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Censorship and the Portrayal of Lesbian Existence in the English Literary Tradition

by Carol-Lynn Thompson*

The recent conflict over the exhibition of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., is the latest example of attempts to censor the portrayal of homosexual existence. Throughout history, legal and informal barriers, such as refusal to publish or display, have prevented gay men and lesbian women from representing their understanding and experience of homosexuality through art and literature. The use of the law to censor these works, whether by obscenity statutes or legislation designed to inhibit the financing of such works, even when unsuccessful, has potentially far-reaching effects on societal perception of homosexuality and may have a chilling effect on those who wish to create or publish works depicting homosexual existence.

There is little debate that lesbian literature has been censored in the English literary tradition. In her essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich identifies a "bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible." Rich argues that compulsory heterosexuality has been and continues to be "strengthened by legislation, religious fiat, media imagery and efforts at censorship." "Lesbian existence," Rich states, thus "comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life." Most importantly, lesbian existence has been rendered more difficult than other types of nonconformity because it:

has been lived (unlike, say, Jewish or Catholic existence) without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning. The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been

* B.A. 1986 Yale College; Member, Class of 1990, Hastings College of the Law. For Eleanor.
2. Id. at 26.
3. Id. at 24.
4. Id. at 52.
kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal and pain.\textsuperscript{5}

This paper will examine some of the first published works of lesbian literature in the twentieth century to show the effects of historical and contemporary censorship. Radclyffe Hall’s \textit{The Well of Loneliness} was the first English novel to meaningfully portray lesbian existence and illustrates the difficulties of writing without a tradition to call upon. \textit{The Well of Loneliness}\textsuperscript{6} was censored legally in both England and America after publication. The two other novels discussed in this essay, \textit{Devoted Ladies}\textsuperscript{7} by M.J. Farrell and \textit{Nightwood}\textsuperscript{8} by Djuna Barnes, were published soon after Hall’s novel. The treatment and development of lesbian characters in these novels reveal Farrell’s and Barnes’s different responses to the censorship of this theme.

I.

Radclyffe Hall — \textit{The Well of Loneliness}

In 1928, Radclyffe Hall published \textit{The Well of Loneliness}, considered by many to be the “first full portrait of a lesbian in a novel.”\textsuperscript{9} \textit{The Well of Loneliness} shows the effects of censorship on many levels. First, Hall’s novel is an autobiographical account of the difficulties a woman faced in developing a lesbian identity at a time when there was no popular or available literature on lesbianism. Further, Hall’s novel reflects the limitations of the only available depiction of lesbianism, sociological and medical studies and how that affected her understanding of what it meant to be a lesbian. Finally, Hall’s attempt to locate her novel in the mainstream literary tradition reveals her desire to claim a legitimate place for the portrayal of lesbian existence and to reach a broad audience in her plea for sympathy and understanding of lesbianism.

\textsuperscript{5} Id.
\textsuperscript{6} R. HALL, \textit{THE WELL OF LONELINESS} (1928).
\textsuperscript{7} M. FARRELL, \textit{DEVOTED LADIES} (1934).
\textsuperscript{8} D. BARNES, \textit{NIGHTWOOD} (1936).
A. Hall’s autobiographical portrayal of the effects of censorship in developing a lesbian identity

_The Well of Loneliness_ begins in the late nineteenth century with the birth of Hall’s heroine, Stephen Gordon. At that time, the practice of homosexuality was a crime and most well-bred women had never heard the word “lesbian,” nor knew that such women could exist. The first half of the novel chronicles Stephen’s early manifestations of “inversion” (or lesbianism), her developing awareness that she is “different,” and her attempts to understand the nature of that difference in an environment of silence.

As a child Stephen bears an astonishing resemblance to her father and although handsome, is marked by a “certain largeness about her, a certain crude lack of grace in her movements.”10 Stephen not only resembles a boy, but also desperately longs to be one: dressing up in pants rather than skirts, taking pride in her athletic prowess, and pretending to be male heroes like Lord Nelson.11 Because Stephen’s early signs of lesbianism are easily dismissable as tomboyish eccentricity, Hall does not show Stephen as seriously affected at this stage by her difference.

Stephen’s parents are more deeply affected early on by the unusual nature of their only child. Stephen’s father, Sir Philip, a singularly wise and scholarly man, senses that his daughter has been “secretly defrauded, was bearing some unmerited burden.”12 After many long nights of study in his library, Sir Philip comes to recognize that Stephen is a lesbian and resolves to bring her up like a boy so that she will be able to overcome the obstacles she is bound to face in the world. Unfortunately, Stephen’s mother, Anna, is secretly repulsed by the inexplicable “alien quality” in her daughter and finds it impossible to love Stephen. Sir Philip is unable to tell Anna, a delicately bred gentlewoman, that he believes their daughter is a lesbian. Sir Philip’s inability to break this taboo and Anna’s guilt and incomprehension surrounding her feelings towards her daughter drive a wedge in their marriage and increase the distance between Stephen and her mother.

When Stephen reaches adulthood, social roles based on sex distinction become essential and she first begins to feel the true pain and isolation of being incomprehensibly different. Stephen unhappily and unsuccessfully tries to fit into what she considers a “solemn and very

10. R. Hall, _supra_ note 6, at 16.
11. _Id_. at 19-20.
12. _Id_. at 16.
ridiculous procession, animals marching into Noah’s Ark two by two”¹³ from fear of being alone in a “no-man’s-land of sex.”¹⁴ Stephen’s growing awareness that she is different reaches a crisis when she meets Martin Hallam. Stephen and Martin develop a “wonderful friendship,”¹⁵ until Martin discovers that he loves Stephen. Not understanding that Stephen is a lesbian, Martin asks her to marry him. Stephen responds to Martin’s proposal with “a kind of dumb horror, staring at his eyes that were clouded by desire, while gradually over her colourless face there was spreading an expression of the deepest repulsion — terror and repulsion.”¹⁶ Stephen’s response to Martin’s proposal compels her to recognize that she is fundamentally different from other women and forces her to ask, “What is she, what manner of curious creature, to have been so repelled by a lover like Martin?”¹⁷ This questioning leads her to reconsider the events of her childhood, the “things in her past that perplexed her,”¹⁸ remembering how “[s]he had never been quite like the other children.”¹⁹ However, Stephen has no way to answer these questions and finally turns to her father. Sir Philip refuses to tell her that he believes she is a lesbian because he finds it beyond his strength to tell her how she has been “maimed” by God.²⁰

Because Stephen has no conception that she is a lesbian or what that means, Hall shows that Stephen’s first love affair is doomed to have bitter and far-reaching consequences. Stephen first falls in love with Angela Crossby, an American ex-showgirl married to a wealthy tradesman in the neighborhood. Angela, Hall shows us, is not the right mate for Stephen either spiritually or intellectually. However, being a worldly and experienced woman, Angela is the first person to recognize that Stephen is a lesbian and to encourage her friendship. Stephen soon becomes involved romantically with Angela but never stops “to analyse her feelings, she only knew that she felt exultant.”²¹ Hall makes it clear that Angela does not reciprocate Stephen’s emotions but rather has become involved with Stephen out of boredom: “the very strangeness of it all was an attraction. Stephen was becoming a kind of strong drug, a kind of anodyne against boredom.”²² Stephen finally begs Angela to

¹³. Id. at 77.
¹⁴. Id. at 79.
¹⁵. Id. at 96.
¹⁶. Id. at 98.
¹⁷. Id. at 99.
¹⁸. Id. at 100.
¹⁹. Id.
²⁰. Id. at 106.
²¹. Id. at 135.
²². Id. at 147.
leave her husband. However, Angela brutally rejects Stephen, saying, "Can I help it if you’re — what you obviously are?"23

Angela’s question forces Stephen to acknowledge that there is something “wrong” with her love for Angela:

She would think with a kind of despair: “What am I in God’s name — some kind of abomination?” And this thought would fill her with very great anguish, because, loving much, her love seemed to be sacred . . . . With a shock she would realize how completely this coming of love had blinded her vision; she had stared at the glory of it so long that not until now had she seen its black shadow.24

Even Stephen’s old governess, Puddle, who Hall suggests is also a lesbian, refuses to help Stephen by telling her that she is a lesbian and that there are many others like her because she respects the “conspiracy of silence that forbade her to speak frankly.”25 The belief that she is an isolated freak leads Stephen to hate herself and to continue in her masochistic relationship with Angela. Angela, however, soon romantically involves herself with a man. Worried that Stephen’s jealousy will lead to her exposure, Angela betrays Stephen by sending one of Stephen’s love letters to her mother. Stephen’s mother is horrified and tells Stephen that they cannot live together in the same house. Stephen, before leaving, spends the night in her father’s old library and discovers a special bookcase containing books by Kraft-Ebbing26 and others along with Sir Philip’s notes about homosexuality. In a moment of revelation, Stephen understands that although not “normal,” she is not unnatural and that there are many other women who are lesbians like herself.

The first half of Hall’s novel thus portrays the enormously painful and difficult process of forging a lesbian identity when the subject of lesbianism is censored. As a child, Stephen feels different and dissatisfied with the expected role of French children. Sir Philip, who understands that Stephen is probably a lesbian, is unable to rise above the taboo nature of the subject to help Stephen understand herself or to help Anna understand and love her daughter. His failure to explain to Stephen that she is a lesbian and that there are others like her leaves

23. Id. at 149.
24. Id. at 152-53.
25. Id. at 154.
26. Kraft and Ebbing were a 19th century psychiatric team who did early research on sexual behavior.
Stephen unprepared for her first encounters with sex. Consequently, Stephen’s relationship with Martin is based on misunderstanding and their friendship ends up causing them unnecessary pain and confusion. Stephen’s first love affair is with a woman who cannot ever properly share her feelings because she is not a lesbian. However, Angela is the only person to recognize that Stephen is a lesbian because she has lived a sexually promiscuous and decadent life and has been exposed to more aspects of sexuality than a well-bred woman of good family. Angela is easily able to exploit Stephen’s feelings to occupy her boredom. The belief that her love is abnormal and wrong makes Stephen a ready victim of Angela’s cruelty and eventual betrayal.

The last half of the novel chronicles Stephen’s development into a great writer and her emigration to Paris where she is exposed to the lesbian salon of Valerie Seymour. Stephen falls in love with a young Englishwoman, Mary, who comes to live with her in Paris. Although desperately in love, Mary is unhappy in the underground world of homosexual bars that are her only social arena and is devastated by straight society’s rejection of her. At this point in the novel, Martin reappears. Martin realizes that Stephen is a lesbian and is content to be her friend. Unfortunately, Martin soon falls in love with Mary. Stephen recognizing that she can never make Mary happy because she cannot provide the social security that “normal” women need, drives Mary into Martin’s arms. The novel ends with Stephen’s realization that she will always be alone and that her mission is to articulate the pain and isolation of lesbian existence.

B. The effect of existing depictions of lesbianism on Hall’s portrayal of lesbian existence

Hall’s novel assimilates and is affected by the inherent limitations of the only material available to her that discussed lesbianism — sociological and medical treatises. Even scientific discussion of lesbianism was sharply regulated at this time. In 1897 (some years after the fictional birth of Stephen Gordon), Havelock Ellis’s Sexual Inversion, a pioneering study of homosexuality that was widely praised in Europe, was censored by the English courts. Ellis made the mistake of portraying homosexuality as a psychological or physical predisposition rather than a moral failing. Hall was probably familiar with Ellis’s work since he wrote the Commentary to The Well of

Loneliness. It is likely that Hall found even this limited scientific literature important in forging her own lesbian identity. In the novel, the scholarly and scientific works by Kraft-Ebbing and Ullrichs are instrumental to Sir Philip and Stephen in understanding and accepting Stephen’s lesbianism.

Hall integrates into The Well of Loneliness contemporary scientific theories of lesbianism by portraying lesbianism as a genetic deformity. "Inverts" or homosexuals are described as physically different from "normal" beings, exhibiting varying degrees of androgynous characteristics. As a baby, Stephen is a “narrow-hipped, wide-shouldered little tadpole.” When Stephen reaches adulthood, she perceives something wrong with her body that makes feminine clothes look strange on her. During her first real sexual and romantic crisis, when Angela has spurned her, Stephen rejects her own body as the source and symbol of her isolation:

she stared at herself in the glass; and even as she did so she hated her body with its muscular shoulders, its small compact breasts, and its slender flanks of an athlete. All her life she must drag this body of hers like a monstrous fetter imposed on her spirit. This strangely ardent yet sterile body that must worship yet never be worshipped in return by the creature of its adoration. She longed to maim it, for it made her feel cruel ...

Stephen believes that she can recognize other “inverts” as well by their physical characteristics. When she first visits Valerie Seymour’s salon, she recognizes the other lesbians by ankles that “were too strong and too heavy for those of a female” or by a “voice which had something peculiar about it . . . like a boy’s voice on the verge of breaking.” Homosexuality is described not only as a physical deformity, but also as a psychological weakness in many ways. Throughout the novel, Hall talks about the “nerves of the invert,” which are more sensitive and yet more erratic than those of “normal” human beings.

Hall’s attempt to integrate a scientific theory of homosexuality based on genetically determined physical and psychological differences

28. R. Hall, supra note 6, at 13.
29. Id. at 73-74.
30. Id. at 186-87.
31. Id. at 350.
32. Id. at 350-51.
significantly limits her portrayal of lesbian existence. Hall recognizes that it is “difficult to classify degrees of attraction. For not always would they [lesbians] attract their own kind, very often they attracted quite ordinary people.” Hall portrays women like Angela and Mary who become sexually involved with women but do not exhibit androgynous characteristics as not truly “lesbian” women. Angela and Mary both perceive Stephen as being different from themselves. For Stephen, loving a woman is natural, but for Angela and Mary loving a woman involves an element of unexplained choice. Hall attempts to attribute Angela’s and Mary’s attraction to other factors. Angela is not genuinely attracted to Stephen, but becomes involved with her out of boredom and a decadent attraction to the strangeness of having a relationship with another woman. Mary is portrayed as an inexperienced, naive, and pure-hearted young woman who is attracted to Stephen’s strength, kindness, and intelligence without perhaps fully considering the significance of her choice. Consequently, Mary is just as easily attracted to Martin because he exhibits those same personal qualities while offering a greater degree of social protection.

Hall believes homosexuality is a genetic deformity, thus the individual is not responsible for her or his homosexual condition because God has created her or him that way. Because God has created homosexuals, they cannot be unnatural or immoral. However, Hall must then explain why homosexuals are rejected by the rest of “normal” society. Hall identifies homosexuals as those upon whom God has set the “mark of Cain.” Hall does not attempt to explain why God has maimed or stigmatized homosexuals in this way. Rather, she takes the stigmatization as something that must be courageously faced and overcome.

Hall’s portrayal of lesbian existence is thus informed by the little existing scientific and religious discussion of homosexuality that serves as a building block for her literary portrayal of lesbian existence. However, Hall’s portrait of lesbian existence is also limited by her acceptance of homosexuality as a genetic deformity and understanding of homosexuals as God’s maimed creatures. As a result, Hall only recognizes women like Stephen who are physically marked as lesbians and denies the lesbian identity of women like Angela and Mary who appear “normal.” Hall minimizes the role of choice and erotic attraction, and thus denies that perhaps lesbian existence itself can offer something

33. Id. at 353.
34. Id. at 301.
uniquely appealing that women might intellectually and sexually prefer to heterosexual existence.

**C. Hall’s attempt to portray lesbian existence within the mainstream English literary tradition**

Radclyffe Hall’s novel is a conscious effort to validate lesbian existence by ending the silence surrounding the subject of lesbianism and establishing a lesbian presence in mainstream literature. At the time Hall wrote *The Well of Loneliness* she was a very popular and successful novelist. Hall, through her alter-ego, Stephen, makes it clear that as a writer she felt an obligation to bear witness to the “normal” world. The novel ends with Stephen’s affirmation of herself as a conduit for the words of all homosexual people:

> one voice, one demand; her own voice into which those millions had entered. A voice like the awful, deep rolling of thunder; a demand like the gathering together of great waters. A terrifying voice that made her ears throb, that made her brain throb, that shook her very entrails, until she must stagger and all but fall beneath this appalling burden of sound that strangled her in its will to be uttered . . . . Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!35

Hall’s novel is shaped in many ways by this attempt to reach a mainstream audience by integrating her subject within an established literary format. *The Well of Loneliness* incorporates many literary conventions of its time. Stephen Gordon is a member of the landed gentry, with a fondness for horses, dogs, hunting, the English countryside, and old family retainers. Hall, through Stephen, demonstrates a respect for home, family, God, and England. The novel might almost be a typical novel of a boy’s coming of age except that the novel has a heroine rather than a hero. However, the novel’s attempt to embrace reassuring conventions limits a full portrayal of lesbian existence. Hall does not go into any real descriptions of sex that might alienate the reader; she prudently ends her love scenes with mere kisses. The relationship between Mary and Stephen follows the structure of a heterosexual relationship of the time. Stephen supports and protects Mary financially and emotionally. Mary serves as a homemaker and is characterized by greater emotional needs than Stephen. Most disturbingly, Mary is portrayed as a simpler and less

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35. *Id.* at 437.
intelligent being than Stephen. This depiction of lesbian existence does not only apply to Stephen and Mary, but also serves to describe the relationships of Stephen’s and Mary’s lesbian friends.

*The Well of Loneliness* thus illustrates on three levels the difficulties of developing a lesbian identity when all discussion of lesbianism has been censored. On the first level, Hall’s novel chronicles an individual’s painful attempt to understand and accept her own lesbianism in the absence of any honest or sympathetic portrayal of lesbian existence to serve as a model. On a second level, Hall’s integration of the little existing sociological and medical literature on lesbianism demonstrates how significant any written representation of lesbian existence was to an educated woman of the time in attempting to understand and explain who she was in relation to the rest of the world. However, the use of existing depictions of lesbianism also limits Hall’s own vision in realizing a lesbian portrait. On a third level, Hall’s novel demonstrates how in attempting to end the censorship of this subject and to establish a lesbian presence in the English literary tradition, Hall felt compelled to adhere to the conventions of a literary tradition built upon a heterosexual norm. Without rejecting these conventions, Hall was unable to depict what is uniquely true of lesbian existence.

### D. Reception of *The Well of Loneliness*

Unfortunately for Radclyffe Hall, publication of *The Well of Loneliness* did not carve out a niche for the portrayal of lesbian existence in the English literary tradition. Despite initial positive reviews, the book soon became the center of “[t]he most celebrated obscenity case of the period.” 36 An English court held the novel obscene 37 under the *Hicklin* test, 38 finding that the tendency of the novel was to deprave and corrupt. 39 The court objected to the book because it:

> glorified unnatural tendencies . . . there is not one word which suggests that anyone with the horrible tendencies described is in the least degree blameworthy. All the characters are presented as attractive people and put forward with admiration. What is even

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37. Id. at 36.
38. Regina v. Hicklin, 3 L.R.-Q.B., test for obscenity as follows: “I think that the test of obscenity is this, whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort might fall.” 3 L.R.-Q.B. at 371.
more serious is that certain acts are described in the most alluring terms.\textsuperscript{40}

The suppression of the book was upheld by an appellate court that found that the book was obscene in that it "seeks to glorify a vice or to produce a plea of toleration for those who practice it."\textsuperscript{41}

The American publication of the novel was similarly banned by a New York court.\textsuperscript{42} As first amendment commentators have noted, the suppression of \textit{The Well of Loneliness} was a unique case in American obscenity jurisprudence:

The censorious, seldom, if ever, had placed a taboo upon an entire subject matter or theme, a whole area of thought. Usually, the attack had been against a specific technique used in presenting the theme, such as four-letter words . . . or specific sexual descriptions. Until [this case], no court opinion had been addressed directly to the question of banning the literary expression of an entire area of human knowledge or human behavior.

Then, . . . the question was raised: Should the public be denied the right to read a book or see a play on the subject of female homosexuality?\textsuperscript{43}

The American court found the book obscene because:

\begin{quote}
\textit{it does not argue for repression or moderation of insidious impulses . . . The theme of the novel is not only antisocial and offensive to public morals and decency, but the method in which it is developed, . . . 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.}\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

An appellate court later reversed the magistrate's opinion, finding that a court could not ban an entire theme from literary discussion.\textsuperscript{45}

\begin{flushright}
40. \textit{Id.} at 36.
41. \textit{Id.}
42. People v. Friede, 133 Misc. 612 (1929). \textit{See also} H. CLOR, O\textsc{bscenity and Public Morality:} CENSORSHIP IN A LIBERAL SOCIETY 18 (1969); M. \textsc{ernst \\& A. Schwartz, Censorship: The Search for the Obscene} 72-78 (1964).
43. M. \textsc{ernst \\& A. Schwartz, supra} note 42, at 71.
44. People v. Friede, 133 Misc. at 613. \textit{See also} H. CLOR, \textit{supra} note 42, at 18; M. \textsc{ernst \\& A. Schwartz, supra} note 42, at 75-76.
45. H. CLOR, \textit{supra} note 42, at 283 n. 20.
\end{flushright}
The legal reaction to *The Well of Loneliness* had a profound effect on subsequent authors' portrayals of lesbian existence. The English and American court cases indicated that any discussion of lesbianism should follow "the legal straitjacket for the modern novel: The good end happily, and the bad unhappily" and lesbians were bad. The court also rejected the notion that lesbianism deserved a meaningful or sympathetic literary exploration. The legal community thus effectively cautioned future writers that lesbianism was a deviant and abhorrent practice, and if represented, must be portrayed as such.

II.

M.J. Farrell — *Devoted Ladies*

In 1934, five years after the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*, M.J. Farrell published *Devoted Ladies*, a novel that portrayed a lesbian relationship but faced no censorship problems. Farrell was not a lesbian and admitted to a rather prurient interest in the notion of lesbian lovers: "I suppose I was rather curious and shocked . . . . I was excited by finding out about lesbians . . . . It was new. It made a subject." With little commitment to the subject and no serious interest in meaningfully exploring lesbian existence, Farrell was easily able to fit her portrayal of lesbianism into the prescribed "the bad end unhappily" format.

The two devoted ladies in Farrell's novel are Jessica and Jane who live together in London. Jane is a young American who has inherited a large fortune from her dead husband and now supports Jessica. Jane is characterized as the weak and artificial creation of a decadent society. She is "[s]imply an object of art . . . with a white broken face and hidden hands and feet, her false voice and false garrulous mind and her joyless body that had passed through all loves and known not one." Jessica is described like the androgynous lesbian of Radclyffe Hall's novel, with dark short hair, a fondness for masculine clothing, and a "hard and boyish" appearance. However, far from demonstrating the nobility of Stephen Gordon, Jessica is sadistic and self-centered with little control over her darker impulses. "It was typical of her to break china and bite baths in moments of stress . . . ." Farrell tells us.

46. G. ROBERTSON, supra note 27, at 36.
47. M. FARRELL, supra note 7, at x.
48. Id. at 134.
49. Id. at 42.
50. Id.
Farrell does not in any sense idealize the relationship between Jane and Jessica; on the contrary, neither character appears really to love the other. For Jane, "her affection for Jessica was a pose, a queer piece of exhibitionism." Jessica, the real lesbian, is shown to be incapable of sustained relationships. She is said to have had a series of intensely passionate love affairs ending in her cruel and disdainful rejection of the love object. Even while passionately attached to Jane, her commitment takes the form of jealous scenes, verbal abuse, and violent physical domination. Jane is thus portrayed as the victim of her relationship with Jessica. The narrator of Devoted Ladies observes in introducing the plot, "why should Jane — poor silly — not be as happy as Blanche? . . . thanking Heaven (on a full stomach) for a Good Man's Love? Why contrarily should she be loved and bullied and perhaps even murdered by that frightful Jessica?"

The novel opens in the midst of a raucous party attended by people whose "feet were set forever in a salty and burning desert . . . Their faces were in the shadow of Death and Sin." In this way, Farrell establishes that the natural milieu of people like Jessica and Jane is a modern Sodom and Gomorrah. At the party, Jane meets George Playfair, an out of town visitor and simple member of the Irish gentry, who is an accidental guest with a limited perception of the other partygoers. George meets Jane and becomes fascinated with her appearance, not comprehending her relationship with Jessica. Farrell states that for someone to have explained Jane to George,

George would have had to learn a whole new language of life and having learnt it he would still have found Sylvester's explanation of Jane unsatisfying. Antichrist, that was how Jane typified all that she was to George could George have understood about her. A thing of the Groves. Unclean. Incredible.

George becomes entranced with Jane and asks her to visit him in Ireland. Soon after the party, Jane succumbs to alcohol poisoning. As part of her recovery plan, she decides to go to Ireland, which has caught her interest after talking with George. Upon arriving in Ireland, Jessica hurts her leg in a car accident and Jane is left to her own devices. Jane quickly establishes a relationship with George and realizes that she

51. Id. at 7.
52. Id. at 23.
53. Id. at 30.
54. Id. at 27.
wishes to escape the tyrannical Jessica and marry him. Jessica recovers and upon discovering how seriously Jane has defected from her, resolves to ruin Jane’s prospects by telling George about Jane’s past and the nature of her relationship with Jessica. However, Farrell ensures that Jane, the normal woman, ends happily by renouncing Jessica and marrying George, while Jessica, the lesbian, ends unhappily by being deliberately run off a cliff and killed.

Farrell’s portrayal of lesbians bears some similarities to Hall’s portrayal but manages to satisfy the prescriptions of the English courts. There is nothing sympathetic or attractive in Farrell’s portrayal of lesbian existence. Jessica, who bears a superficial resemblance to the androgynous lesbian Radclyffe Hall identified, is a malevolent, domineering, and emotionally unstable woman. Jane has become involved with Jessica, much like Angela in The Well of Loneliness, out of boredom and a decadent attraction to something strange and violent. However, Jane, the normal woman, is not as guilty as Jessica, the real lesbian, because she is Jessica’s victim. She has been preyed upon by Jessica who lives off her by dominating her physically and mentally. Farrell thus shows that lesbian existence, if appearing attractive initially, is in reality a doomed and unhappy choice. Further, Farrell makes sure the bad end unhappily by purposefully killing off Jessica, the unrepentant and true lesbian, while Jane, the comparatively innocent victim, is allowed the redemption of marriage. This remains a relatively happy ending for a woman who has lived as “badly” as Jane, even though she is marrying a man who in his naive stupidity would hate and despise her if he should ever discover the nature of her past relationship with Jessica. Farrell thus confirms that a relationship with a man, no matter how dishonest or boring, is preferable to a relationship with a woman. In this way, Farrell respects the heterosexual norm in literary tradition. The main character of Devoted Ladies is Jane, the normal woman, not Jessica, the lesbian. The novel ends as do most novels of the period about women, with Jane’s marriage. Jane’s lesbian relationship only serves in this novel as an interesting obstacle to the traditional resolution of stories about women.

III.

Djuna Barnes — Nightwood

Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood, published in 1936, represents an entirely different response to the legal censorship of literature portraying lesbian existence. Barnes’s novel centers on the love affair between
Robin Vote and Nora Flood. Barnes accepts the fact that lesbian existence has been lived without a tradition or continuum. The ahistorical nature of lesbian existence becomes both a defining characteristic and rationale for love. Barnes also accepts that the normal world had rejected the serious treatment of lesbian existence in mainstream literature by censoring Hall’s novel. Thus, Barnes uses an underworld and outcast setting for her exploration of lesbian existence. The use of this apparently freakish environment makes the relationship between Nora and Robin exist outside societal criticisms or judgment. In addition, the unquestioned absence of heterosexual conventions enriches Barnes’s unique portrayal of a lesbian relationship.

One of the predominant themes in Barnes’s novel is the relationship her characters bear to history. Robin Vote, the central lesbian character of *Nightwood*, is a woman whom Barnes describes as embodying the unrecorded past. The other characters are fascinated by how Robin “carried the quality of the ‘way back’” and appears “like a person who has come from some place that we have forgotten but would give our life to recall.” Barnes suggests that in being outside written history, Robin remains uncivilized and in an earlier state of evolution. “Such a woman,” Barnes writes, “is the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache — we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers.” Felix, Robin’s husband, senses that she will always be an enigma to him because “her attention, somehow in spite of him, had already been taken by something not yet in history. Always she seemed to be listening to the echo of some foray in the blood that had no known setting.” Barnes also describes Robin as having the “odour of memory,” which is said to be like the odor of a fungus. Thus, through Robin, the central lesbian character, Barnes represents lesbianism as a primitive impulse — existing prior to and outside of recorded history, but, for that reason, more powerful because unknown and uncontained. Barnes shows that Robin (or lesbianism) has survived because it has not left its own prehistoric jungle - or sexual and shadowy underworld.

However, although homosexuality has perhaps survived because relatively hidden and unilluminated, for Robin, the essential lesbian

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55. D. Barnes, supra note 8, at 40.
56. Id. at 118.
57. Id. at 37.
58. Id. at 44.
59. Id. at 118.
60. Id. at 34.
woman, the fear that she will continue to exist without a history becomes a motivating force. Robin spends her days and nights travelling and meeting strangers, trying to imprint herself on them through sex. Robin continually asks those close to her to love her and to remember her. Nora Flood’s love for Robin becomes the vehicle by which Robin senses she will be preserved and through which Barnes creates the story that she herself wishes to make myth or legend.

Nora, as Barnes describes her, is characterized by her force and presence. Unlike Robin, Nora represents creation rather than decay. Barnes describes Nora as a powerful instrument by which people are reflected and recorded in a unique way: “[s]he was one of those deviations by which man thinks to reconstruct himself.” The record Nora creates is original because she is oblivious to “[t]he world and its history.” Nora “recorded without reproach or accusation . . . . In court she would have been impossible; no one would have been hanged, reproached or forgiven because no one would have been “accused.” Robin is drawn to Nora as someone who alone can attest to and recognize who Robin is without diminishing or judging her. Yet, Robin also is afraid to come out of hiding, to be recognized, because this threatens her survival: “[T]wo spirits were working in her, love and anonymity.” When Robin ceases her wandering and sets up a home with Nora, the house and its objects attest to their love. Thus, Nora becomes the means by which Robin is preserved in time and assumes a real identity:

so in the heart of the lover will be traced, as an indelible shadow, that which he loves. In Nora’s heart lay the fossil of Robin, intaglio of her identity, and about it for its maintenance ran Nora’s blood. Thus the body of Robin could never be unloved, corrupt or put away. Robin was now beyond timely changes, except in the blood that animated her.

However, Barnes shows that despite the mythologizing power of Nora’s love, Robin remains a creature of the underworld to which she is

61. Id. at 121.
62. Id. at 53.
63. Id.
64. Id.
65. Id.
66. Id. at 55.
67. Id. at 56.
doomed to return, going "from drink to drink, from person to person." 68

Barnes accepts Robin's natural environment as the underworld. She does not attempt to portray Robin or Nora in relation to normal society, explaining their difference through genetic or psychologic deformity, as Hall did. Instead, Barnes creates a powerful and rich Parisian underworld of "the odd." This forced association with decay and corruption, Barnes tells us, is closer to reality because the past is about depravity, untidiness. Cleanliness and conformity, Barnes believes, are a method of denial.

The book is also peopled by those who appear to be outcasts: Dr. Matthew O'Connor, the narrator, is a failed Irish-Catholic gynecologist, a drunk, and a transvestite; Felix, Robin's husband, is a Jewish nobleman from anti-Semitic Austria; and Nora is an American expatriate who works as a publicist for the circus. Yet by creating a world where there is no normal, the abnormal becomes acceptable and understood as independent of socially determined standards. Thus, the reader and the other characters in the novel are able to recognize through the unique setting that Nora and Robin possess a great and tragic love affair. Their eventual rift becomes a legend in the underworld. In retelling the story, Dr. O'Connor frames it not as a freakish event, but as part of the horrible unhappiness of the world as a whole. In Dr. O'Connor's eyes, people are "[a]ll queer in a terrible way" 69 and so the affair between Robin and Nora becomes just another "grand bad story." 70

Robin, although a night creature, refuses to allow the world to condemn her. Barnes describes Robin as holding herself above the contemporaneous judgment of her: "she will make an innocence for herself; a fearful sort of primitive innocence. It may be considered "depraved" by our generation, but our generation does not know everything." 71 Barnes characterizes Robin in her ability to exist as a night creature without being tainted by its depravity as a somnambulist, or sleep walker, living in her own sustained dream. Robin chooses Nora because she is able to view things with a myopic and unique vision, uninfluenced by a worldly or historical perspective. Robin, through Nora's love, allows herself to become visible or recognizable. But, Robin is also forced to confront her reflection in Nora's vision. Robin was innocent before because she "was outside the 'human type'

68. Id. at 59.
69. Id. at 161.
70. Id. at 161.
71. Id. at 117-18.
— a wild thing caught in a woman's skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain; . . . she can't 'put herself in another's place,' she herself is the only 'position' . . . . She knows she is innocent because she can't do anything in relation to anyone but herself.\textsuperscript{72} Tragically, Nora, because she is pure and faithful and because Robin loves her, is the first person, through her intimacy, to make Robin feel depraved and corrupt. As Nora realizes after Robin has left her because of this intolerable intimacy:

\begin{quote}
It was \textit{me} made her hair stand on end because I loved her. She turned bitter because I made her fate colossal. She wanted darkness in her mind — to throw a shadow over what she was powerless to alter — her dissolute life, her life at night; and I, I dashed it down.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

To reconcile herself with Nora, Robin makes Nora a Madonna symbol, an unattainable and maternal representation of goodness. However, the Madonna of Robin's nightworld is not an ideal, "not a saint at all, but a fixed dismay, the space between the human and the holy head, the arena of the 'indecent' eternal."\textsuperscript{74} Thus, for Robin, the only person capable of condemning or judging her is Nora, the only person Robin worships. However, because Nora loves her in return, she is not only her condemnor, but also her redeemer. As the doctor tells Nora, "you are the only one strong enough to have listened to the prosecution, your life; and to have built back the amazing defence, your heart!"\textsuperscript{75} In the last scene of the novel, Robin returns and prostrates herself before Nora in her family's chapel, enacting her inarticulate desire for redemption and love.

Barnes portrays the lesbian relationship between Robin and Nora as fundamentally different from heterosexual relationships. As Nora says, "A man is another person — a woman is yourself, caught as you turn in panic; on her mouth you kiss your own. If she is taken you cry that you have been robbed of yourself."\textsuperscript{76} In this way, lesbian love possesses greater truth than heterosexual relationships because it forces women to confront themselves. Barnes also shows that in loving another woman, a woman involves all aspects of herself and of that other woman. Nora

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\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{72} \textit{Id.} at 146.
\item \textsuperscript{73} \textit{Id.} at 156.
\item \textsuperscript{74} \textit{Id.} at 157.
\item \textsuperscript{75} \textit{Id.} at 153.
\item \textsuperscript{76} \textit{Id.} at 143.
\end{enumerate}
\end{flushleft}
calls Robin her lover and her child, "[f]or Robin is incest too," and Nora can be both lover and mother. Thus, in breaking the taboo against lesbian relationships, Barnes shows that Nora and Robin break other taboos and experience a greater, more powerful, and more encompassing relationship than is possible in a heterosexual relationship.

*Nightwood* shows the effects of literary and legal censorship of the lesbian theme in many ways. First, Barnes accepts as an underlying premise that lesbian existence has been lived without a documented history and has been denied by the normal world. Thus, the central lesbian character, Robin Vote, is portrayed as a woman who embodies a prehistoric or primitive sensuality, incomprehensible to and unknowable by the other characters. However, her unrecorded existence allows Robin to live uninhibited or constrained by civilized society and its mores. Robin’s quest for love becomes a quest for recognition and realization. Nora and her love for Robin become the means by which Robin is preserved in the world and is able to claim an earthly space. Tragically, however, Nora’s love is also the means by which Robin comes to see the "indecency" of her life as a night creature. Because Nora loves Robin, she is the sole person who can fully comprehend her depravity, and the sole person who can redeem her through love. The ambiguous ending of *Nightwood* frustrates any conventional reading of the novel. Barnes subverts the prescription that lesbians must end badly by making Robin’s and Nora’s pain and unhappiness mythic and inevitable, thus raising the characters to tragic proportions.

Barnes, unlike Radclyffe Hall, does not attempt to excuse or plead for sympathy for Robin’s and Nora’s lesbianism. Barnes portrays Robin as unquestionably depraved or corrupt according to prevailing social standards. Yet, Barnes shows that Robin’s strength is her ability to insist upon her own primitive vision of innocence and to set herself above pity, sympathy or criticism by the outside world. Only Nora, the person who truly loves her, is portrayed as capable of judging her. Most importantly, Nora’s recognition of Robin’s depravity is not based on Robin’s lesbianism, but rather on Robin’s choice to live in the underworld. Yet, Barnes also suggests that Nora’s love, a woman’s love, alone can save Robin. Barnes, unlike Hall or Farrell, thus depicts women’s love as superior to heterosexual love. Barnes rejects the dominant literary reference to a Christ figure by insisting upon an uncomfortable and strange Madonna figure. She thus fashions a feminine model for the creation and redemption of lesbian existence.

77. *Id.* at 156.
Barnes sets her novel in a freakish underworld rather than attempting to portray lesbian existence within the normal world. The absence of a normal world allows this freakish world to become a unique vision of the world as a whole and reveals Barnes's own belief that people are "all queer in a terrible way."

Further, the distorted, nightmarish environment makes it more difficult for the reader to retain standards by which to judge or condemn the people portrayed in the novel. The utter absence of normality either alienates the casual reader or helps the dedicated reader to empathize with the characters and their lives. Finally, by exiling the normal world, Barnes denies heterosexual existence as the dominant model. Thus, Barnes's portrayal of lesbian existence is richer than that of any of the novels that preceded it. Barnes shows that lesbian existence does not simply replicate heterosexual existence; in loving another woman, a woman can experience herself essentially and uniquely because there are no constricting social models. Thus, lesbianism is portrayed as the more powerful and fundamental form of attachment.

Conclusion

The three works of literature discussed above represent the earliest known portrayals of lesbian existence in the English literary tradition. All three works show the effects of contemporaneous and historical censorship of the lesbian theme. *The Well of Loneliness* represented the first attempt to break through the silence surrounding lesbianism. Hall's novel, however, was itself limited by the absence of any prior lesbian tradition to enrich Hall's own portrayal of lesbian existence. Further, Hall, perhaps naively, believed that there could be a place for the portrayal of lesbian existence in the mainstream literary tradition and so her message appeared directed to a "normal" audience, seeking pity, sympathy, and tolerance. The censorship of Hall's novel warned other writers who sought to portray lesbian existence that lesbians must be portrayed as evil and should "end badly" and that lesbianism must not be portrayed as "natural."

M.J. Farrell's *Devoted Ladies* perfectly realized this prescriptive treatment of lesbianism. Farrell's portrayal was probably informed by Hall's book on some levels. The central lesbian character is depicted in a superficially similar way to Hall's androgynous heroine. The "normal" woman who becomes involved with the lesbian also bears many similarities to the evil first love of

78. Id. at 161.
Hall’s heroine. However, Farrell does not portray lesbian existence sympathetically or as a natural condition. The two “devoted ladies” have chosen to pursue a lesbian relationship in accordance with their decadent lives. Farrell’s teasing and ironic tone reflects her belief that her subject does not deserve serious treatment or understanding. Farrell thus reflects the view of those who write from within the mainstream tradition. Conversely, Djuna Barnes in Nightwood creates a fully realized portrait of lesbian existence. Barnes accepts the censor’s judgment that lesbians are depraved and have no place within “normal” society. Barnes, however, shows that the judgment of normal society is meaningless and that the underworld, or depravity, is preferable and closer to the essence of life. Barnes also shows that, although painful and doomed, lesbian relationships are more fundamental than heterosexual relationships. Finally, Barnes confronts the fact that lesbianism has been lived without a narrative tradition. Thus, the story of Robin’s quest for love as narrated by Nightwood’s many characters becomes itself a myth and history of lesbian existence. Barnes establishes a new precedent for the portrayal of lesbian existence.