Loneliness*. In this film, the salvageable bisexual woman was saved from the lesbian

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<sup>1017</sup> As defined by Marvin in Williams, *Hell Cat*, 99.

threat when her future husband threw hot oil on the lesbian and, blinded, the lesbian wandered out into traffic and was hit by a car. However, prohibitive films such as this soon disappeared, as the Hays Code secured control of most movie production by the end of the decade. Censorship prohibited any mention of homosexuality in Hollywood films, and instances such as Marlene Dietrich's homosexual flirting in *Morocco* and Greta Garbo's same-sex kiss in *Queen Christina* became relics of the past. After World War II, the rise of McCarthyism and the efforts of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals forced an even greater code of silence upon Hollywood. Now, not only were women-loving women actresses prohibited from portraying women-loving women on screen, but they faced real consequences—loss of jobs, loss of freedom, and blacklisting from all future employment—if they were unable to hide their own homosexuality from the public.

The creation and growth of the NODL beginning in 1938 further silenced any portrayals of lesbianism. This organization outright banned any books which dealt with “illicit love.”<sup>1018</sup> Although legal censorship was on a steep decline in the 1930s and 1940s and organizations such as the American Librarian Association fought back against extralegal forms of censorship including the NODL, Catholic pressure on local book shops, corner stores, and pharmacies kept publishers from pushing too hard against the taboo of homosexuality. Still, as paperback novels became more popular, stories about women-loving women continued to circulate. While not always accurate in their portrayal of lesbian life, and often much more deadly than lived lesbian experiences, these novels promised women-loving women that there were others like them out there, a message sorely needed based on the memories of Vassar College students and Buffalo, NY residents of the 1940s.

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<sup>1018</sup> O'Connor, “The National Organization for Decent Literature,” 401.

The works of fiction analyzed in this study clearly feature identifiable women-loving women characters, feature a women-loving woman main or major character, and were produced between *Norma Trist* in 1895 and the dawn of the Golden Age of Lesbian Pulp in 1950. Of the 28 works analyzed in this study, 14 of them, or 50%, include the death of at least one women-loving woman character. These 14 works include the deaths of 21 women-loving women, with seven of the works including multiple victims of Dead Lesbian Syndrome. Furthermore, a third of these women commit suicide, and ten of the dead women-loving women are dead because of illness or accidental death—suggesting that it is karmic inevitability that lesbianism should end in tragedy. Furthermore, lesbianism is shown to be a form or symptom of psychosis in two-thirds of these fictional works, and the lesbian is painted as a villain or in some way malevolent in half of them. When compared with the fact that only three (less than 10%) of the novels permit the women-loving women characters to be together in the end, these statistics paint a bleak picture of societal views of lesbianism. Contrary to arguments that lesbian fiction was produced *by men for men*, 50% of the 28 fictional works analyzed in this research were written by people who either openly identified as or who have evidence to suggest that they were women-loving women. In fact, only five of the works were written by men, and only two of these five works included Dead Lesbian Syndrome. As this research has shown, Dead Lesbian Syndrome was a manifestation of Anglo-American society's desire to destroy the lesbian threat, and it was endemic to women-loving women fiction from the very beginning of the genre's canon.

*From Past to Present: Dead Lesbian Syndrome Today*

As initiatives like the Hays Code, NODL, and the House Un-American Activities Committee coagulated in the late 1940s to destroy the lesbian threat through silencing lesbian

narratives, one would assume the ensuing decades would be almost completely void of lesbian literature. Instead, the rise of the paperback novel, the dissolution of legal literary censorship, and the growth of a strong and unapologetically queer counterculture that fought for public space and political recognition turned the 1950s and 1960s in the Golden Age of Lesbian Fiction.<sup>1019</sup> During this era of McCarthyism and the “Lavender Menace,” lesbian pulp fiction saved lives. From frustrated middle-class housewives in Pennsylvania, to isolated working-class secretaries in Indiana, to indigent sex workers in Los Angeles, lesbian fiction was a form of survival literature, proving that women-loving women existed out in the world, and community was there, if you could find it. Survival literature empowered fictional lesbians to serve “as a conduit through which isolated lesbians could ‘find themselves’ and access some form of lesbian community.”<sup>1020</sup>

Lesbian writer Lee Lynch, who was born in 1945 and came-of-age in the 1960s, remembers her first foray into lesbian pulp fiction. “At last, lesbians! ... I read every one of these mass-market paperbacks I could get my hands on. ... I was driven, searching for my nourishment like a starveling, grabbing at any crumb that looked, tasted, or smelled digestible.”<sup>1021</sup> Although women were afraid to be seen purchasing the salacious titles, including *Libido Beach* (1962) by Alain Abby, *Her Woman* (1962) by Richard Villanova, and *House of Sin* (1961) by Dallas Mayo,

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<sup>1019</sup> Susan Stryker, *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001), 49-53.

<sup>1020</sup> Sarah Louise Stratton, “More than throw-away fiction: investigating lesbian pulp fiction through the lens of a lesbian textual community,” Dissertation, (Birmingham: *University of Birmingham*, 2018), 7. For more on lesbian fiction of the 1950s and 1960s as survival literature, see Sarah Louise Stratton, “More than throw-away fiction: investigating lesbian pulp fiction through the lens of a lesbian textual community,” Birmingham: *University of Birmingham*, 2018; “Lesbian Survival Literature,” in *The Lesbian Pulp Fiction Collection @ Mount Saint Vincent University*, Nova Scotia, CA, 2022, Accessed January 3, 2022, <https://msvulpf.omeka.net/exhibits/show/lpf/lesbian-survival-literature>; and Natasha Frost, “The Lesbian Pulp Fiction that Saved Lives,” *Atlas Obscura*, May 22, 2018, Accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/lesbian-pulp-fiction-ann-bannon>.

<sup>1021</sup> Lee Lynch, “Cruising the Libraries,” in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts*, ed. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 40 quoted in Yvonne Keller, “‘Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?’: Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965,” *American Quarterly*, (57.2, 2005), 385-410, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068271>, 385.

they still felt, “it was absolutely necessary for me to have them. I needed them the way I needed food and shelter for survival.”<sup>1022</sup> By 1956, when renowned lesbian historian Lilian Faderman was a teenager on the hunt for lesbian representation, lesbian pulp fiction was surprisingly easy to find at her local drugstore. In the early 1950s, few of the writers expected there to be a whole market of women-loving women readers. During a 1989 roundtable discussion about lesbian pulp fiction, Marijane Meaker, author of the 1952 lesbian pulp novel *Spring Fire*, explained that both she and Tereska Torres did not know there were so many women-loving women readers hungry for literary representation when they published *Women’s Barracks* in 1950 and *Spring Fire* in 1952. Meaker remembers, “We were amazed, floored, by the mail that poured in. That was the first time anyone was aware of the gay audience out there.”<sup>1023</sup> As the letters poured in and readership grew, the demand for more lesbian fiction created a veritable machine: between 1950 and 1965, over 500 lesbian pulp novels were published in the United States, with more overseas.<sup>1024</sup>

While much of the fiction written between 1950 and 1965 was exploitative and tragic, Yvonne Keller’s research suggests at least 16 authors in this genre wrote pro-lesbian fiction, with over 90 books written from this perspective. According to Keller, *all* of the pro-lesbian novels of this time period were written by women, or at least authors who used female-sounding pennames.<sup>1025</sup> One of these writers was Velma Young, who wrote most often under the penname Valerie Taylor. She claimed much of the lesbian fiction she found prior to writing her first book in 1957 was written by men who had never knowingly interacted with a lesbian and so the

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<sup>1022</sup> Donna Allegra, “Between the Sheets: My Sex Life in Literature,” in *Lesbian Erotics*, ed. Karla Jay (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 72, quoted in Keller, ““Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?”” 385.

<sup>1023</sup> Marijane Meaker, “Marijane Meaker,” transcribed talk, in “Those Wonderful Lesbian Pulps: A Roundtable Discussion,” Eric Garber, ed., *San Francisco Bay Area Gay and Lesbian Historical Society Newsletter A* (summer 1989), part 2, 7 quoted in Keller, ““Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?”” 390.

<sup>1024</sup> Keller, ““Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?”” 388.

<sup>1025</sup> *Ibid.*, 391-392.



literature amounted to “[w]ish fulfillment stuff, pure erotic daydreaming. I wanted to make some money, of course, but I also thought that we should have some stories about real people.”<sup>1026</sup> Young went on to write at least five lesbian pulp novels that have been reprinted numerous times, including the well-known book *The Girls in 3-B* (1959). After making her first \$500 writing, Young divorced her husband and became an active member of the burgeoning lesbian political scene. She was a co-founder of both the Mattachine Society of the Midwest and the Lesbian Writers Conference of Chicago.<sup>1027</sup> While lesbian pulp fiction was a lucrative genre in the 1950s and early 1960s, by 1965 editorial interest in new novels began to fade. Keller cites two causes for this new ambivalence. First, the decriminalization of pornography meant men no longer turned to these novels for erotic stimulation when they could find more erotic literature and photographs created for the male gaze. Then, without the male pornography market, mainstream publishers did not seem interested in publishing “serious” lesbian fiction—that is, lesbian fiction which was not inherently pornographic in nature.<sup>1028</sup>

While there has not been a systematic survey of the over 500 lesbian pulp novels of the 1950s and 1960s to see the prevalence of Dead Lesbian Syndrome, Keller’s conclusion that only 90 of the novels are “pro-lesbian” suggests that the other 82% of lesbian pulp novels ended tragically—either through Dead Lesbian Syndrome, psychosis, or a cisheteronormative marriage taking the place of a lesbian love affair. Determining the actual prevalence of Dead Lesbian Syndrome in lesbian literature of the Golden Age of Lesbian Pulp is important to understanding how this virus has continued to plague lesbian fiction for generations. Such research would be instrumental in learning how toxic the survival literature of the mid-century really was and help

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<sup>1026</sup> Valerie Taylor, “Valerie Taylor,” transcribed talk, “Those Wonderful Lesbian Pulps: A Roundtable Discussion,” Eric Garber, ed., San Francisco Bay Area Gay and Lesbian Historical Society Newsletter A (summer 1989), part 1 quoted in Keller, ““Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?”” 390.

<sup>1027</sup> “Valerie Taylor,” *The Feminist Press*, 2022, Accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.feministpress.org/authors/valerie-taylor>.

<sup>1028</sup> Keller, ““Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?”” 392-393.

us to better understand the influence literature had on women-loving women's feelings of isolation, self-hatred, and suicidal ideation, as well as its more positive influences of representation and imagined community.

Lesbian representation in film was mostly dormant throughout the 1940s and 1950s, but in 1961 films like *The Children's Hour* pushed hard enough against the diminishing power of the Hays Code to change the enforced silence of homosexuality to a more relaxed requirement: homosexuality could appear, as long as the films responded to homosexuality negatively. The 1961 *The Children's Hour*, which, unlike the 1936 version, kept to the lesbian themes of the original play, had a star-studded cast, including James Garner, Shirley MacLaine, and Audrey Hepburn.<sup>1029</sup> As this film is shockingly true to the original play, it does fall victim to Dead Lesbian Syndrome in the end, when MacLaine's Martha commits suicide and Hepburn's Karen finds Garner's Joe in Austria, willing to give their cisheteronormative relationship a chance. *The Children's Hour* paved the way for *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) which, despite its title, does not include the killing of any actual character in the film. While *The Killing of Sister George* did not suffer from Dead Lesbian Syndrome, the lesbian protagonist is very much a villain, and the film is a tragedy.<sup>1030</sup>

By the 1960s, women-loving women were also on the small screen. Hallie Lambert, a character in one episode of *The Eleventh Hour* in 1963, visits a therapist when she realizes her hatred of her woman director is negatively impacting her acting career. Dr. Starke explains that Hallie is projecting a teenage crush from her past onto her relationship with the director, and Dr. Stake uses psychotherapy to intervene with the negative relationship. Over the course of the

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<sup>1029</sup> "James Garner," *Golden Globe Awards*, <https://www.goldenglobes.com/person/james-garner>; "Shirley MacLaine," *Golden Globe Awards*, <https://www.goldenglobes.com/person/shirley-maclaine>; "Academy Awards Winners & History, (1950-1959)," *AMC Filmsite*, <https://www.filmsite.org/oscars50.html>.

<sup>1030</sup> Robert Aldrich, *The Killing of Sister George*, Palomar/Associates, 1968.

episode, Hallie overcomes her crush and is able to become cisheteronormative by the end of the episode.<sup>1031</sup> This first televised lesbian plotline is reminiscent of *Norma Trist*, who is also able to become a cisheteronormative woman after psychiatric treatment. Of the first four lesbian characters of the 1960s and 1970s uncovered by *Autostraddle* CEO Riese, one was a murderess who never comes out, one was falsely accused by a woman who ends up being the *actual* lesbian, and two (inclusive of Hallie Lambert) are victims of psychosis. The fifth television women-loving woman character Dr. Annie Claymore in *Medical Center* is only on screen for one episode and spends this time convincing her cisheteronormative but confused patient, Tobi, that Tobi is “normal.” Riese notes that some consider Dr. Claymore to be the first “productive” and “happy” lesbian character.<sup>1032</sup>

In November 1974, “Flowers of Evil,” an episode of *Police Woman* aired on NBC. This may have been the first nationally syndicated television episode to draw protest from LGBTQ activist groups, including an overnight sit-in at NBC headquarters, led by the Lesbian Feminist Liberation group.<sup>1033</sup> “Flowers of Evil” focused on a group of lesbians running a nursing home. Unfortunately, these lesbians were cold-blooded killers who were robbing and murdering their elderly clients. According to Riese, “NBC responded to protest by removing all explicit references to lesbianism, which of course, just made matters infinitely worse, as the lesbianism remained obvious even if nobody said the word ‘lesbian.’”<sup>1034</sup> “Flowers of Evil,” which was written by three men and directed by a man, is very similar to the plot of the 2020 film *I Care A Lot*, a film written and directed by a man, in which a lesbian legal caretaker robbed her elderly

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<sup>1031</sup> “*Eleventh Hour, The: What Did She Mean by Good Luck (TV)*,” *The Paley Center for Media*, 2022, Accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.paleycenter.org/collection/item/?q=the&p=231&item=B:78836>; Riese, “10 First-Ever Lesbian Characters on American TV: Killers, Tramps, Thieves and Therapists,” *Autostraddle*, November 16, 2015, Accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.autostraddle.com/10-first-ever-lesbian-characters-on-american-tv-killers-tramps-thieves-and-therapists-316645/>.

<sup>1032</sup> Riese, “10 First-Ever Lesbian Characters on American TV.”

<sup>1033</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1034</sup> *Ibid.*

clients. Unlike the killers in “Flowers of Evil,” who end up in prison, Marla Grayson who initially gets away with her sinister crimes, eventually falls victim to Dead Lesbian Syndrome and is murdered in the last thirty seconds of the film.<sup>1035</sup> Two years after “Flowers of Evil” premiered, *Police Woman* worked with LGBTQ activists to create “Trial by Prejudice,” in which the main character is accused of molesting a teenage girl. To prove her innocence, the protagonist “proves” her heterosexuality by having her homosexual college roommate testify on her behalf, effectively outing her college roommate and putting the lesbian woman’s job at risk.<sup>1036</sup>

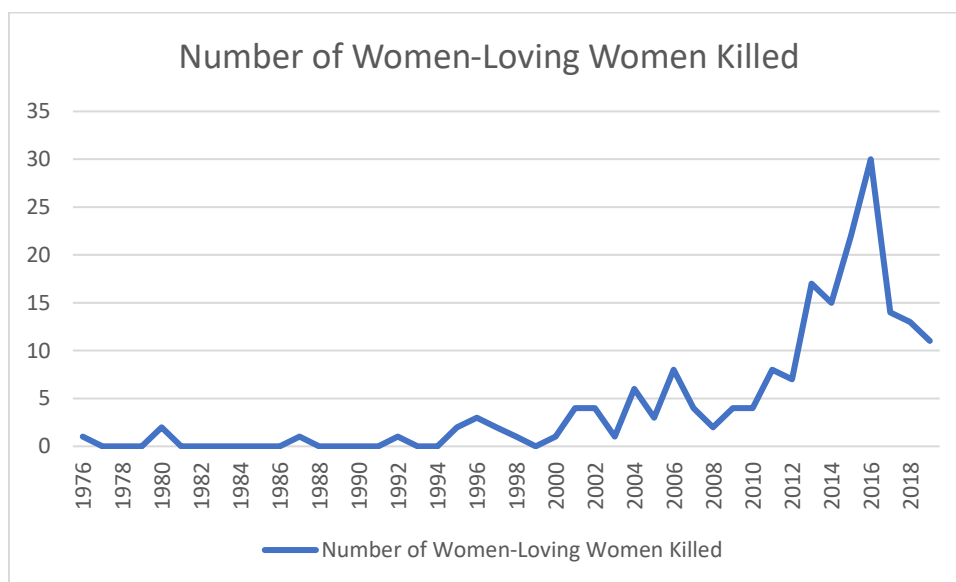
Surprisingly, it was the *seventh* women-loving woman character on television who first suffered from Dead Lesbian Syndrome. In December 1976, *Executive Suite* featured a lesbian story arc in which Julie Solkin, the victim of domestic abuse, comes out to her abusive husband and her best friend. In a multi-episode arc, Julie eventually confesses to her best friend, Leona, that Julie is in love with her. Meanwhile, Julie’s abusive husband tells Leona’s husband that Julie is attracted to Leona. Leona confesses that she, too, has feelings for Julie. Confused and emotional about the confession, Leona walks out into traffic, with Julie following behind her. In the middle of oncoming traffic, Julie is killed by a truck. Bereft and blamed for the death, Leona suffers a nervous breakdown. Julie’s death is reminiscent of Bobby’s death in the *Children of Loneliness*, the 1937 government-issued film about lesbianism, while Leona’s mental breakdown has echoes of Ann’s catatonic episode in *Pity for Women* (1937). By 1976, Dead Lesbian Syndrome had successfully infected television, and would soon become an endemic part of portraying women-loving women characters for the next five decades.

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<sup>1035</sup> “Police Woman: Flowers of Evil,” IMDB, 2022, Accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0676421/>; “I Care a Lot,” IMDB, 2022, Accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9893250/>; “J Blakeson,” IMDB, 2022, Accessed January 3, 2022, [https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2128335/?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_dr](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2128335/?ref_=tt_ov_dr).

<sup>1036</sup> Riese, “10 First-Ever Lesbian Characters on American TV.”

From Julie's death in *Executive Suite*, Dead Lesbian Syndrome spirals into an all-encompassing illness that few women-loving women characters can evade. Twelve more deaths of women-loving women characters took place on anglophone television shows between 1980 and 1999, including seven women murdered, two accidents, two suicides, and one medical issue. It should be noted that two of the murdered women-loving women died from a bullet meant to kill their girlfriends. Thirty-eight women-loving women television characters died between 2000 and 2009, including 24 women murdered and four cases of suicide. The deadliest decade for women-loving women characters so far is 2010-2019, in which 140 women-loving women characters died. Ninety-three, or two-thirds, of these deaths were murders, while a further 14 women-loving women characters committed suicide.<sup>1037</sup> See Figure 1 for a timeline of the number of women killed each year between 1976 and 2019.



**Figure III: Growth of Dead Lesbian Syndrome on Television, 1976-2019**

<sup>1037</sup> Riese, "All 215 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters On TV, And How They Died," October 2021, Accessed January 3, 2021, <https://www.autostraddle.com/all-65-dead-lesbian-and-bisexual-characters-on-tv-and-how-they-died-312315/?all=1>.

As evidenced in this graph, there were major jumps in the number of women-loving women characters killed in 2013 (double the number of deaths from any previous year) and 2016 (the highest ever at 30). Were these fictional deaths reactionary? In 2010, Don't Ask, Don't Tell was repealed by Congress, and the acceptance of LGBTQ individuals in the United States Military officially began in September 2011, just as writers were planning episodes for 2013. Marriage equality was legalized across the country in June 2015, giving writers enough time to plan a virtual bloodbath for women-loving women characters in the spring of 2016.

News outlets responded to the 2016 women-loving women television character massacre with numerous articles about Dead Lesbian Syndrome. In an interactive article for *Vox News*, Caroline Framke, Javier Zarracina and Sarah Frostenson analyzed every LGBTQ death on television during the 2015-2016 season. According to their findings, queer male characters comprised 3% of all television deaths during the television season of 2015-2016, although they only allotted for 2% of all television characters. Comparatively, queer female characters also represented 2% of all television characters, but 10% of television deaths.<sup>1038</sup> These statistics show that during the 2015-2016 season, women-loving women characters were five times more likely to die than cisheteronormative characters and three times more likely to die than men-loving men characters.

Taking their research a step further, *Autostraddle* commissioned Senior Editor Heather Hogan to research women-loving women characters on all television shows between 1976 and 2015. To qualify, the television series had to have ended prior to Hogan's research in March 2016. These shows had to include a women-loving women character that existed for more than one episode *and* the show had to be available to audiences in the United States. According to

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<sup>1038</sup> Caroline Framke, Javier Zarracina and Sarah Frostenson, "All the TV character deaths of 2015-'16 in one chart," *Vox News*, June 1, 2016, Accessed January 3, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/a/tv-deaths-lgbt-diversity>.

Hogan's research, only 11% of scripted American television shows during this time included women-loving women characters. Of the 193 shows that qualified for the study, 68 included women-loving women characters that died, and 31% of the total women-loving women television characters in this study were dead by the end of the series, while only 10% ended up with a happy ending.<sup>1039</sup>

The seven decades between the publication of *Olivia* in 1949 and the last women-loving woman television character to die in 2019 have seen a great amount of LGBTQ protests, and increase in LGBTQ rights and representation, and important legislative changes that support marriage equality, gender affirming mental and physical health care, and greater legal rights for women-loving women in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other anglophone countries. However, when it comes to fictional women-loving women, it seems that visibility comes at the cost of tragedy, and as the number of women-loving women characters in novels, on screens, and on stage continues to grow, Dead Lesbian Syndrome continues to plague writers' rooms, editor's notes, and narrative arcs across all media.

*Sweat the Fever, Starve the Cold, or Burn It Down*

When approaching a new disease, defeating the illness requires two essential steps. The first is to observe and analyze the illness, to understand its causes, symptoms, and variants. By becoming an expert on the disease, scientists can identify it in new patients, understand how it is transmitted across time and space, and discuss the disease with their colleagues using *a priori* terms and definitions that fit the disease. The second step is to begin work on a cure. This

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<sup>1039</sup> Heather Hogan, "Autostraddle's Ultimate Infographic Guide to Dead Lesbian Characters on TV," *Autostraddle*, March 25, 2016, Accessed January 3, 2021, <https://www.autostraddle.com/autostraddles-ultimate-infographic-guide-to-dead-lesbian-tv-characters-332920/>.

research has provided insight into the earliest manifestations of Dead Lesbian Syndrome, its possible causes in the forms of the mutated tomboy narratives of the nineteenth century, inspiration drawn from Alice Mitchell's murder trial, and the societal need to destroy anything that threatened the family and cisheteronormative marriage, foundations of our capitalist society. Drawing from the work of Mary Douglas, this research analyzed the ways in which society tried to reduce and destroy the perceived danger of lesbianism, which pushed upon the internal margins of society that separate "male" from "female" and "dominant" from "submissive." Furthermore, this research traced the ways in which Dead Lesbian Syndrome became a part of the survival literature women-loving women in the real world needed to create first imagined and then connected communities and feel a sense of belonging in a very isolating world. This research looked at individual Dead Lesbian Syndrome victims, the symptoms they had in terms of lesbianism as a form of psychosis and the evil lesbian, and the ways in which women-loving women characters died. Taking all this information in, it is time to look towards finding a cure.

According to the work of Karen Frost, only 5% of international women-loving women characters and 8% of women-loving women characters on television in the United States have received happy endings. Based on approximations for cisheteronormative television characters, a women-loving woman television character is six times more likely to be unhappy by the end of her narrative arc than her cisheteronormative counterpart.<sup>1040</sup> Frost goes on to explain the "Women in Refrigerators" comic book trope, in which women characters are "injured, raped, or killed as a plot device to advance a male character's story arc."<sup>1041</sup> This comic book trope exists primarily because women are often secondary characters, and therefore more likely to be killed

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<sup>1040</sup> Karen Frost, "The Lesbian Unhappy Ending Problem," *What about Dat? Queer Media*, April 15, 2020, Accessed January 3, 2022, <https://whataboutdat.com/whats-new/2020/4/15/the-lesbian-unhappy-ending-problem>.

<sup>1041</sup> Ibid.



to advance the plot. As women-loving women characters are both women and queer, making them more likely to be secondary characters, they are often murdered as a way to further the plot. While this is applicable to television shows and movies where the women-loving woman is not the protagonist, it falls short of explaining plays like *The Children's Hour*, where Martha is the main character, or books like *Queer Patterns*, where both the women-loving woman protagonist and a minor women-loving women character die.

In order to understand how Dead Lesbian Syndrome has continued to thrive while women-loving women audiences are trapped engaging with popular media that rarely even wants them to survive, more research is needed into the prevalence of Dead Lesbian Syndrome in literature from the 1950s through the present day, the connections between the Golden Age of Lesbian Pulp and the (re)introduction of women-loving women characters to film and television in the 1960s, and the decisions made by writers, directors, and editors both individually and systematically today. There are still many factors to be individually drawn out and assessed, including the influence of male writers, directors, and publishers on Dead Lesbian Syndrome; the intersectional impact of race and class on Dead Lesbian Syndrome; and the generational divide between Generation X, millennials, and Generation Z when it comes to perpetuating these tropes. After the unexpected murder of Lexa on *The 100*, fans created the “LGBTQ Fans Deserve Better Pledge,” which put pressure on showrunners and writers to “to ‘refuse to kill a queer character solely to further the plot of a straight one,’ avoid ‘story choices that perpetuate the toxic [Bury Your Gays] trope’ and make other improvements to counter the long history of killing off gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters, often as punishment for their sexuality.”<sup>1042</sup>

However, this movement soon lost steam, perhaps because only half the number of women-

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<sup>1042</sup> Jonathan Handel, “‘Bury Your Gays’ Trope Stumps Panelists at Writers Guild Event,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 6, 2016, Accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/bury-your-gays-trope-stumps-891596/>.

loving women characters were killed off during 2017, and the pledge is no longer available online. To ensure sustained support for an end to Dead Lesbian Syndrome, the world needs more diverse voices telling more diverse stories about women-loving women. After all, if Bobby in 1937, Julie in 1976, and Cat in 2012 are all women-loving women who confessed their love and then promptly walked into traffic to be hit by an oncoming vehicle, and Clare in 1929, Lucy in 1943, and Texas Longford in 2013 can all be defenestrated by the person they loved, there appears to be a limited number of ways Dead Lesbian Syndrome can manifest.<sup>1043</sup> It has been 130 years since the unfortunate murder trial that inspired the first anglophone women-loving women novels—and the first victims of Dead Lesbian Syndrome. The rights, opportunities, and lives of women-loving women have changed drastically during this time. It is time for women-loving women representation in fiction to change and create stories that serve as accurate models of and for women-loving women audiences today. If society no longer wants to eliminate the lesbian threat, then creators need to prove women-loving women are safe by keeping these characters alive and giving them the realistic—and yes, sometimes even happy—endings they deserve.

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<sup>1043</sup> Bobby was the character who walked into traffic in *Children of Loneliness*, Julie walked into traffic in *Executive Suite*, and Cat was a character who died by getting hit by a car after realizing she was in love with her ex-girlfriend on the British television series *Lip Service*; Clare fell out of a window in Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing*, Lucy was the young girl pushed out a window by Miss Grange in *College for Scandal* (1943), and Texas Longford was pushed out a window on her wedding day by her fiancé in *Hollyoaks*. See Chapter 5 for *Children of Loneliness*, Chapter 4 for *Passing*, Chapter 6 for *College for Scandal*, and Riese, "All 215 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters On TV, And How They Died,"

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Drew University	Madison, NJ	PhD Degree	2022