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Radclyffe Hall's Gender Outlaw: Queer Shame and Gender
Performativity in *The Well of Loneliness*

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Abstract

Since *The Well of Loneliness*'s publication in 1928, critics have notoriously understood Radclyffe Hall's sexually inverted protagonist as a lesbian character. Nevertheless, despite its reputation as the lesbian novel for the majority of the early and mid-twentieth century, Stephen Gordon has been heavily criticised in lesbian circles for her hyper-masculine, "mannish", and melancholic lesbian representation. With the rise of the queer and trans movement, some contemporary critics have started arguing that Stephen's experiences correspond more accurately to that of a queer, trans person. Grounded in Queer theory, especially Judith Butler's conceptualisation of gender performativity as well as Feminist and Queer literary criticism, the purpose of this essay is to explore how queer gender identity and sexuality are presented, explored, and negotiated during the early twentieth century. Embedded in this literary exploration, I will also turn to affect theory to analyse notions of shame, loss, pride, and resistance in relation to queer experiences and identity formation, as well as its correlation to societal norms regarding gender and sexuality.

I claim that Hall's protagonist should be read as a trans "genderqueer" character rather than a cisgender lesbian. Stephen Gordon both subverts and endorses gender norms in her exploration of her queerness in accord with the socio-cultural and political climate of her time, which ultimately contributes to how and why her queer identity is formed the way it is. Thus, by focusing on Stephen's experiences of being queer, treating her as a trans character that embodies both transmasculine, lesbian and female experiences, this essay aspires to untangle the complex relationship between gender, sexuality, and shame in a non-essentialist way. The concept of "genderqueer" enables me to situate the novel in a larger and more fluid discourse of queer identities and experiences and thus contribute to a better understanding of how queer identities historically have been presented in literature and what the importance of their representation means to the past and future of queer gender non-conforming lives and history.

Keywords: Trans; genderqueer; gender performativity; sexuality; shame

Introduction

Despite being critically acclaimed and known as *the* lesbian novel during the early and mid-twentieth century, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), with its “sexually inverted” protagonist Stephen Gordon, has in the middle of its appraisal, also been met with heavy critique for its depiction of lesbianism as hyper-masculine, “mannish,” shameful, and melancholic. Indeed, for feminist and lesbian scholars, especially those adhering to second-wave feminism¹, Stephen presents them with a dilemma. On the one hand, *The Well of Loneliness*² bravely confronts twentieth-century societal stigma about non-heterosexuality, presenting a story which not only advocates for same-sex love but also argues for its naturalness in a homophobic society. On the other hand, Stephen's hyper-masculinity goes against the lesbian principle that a lesbian is a woman-identified woman³ who loves other women-identified women (Newton 1984, 557-58). Being perceived as a stereotypical hyper-masculine, butch lesbian, Stephen is the opposite of the androgyne lesbian that second-wave lesbian feminists favoured.

However, since the late eighties, many scholars have either come to defend Stephen Gordon's masculine lesbian identity or argue for a transgender understanding of her character. Yet, Stephen's status as a “sexual invert” in which gender, sex, and sexuality are conflated, neither lesbian nor transgender manages to capsule the fluidity and ambiguity of Stephen's gender and sexuality. Similarly to Tobi Lynn Harper (2015), this thesis will thus use the term “genderqueer” to describe Stephen's trans identity. It is my hope that such a reading will contribute to increased knowledge about the lived experience and struggles of being trans in a heteronormative society. In

¹ The “Second wave” feminism emerged during the 1960s. Aside from equal pay and recognition of women's unpaid workload in the home, it advocated for sexual liberation, reproductive rights, lesbianism and better protection and resources to prevent rape and domestic violence. The lesbian feminist rejection of heterosexuality and anything male-defined consequently put the traditional “butch/femme” relationship and identities under suspicion, accusing them of endorsing a patriarchal and heterosexual order. This “shift” to lesbian androgyny caused many masculine lesbians (some transmasculine people) and their (often) feminine-presenting lovers to be excluded from the lesbian community. This exclusion and uprise of transphobic discourse within gay and lesbian circles is what spurred the FTM (female-to-male) and transgender communities to grow during the 1970s (Stryker 2017, 123-138).

² From this moment on, the shortened version *The Well* will be used when referring to the novel.

³ Coined in the lesbian feminist pamphlet “The Woman-Identified Woman” by the feminist group Radicalesbians. In the pamphlet, the writers urged all women, lesbians, and heterosexual women to reject their “male-given identity” and come together as a collective to resist and fight against the patriarchal structures that formed hierarchical gender roles in which women were given subordinate positions. To them, women will never be “free” from oppression as long as they are dependent on the “male culture,” “approval,” and “heterosexual structure” that binds them to “one-on-one relationships” with their male oppressors (1970).

addition, by engaging in a discourse about trans existence in literature, gender non-conforming people may lay further claim to their place in literary history –including their right to existence.

On another note, the continuous melancholy that underscores Stephen’s experience throughout the novel amplifies a common discontent about homosexual portrayals that insists on reducing gay and lesbian experiences to those marked by melancholy, loss, and shame. In agreement with Ester Newton, the question one might ask is: What exactly is it with Stephen Gordon that makes lesbian feminists and allies “squirm?” (1984, 558). Why were early lesbian feminists unable to make sense of her character and legitimise her story as an authentic representation of a lesbian experience? Furthermore, with the rise of various interpretations about Stephen’s gender and sexuality in the late twentieth century and twenty-first century, where does that leave her? Is she a lesbian, a transgender man or something else entirely? How and why does Stephen’s representation of her genderqueer experience matter for the queer community and literary history?

As will be discussed, the answers to these questions can be found by viewing Stephen not as a “fixed” cisgender lesbian but as a “fluid” trans genderqueer person.⁴ It will also be argued that an analysis like the one proposed should be done by approaching shame rather than dismissing it. The primary reason for reading *The Well* from a genderqueer perspective stems from a need to make trans literary history visible and, simultaneously, counter the transphobia that underscores some of the most well-known critiques of the novel. However, the intention is not to engage in a trans-lesbian “war” but rather provide an alternative perspective to viewing gender and sexuality, emphasising the physical and emotional experience of being gender non-conforming in a heteronormative society. Hopefully, this will offer some possible explanations as to why critics such as Blanche Wiesen-Cook, Lillian Faderman, and Catharine Stimpson reject Stephen Gordon’s lesbian representation to such an extreme extent.⁵ Moreover, this essay will also argue against their rejection of shame due to a conviction that a

⁴ Despite this, and the fact that Stephen is a “man’s” name this author will refer to Stephen using she/her pronouns as these are the ones used in *The Well*.

⁵ See, for example, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (Faderman 1981); “Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English” (Stimpson 1981) and “‘Women Alone Stir My Imagination’: Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition” (Cook 1979).

complete dismissal of shame, melancholy, and loss in relationship to queer subjectivity and experience risk undermining its unavoidable effect on queer identity formation.⁶

Indeed, as some scholars have argued, gay and lesbian shame does not evaporate by rejection and a complete turn to pride. Instead, it shifts to other marginalised queer bodies (Liu 2017; Valentine 2007). While advocates for gay and lesbian pride have a valid point that shame, loss, and trauma should not define or equate with homosexuality, the presence and influence of shame in relation to queer experiences cannot be ignored. This essay intends to move away from viewing gender, sexuality, shame, and pride from an essentialist perspective. Instead, I will turn to queer theory and affect theory. In contrast to an essentialist point of view which emphasises nature and “biological determinism” as fundamental aspects of one’s identity (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom 1996, 135) in which gender and sexuality are embedded, queer theory views identity, gender, and sexuality as unstable, fluid, variable and conflicting (Blackburn et al. 2015). According to Blackburn et al., queer theory’s poststructural notion of identity is founded on the argument that there is no such thing as a fixed, stable, and “true” identity but that it is constantly constructed and reconstructed through experiences, engagements, and performative acts (2015, 15).

Combined with affect theory, which Wen Liu argues should be understood as “the movement of intensive energies that travel across the boundaries of bodies, creating and undoing subjectivity through the dynamic relations of transmission, repetition, and incitation,” a more in-depth reading of Hall’s queer characters may be achieved (2017, 45). In affect theory, the concept of shame is theorised as a “circulatory affect” between bodies that, according to Liu, enables a queer strategy “of and through psychology,” which can help undo the “dichotomization of queer subjectivity between pride and risk, joy and melancholia, and happiness and unhappiness” (2017, 45-47). The goal to undo these types of binarisms aligns with queer theory’s goal to disrupt norms, particularly those contributing to the heterosexual/homosexual and female/male binaries (Blackburn et al. 2015, 15).

Closely intertwined with queer theory and the theorisation of queer performative acts, there is the idea that gender and gender identity is a social construct

⁶ This applies especially to those whose identities are formed and negotiated by intersecting factors such as race, ethnicity, class, and religion. Important as this aspect may be, it will not be discussed in detail. This is not due to a lack of interest or need but a lack of space and choice of angle in this essay. However, I urge the reader to approach the matters and issues this text discusses through an intersectional lens.

constituted incoherently and non-consistently according to various historical, social, cultural, racial, ethnic, and political contexts (Butler 2006, 4). More specifically, gender, as Butler explains, is constructed in the sense that it is made through structures of power, and just as power structures change, so does gender. In other words, gender and gender categories are not rigid and timeless but transformational and ephemeral, including the categories of “man” and “woman” (Butler 2024, 138). They are, as Joan W. Scott argues, both “empty” due to a lack of “ultimate” and “transcendental meaning” and “overflowing” because they contain “alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions” (1988, 49). However, as Butler notes, while gender might be fluid and transitory, one is still born into a gender through the biological sex and the social expectations tied to it. Throughout life, one might then claim the gender assigned at birth, expand the category or challenge and/or change it by claiming another gender (Butler 2024, 146).

Another note is that while a distinction between gender/sex is often made in which only the former is seen as a social construct, some scholars, such as Judith Butler, also question this notion.⁷ While this essay will not argue specifically for either claim, Hall’s Stephen Gordon certainly is an intriguing subject of study in which these perspectives can be used in dialogue to think about the complexities of sex and gender. Indeed, with Stephen Gordon being a sexual invert, a concept that no longer is used and, notably, already was starting to be abandoned/re-conceptualised by the time *The Well* was written and published, the question of sex and gender becomes even more complex.

Arguably, one of the apparent reasons why Stephen Gordon has been read and critiqued as a lesbian rather than a trans character throughout history is due to the lack of conceptualisation (and rejection) of transness at the time it was published and most frequently read. It was not until the 1950s that the term transsexualism started being used and, with time, popularised. Before that, the closest to any conceptualisation of transness was Magnus Hirschfeld’s theorisation of transvestitism⁸ and various

⁷ For further theorisation on this matter, see the chapter “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions” in *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990) and “Terfs and British Matters of Sex” and “What About Sex?” in *Who’s Afraid of Gender* (2024).

⁸ Today, this term still exists but is rarely used due to its negative connotations. Susan Stryker provides a short explanation of this and other terms in *Transgender History* (2017, 39).

sexologists' theories on sexual inversion⁹ in which sex and gender were conflated (Stryker 2017, 38-40; Connell 2015, 108-109). Notably, in contemporary society, all these mentioned terms have either been abandoned, re-conceptualized or replaced with terms such as transgender or trans.¹⁰

In this essay, these outdated or rarely used terms will be used and analysed according to their historical context but also in comparison to today's, and my, understanding of terms such as "trans" and "queer."¹¹ Arguably, this is necessary in order to gain knowledge about the various historical situations and developments of queer and trans identities. Conversely, by analysing gender and sexuality by how they were treated, understood, and produced in different historical periods, such as the early twentieth century, one may be able to engage in critical discussions about these various historical representations of gender and sexuality without the limitation of one's own socio-cultural, academic, and political views on these matters.

Overall, this essay aims to use one of the most famous classical queer literature to provide a discussion and tools for how contemporary scholarship and readers can engage with a difficult but fundamentally crucial historical past for queer people and society at large. Naturally, with *The Well* being only one story out of many, there is a limit to how much a critical analysis of it may provide in terms of discussing queer representation and experience. Nevertheless, *The Well* offers great insight into the

⁹ The term was coined in 1964 by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who theorised in his book *Inclusa* that a homosexual man, according to the heteronormative logic, must be a woman "trapped" in a man's body and thus the homosexual woman a man "trapped" in a woman's body. Furthermore, he argued that these were natural and inborn identities (Bauer 2009, 90; Saxey 2014, 402).

¹⁰ The history of these terms is much more complex than described here. For example, the term "transgender" emerged in the '60s-'70s as a way for certain trans people to distinguish themselves from the transvestite (who only sought to temporarily express the opposite gender socially through clothes and mannerisms) and the transexual (who wanted to alter their genitals surgically). Back then, being transgender included a wish and need to present themselves as the opposite sex permanently. This included expressing their preferred gender socially (through, for example, clothes) and physically using hormone therapy. However, during its popularisation during the '90s, its definition broadened and started to encompass a variety of non-conforming gender identities. Today, while this definition still applies, the term "trans" has recently started to be used instead. Hence, in some cases, transgender is used much in the same way transsexual used to be, that is, to describe a trans individual who identifies with a binary gender opposite to the one assigned at birth (Stryker 2017; Stryker and Blackston 2022).

¹¹ I will use the term "trans" to refer to any gender non-conforming person/character who views their gendered identity as non-cisgender. This includes transgender/sexual people, non-binary people, agender people, genderqueer people etc. "queer" will be used somewhat interchangeably. More specifically, when used broadly, it will refer to all non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people/characters, including lesbians, gays, and trans people. In contrast, in discussions of Stephen Gordon's gender and sexuality, queer will refer to a person whose sexuality and gender are more fluid and undefined than they are for a cisgender lesbian. For more discussion and explanations on sexual and gendered identities and terminologies, see, for example, *Transgender History* (Stryker 2017), *Transgender Warriors* (Feinberg 1996), *Gender In World Perspective* (Connell 2015) or LGBTQIA+ sources on the internet such as any glossary from an LGBTQIA Resource Center.

societal climate and some of the many socio-cultural circumstances which affected the lives of queer people during the early twentieth century.

Thus, through a genderqueer lens, the purpose of this essay is to engage in a discussion of the various societal factors which affect Stephen's trans experiences and identity formation. It is my hope that such a reading will provide increased knowledge about the struggles of being trans in an oppressive heteronormative society while simultaneously enabling more gender non-conforming people the possibility to claim their place in literary history and, with that, their right to existence.

Conversely, starting with chapter one, attention will be on discussing some of the reasons behind the various interpretations of Stephen's gender and sexuality. Embedded in this discussion, arguments for my choice to do a genderqueer reading of the novel will be presented. Furthermore, this section will also give a first glimpse into some of the emotional and physical struggles which Stephen must deal with due to her genderqueer identity. In chapter two, the matter of authorial influence and character will be addressed as they are related to some of the reasons behind the lesbian readings of *The Well*. The discussion aims to provide some background information on Radclyffe Hall and her relationship to *The Well*, Stephen, writing and authorship. The last chapter will go into more depth about Stephen's queer experiences and some of the factors which come to shape them. While many and varied, the primary focus will be on discussing the aspects of shame and gender performativity, as these are the two main influential components in Stephen's process of being genderqueer and forming an identity in relation to that experience.

Stephen Gordon: A Butch Lesbian, a Transgender Man or Something in Between?

As previously stated, *The Well* has been read as a lesbian novel and Stephen has been understood as a stereotypical "butch" lesbian character even though the novel and the character itself identify her as a sexual invert and not as homosexual. This is an important distinction to make since, at the time of *The Well's* publication, the term "trans(gender/sexual)" did not exist, and the term "homosexual" had started to replace the terminology of the "sexual invert" to describe love between same-sexed people (Prosser 1998, 155). However, sexology's conceptualisation of sexual inversion differed quite distinctly from the psychoanalyst conceptualisation of homosexuality,

even though it was used interchangeably with the latter.¹² Conversely, if Hall had intended to write Stephen as a lesbian character, she would have had no reason not to have the novel identify her as homosexual rather than as a sexual invert. As Prosser puts it, Hall “did not need sexual inversion” to tell “a politically transformative story of female homosexuality” (156) and yet chose to do so. This makes Hall’s choice to reverse back to outdated terminology seem deliberate, even more so if one looks at the novel’s attitude towards the different theoretical frameworks of sexology and psychoanalysis.

For example, Hall establishes her knowledge of sexological writing and how its teachings relate to Stephen’s queerness as early as chapter two, when Stephen is only a child. Through the omniscient narrator of the story, the reader is first presented with a description of Stephen’s father as he “gravely” studies “the curious suggestion of strength in her movements, the long line of her limbs ... and the poise of her head on her over-broad shoulders” while she plays with their dogs in the garden (Hall 2014, 19). Following this, Sir Philip, now “[a]lone in that grave-looking, quiet study” in his library, would read a volume written by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and his eyes “would grow puzzled” before grabbing a pencil and writing down “little notes all along the immaculate margins” (19). He would “jump up and pace the room quickly, pausing now and again to stare at a picture — the portrait of Stephen painted with her mother” and then compare “the gracious beauty of Anna” to the “indefinable quality in Stephen that made her look wrong in the clothes she was wearing, as though she and they had no right to each other, but above all no right to Anna” (20). Here, not only does a link between Stephen’s boyish and queer behaviour become established in relation to the inversion theories of Ulrichs, but the seriousness of which Ulrichs’ texts are being treated in the novel, is emphasised by having Sir Philip, who is a well-educated and respected character in the novel, engage with the sexologist’s theories. Hall’s mention

¹² Although influenced by sexology, Sigmund Freud did not view sexual inversion or homosexuality as a disease or perversion. He also moved away from the biological aspect of sex in sexual inversion and instead theorised about the sexual object-choice in relation to five psychosexual stages of development (See: *Three essays on the theory of sexuality*, Freud 1905). According to Prosser, in psychoanalysis, gender identities are thus turned into “phantasmatic and momentary sexual identifications”, in which the transgender identity becomes a “pit stop” on the way to a “homosexual becoming” (1998, 150). In other words, in the shift from the body to the unconscious, an essential aspect of transness and trans experience is ignored.

of Ulrichs and, later on, Krafft-Ebing¹³ is clearly a way for her to signal their relevance to Stephen's characteristics and behaviour to the reader.

That Hall favours nineteenth century sexology rather than twentieth century psychoanalysis is further conveyed through Stephen's homosexual friend Jonathan Brockett, who, in a letter to Stephen, mocks one of Freud's disciples: "It's a pity you're so unsociable, Stephen, unwholesome, I call it, you'll be bagging a shell like a hermit crab ... or worse still a complex. You might even take to a few nasty habits towards middle life — better read Ferenczi!" (Hall 2014, 271). In a realist-styled novel that deals with societal topics in a grave and serious manner throughout the story, Brockett's sudden turn to irony certainly stands out. This inclusion again shows Hall's knowledge of psychoanalysis but also reduces it "into superstitious nonsense" by using irony, in the words of Prosser, to "make [e] a point of showing that it refuses to take it seriously" (1998, 156). Arguably, this comparison shows that Hall is aware of the distinction between the sexologist sexual invert and the psychoanalytical homosexual and, more importantly, perceives Stephen as the former of the two. At the same time, the sexual invert's negative connotations and association with nerves and eugenics in the novel do, whether consciously or unconsciously on Hall's part, still draw on psychoanalysis to a certain extent, "blurring" the lines between the two fields (Baer and Liu 2022, 9; Green 2003, 279).

Nevertheless, the point remains that Hall favoured the concept of sexual inversion and ultimately turned her head more to the sexological tradition, which thought "sexual disposition" congenital and an effect "physical rather than mental organisation" (Green 2003, 279). The fact that she had sexologist Havelock Ellis, writer of *Sexual Inversion* (1897), write the introduction to *The Well* strengthens this argument further. The easiest way to think about this "blurring" then, as Green explains, is to view it as a "general confusion ... of how to conceptualise and represent identities" during this period. In technical terms, at least based on how she is identified in the novel, Stephen is not a defined and "fixed" lesbian character. Having said that, there is no denying that *The Well* contains lesbian themes and experiences. Yet, the fact that Stephen is defined as a sexual invert, a person with a man's soul in a woman's body who is sexually attracted to women, directly contradicts Radicalesbians' definition of

¹³ Writer of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, in which he studies and theorises about various cases of sexual "anomalies," including sexual inversion or "antipathic sexuality" as he terms it (Krafft-Ebing 1939, 54-55, 285-86).

female homosexuality. Instead, the true invert is, as Esther Newton phrases it, “a being between categories, neither man nor woman, a ‘third sex’ or ‘trapped soul’” (1984, 568). In recent discourse, this definition would align with the conceptualisation of “non-binary,” “genderqueer,” or any other non-conforming gender identity found under the trans “umbrella.” Indeed, the fact that Stephen is given a male name and is described as “a narrow-hipped, wide-shouldered little tadpole of a baby” (Hall 2014, 7) marks the incongruence of her assigned sex, hinting at her genderqueer identity from the moment she is born. Thus, although problematic in many aspects, sexologists’ confused merging of sexuality and gender and theories on sexual inversion still contain important knowledge and insight into what later came to lay the foundation for the conceptualisation of transsexuality and transgenderism, some of which remains intact even in today’s understanding of transness.

So, having disclosed that the sexual invert is not a lesbian nor a transsexual/transgender but something “in-between”, the question of how one should approach *The Well* remains. As suggested, one possible solution which may offer Stephen’s character and Hall’s novel justice without disregarding/discrediting previous studies is to turn queer theory and the term “trans” and “genderqueer.” While I think Stephen leans more towards a transgender identity than a genderqueer one, the historical context in which Stephen was situated (regardless of her own identification) cannot be ignored. In other words, just as it is not accurate to claim that she only can be a cisgender butch lesbian, it is not accurate to say that she is a heterosexual transgender man. She is ultimately perceived by the fictional society she inhabits as a deviant queer masculine woman who loves other women.

Indeed, if there is one thing that all readers and critics agree on, it is that Stephen loves women and women only. Hall makes it very clear that Stephen is not struggling with accepting that she loves women but that she is struggling with her sense of self. Hence, while the sexual terminology might differ depending on Stephen’s gender, there is no disputing which gender category she is attracted to. As early as page ten, Stephen’s love for women is proclaimed: “[W]hen Stephen was just over seven, Collins looked up and suddenly smiled, then all in a moment Stephen knew that she loved her — a staggering revelation!” (Hall 2014, 10). This is not the only instance where the “nature” of Stephen’s sexuality is affirmed. Only a few pages later, it is emphasised when the narrator states that Stephen: “longed intensely to be near [Collins], longed to force the response that her loving craved for... She would say: ‘I do love you awfully, Collins. I

love you so much that it makes me want to cry” (Hall 2014, 17). That Stephen is attracted to women and women only is confirmed in her teenage years when her friend Martin declares his love for her. His confession is described as causing her to stare at him in “dumb horror,” “terror,” and with “the deepest repulsion” (Hall 2014, 88). Shortly after Martin’s confession, she ponders over her intense feelings of repulsion, wondering “what manner of curious creature” she must be to be “repelled by a lover like Martin.” In the end, she concludes that her repulsion and decision to drive him away stemmed from a feeling that “something within her was intolerant of that new aspect” of someone she perceived as nothing but a friend” (89). In other words, regardless of her gender identity (and thus accurate terminology for her sexuality), the novel makes it abundantly clear that Stephen is, without a doubt, not sexually attracted to men.

The issue of Stephen’s gender identity is much more complex, which the mixture of interpretations and critiques surrounding the novel and Stephen’s sexuality affirms. There is one “scene” in particular that has sparked opposing commentaries among critics. The scene follows one of Stephen’s shopping sprees, when she goes out to buy herself expensive masculine clothing, a car and gifts for her secret lover, Angela, in the hope that her masculine appearance and expensive gifts will strengthen her “claim” as a competitor for Angela’s affection. Unfortunately, Stephen’s hope and pride are quickly shattered. Even though her excessive spending gives her “a fleeting satisfaction,” it quickly transitions into “renewed desolation” due to the realisation that no amount of money can buy her “the one thing she need[s] in life”, namely Angela’s love (Hall 2014, 169). Consequently, later that evening, Stephen is seen having a conflicting emotional meltdown whilst studying her naked reflection in the mirror:

That night 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; it was so white, so strong and so self-sufficient; yet withal so poor and unhappy a thing that her eyes filled with tears and her hate turned to pity. She began to grieve over it, touching her breasts with pitiful fingers, stroking her shoulders, letting her hands slip along her straight thighs – Oh, poor and most desolate body! (Hall 2014, 169)

This passage best captures Stephen’s gender dysphoria. However, critics like De Lauretis, Halberstam and Prosser disagree on the root of her apparent negative feelings

towards her body. De Lauretis, taking a lesbian perspective, paints an erotic picture of the scene, concluding that Stephen's dysphoria stems from a desire to be feminine and thus an object which may not only worship but be worshipped. To be more specific, she argues that Stephen's lack of femininity causes her body to become "inadequate as the object of desire ... and thus inadequate to signify the female subject's desire in its feminine mode." Moreover, she also concurs that because Stephen's body is "masculine but not male" it is also "inadequate to signify or bear the subject's desire in the masculine mode" (De Lauretis, 1994, 212). The fact that the novel repeatedly rejects the idea that Stephen desires femininity and emphasises her wish to be a man, De Lauretis's reading feels somewhat decontextualised.

In her critique of De Lauretis, Halberstam poses the question of why the masculine female body should be considered inadequate in "bearing the subjects desire 'in the masculine mode'" when it can do so through various other ways, including the use of, for example, an "artificial phallus" (1998, 104). Furthermore, excluding the passage above, which may, if taken out of its context, be understood as a desire for femininity, there is no textual evidence to be found in the novel which would support the idea of Stephen's feminine gender envy. Textually, De Lauretis lacks evidence for her claim that Stephen, "the 'mythic mannish lesbian' wishes to have a feminine body, the kind of female body she desires in Angela, later in Mary—a femme's body" (1994, 113). The story provides quite the opposite narrative, which both Halberstam and Prosser argue in their respective readings.

To Halberstam, Stephen's confrontation with her naked reflection is not haunted by frustration for a desired femininity nor hatred for her body but rather her disidentification with her body where "Stephen's repudiation of nakedness or the biological body as the ground for sexual identity suggests a modern notion of sexual identity as not organically emanating from the flesh but as a complex act of self-creation in which the dressed body, not the undressed body, represents one's desire" (1998, 106). Arguably, Halberstam's analysis, which emphasises the performative power of clothes regarding gender expression and/or (dis)identification, aligns with what the narrative tells the reader. Clothing indeed "becomes the means by which Stephen covers her queerness and finds a comfortable gender expression" as a way to make masculinity "both real and potent, convincing and natural" (1998, 100). To exemplify, during one of Stephen's shopping rounds for new clothes, shoes and handkerchiefs, the narrator points out that Stephen's trifles for details concerning her clothes "assumed an

enormous importance” for her (Hall 2014, 121). However, while she is not wrong in her claim that Stephen “is either awkward (in women’s clothes) or inadequate next to the ‘real’ embodied masculinity of a man” (Halberstam 1998, 100) in men’s clothes, it somewhat contradicts her argument that it is only the “dressed body” and not the “undressed body” that represents Stephen’s desire.

The reason for this is that it suggests that Stephen’s gender dysphoria can be “fixed” the moment she puts on masculine clothing when that is not the case. One example of this is when Stephen, during a hunt with her father, gets compared to Colonel Antrim’s daughter Violet:

and you, Stephen, had been compared to Violet! Ridiculous of course, and yet all of a sudden you felt less impressive in your fine riding breeches. You felt — well, not foolish exactly, but self-conscious — not quite at your ease, a little bit wrong. It was almost as though you were playing at young Nelson again, were only pretending. (Hall 2014, 33)

Evidently, Stephen’s male riding clothes only offer her a temporary solution and comfort. The moment the Colonel points out that Stephen is a girl, the illusion her clothes help her uphold is shattered. Even dressed in her “fine riding breeches,” she, when made aware of her sex, feels “self-conscious,” “wrong,” and as if she is only “pretending” to be a boy, although her perception of herself is that she “must be a boy, ‘cause [she] feel[s] exactly like one” (Hall 2014, 13). Thus, in the end, it is still the invisible naked body under the male clothing that Stephen desires. It is important to remember that during this time, male clothing also came to represent the male body, which is why Stephen’s gender dysphoria reaches its peak once her male clothes are removed. According to the narrator, being forced to dress like a girl “spoil[s] everything” (29) to Stephen as it makes her feel “queer looking” (63) and hinders her from feeling “perfectly natural” (39). Moreover, as indicated by her statement to her mother, the reason why she appears to have “loved [Angela] the way a man loves a woman” (183) is because she does not feel like she *is* a woman and never has. Nevertheless, that Stephen does not know “what she is” does not change the fact that she still knows and *feels* that she is different. Taking all these things into consideration, what Stephen is experiencing in the mirror scene then is, at its core, a loss for the male body she desires but that she believes will forever remain unavailable to her.

In a similar yet different reading, Prosser, in his critique of De Lauretis’ reading, argues that in order to claim the scene “as a figure of for lesbian desire,” the scene must

be removed “from its sexological context” and be read “through the psychoanalytic paradigm that Hall opted against” (1998, 160). To avoid this, Prosser suggests that one should regard the scene as one defined by “sexual inversion,” in which Stephen’s “transgendered ambivalence” of being “masculine yet female” is what causes her disgust and self-hatred. Stephen’s desire to “maim” her body thus seems to stem from the feeling of failure and loss (1998, 160). Looking into that mirror, Stephen’s naked body is a direct reminder of the societal constraints that prevent her from becoming and being accepted as the gendered person she identifies with – which most definitely is not a feminine woman. If anything, the novel clearly displays how much Stephen desires a masculine gender identity.

Again, at the time, Hall did not have the myriad of gender categories that is available today, yet, out of all the queer characters in the story, only Stephen is struggling with her gendered sense of self. As a young girl, she feels like a boy but is constantly reminded that she cannot be one due to her biological sex, whereas as an adult, she, after stumbling upon the works of sexologists, thinks of herself as a female sexual invert. Interestingly, though, she never seems to be able to fully settle with that definition either. Again, here “genderqueer,” which conceptualises a fluid trans identity, is a potential key to understanding Stephen, as it enables an analysis that is not limited to a definite transgender or lesbian label but situates her in a larger and more fluid discourse of queer identity and perhaps more importantly – queer experiences.¹⁴

In her article “‘Spoiled Identity’: Stephen Gordon’s Loneliness and the Difficulties of Queer History,” Heather Love provides an insightful argument for how and why queer literary criticism should engage more with discourses surrounding identity and experiences:

Thinking through our partial, ambivalent identification with Stephen’s suffering might offer us a way to reckon with the difficulties of queer history. We cannot use Stephen’s history in any straightforward sense because it is a history that has “gone bad.” But the very spoiling of identity turns our critical attention to the experience of queer subjectivity, both in the past and in the present...In Stephen, critics encounter the image of a queer subject who lives out ideology’s effects in a particularly painful way; the novel is unrelentingly specific about this experience. (2001, 498)

¹⁴ In the end, the importance is not to define Stephen’s gender identity but to analyse her experiences as a queer person to understand queer experiences and struggles better. However, as Heather Love suggests, this is not to say that identity discourse should be abandoned but merely that one should keep in mind that identifications with characters are “always partial, ambivalent, and mixed” (2001).

Being written in the form of a bildungsroman, the entire novel is built upon Stephen's experiences from infancy to middle-aged adulthood. Yet, critics have, as Love states, "paid little attention to Hall's careful account of Stephen's experience" and instead, "sought to unmask the novel's various ideologies of misogyny and homophobia." Consequently, this has "deflected attention from the novel's representation of homophobia and feeling (Love 2001, 498). Arguably, as long as homophobia and transphobia are prevalent in society, queer stories like Stephen's are in constant need of revision. In "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Adrienne Rich offers an argument as to why:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (1978, 18)

While Rich is explicitly talking about women, this applies, in various intersecting degrees, to all marginalised groups. By re-visiting *The Well* and treating Stephen as a masculine trans/genderqueer character that embodies both transmasculine, lesbian as well as female experiences, one will be able to detangle the complex relationship between gender and sexuality and the societal influence regulating it in a less constricted way. In this myriad of gender identities, it is essential to look closely at Stephen and how her experiences of gender are dealt with by herself as well as how those experiences and feelings compare to other queer characters around her. There is also an essential need for scholars within all disciplines to critically rethink their preconceptions of female-, queer-, and trans masculinities in relation to sexuality and gender identity. Too often, these masculine identities are reduced to stereotypes when the variety of these lived masculine experiences is indefinite.

As Halberstam importantly states, during the 1920s, many masculine women "effectively change[d]" their sex up to the point that they could pass as men while some "took wives... and lived lives as men." She rightfully argues that it would be "inadequate" to call these women lesbians as it would "ignore the specificity of their lives", just as it would be equally as inadequate to "label them pretranssexual" since sex change or hormone therapy was yet to exist and become available to those who wished to transition into men (1998, 87). Conversely, it is incredibly difficult to disclose which of these women would have identified themselves as trans or varieties of masculine

lesbians or bisexuals and which would have wanted to alter their bodies medically. A suggestion to how one should approach Stephen and *The Well* is through a kind of double reading where Stephen's character should be understood and analysed as genderqueer but as a trans genderqueer person situated in a society in which she is regarded as a queer woman/sexual invert who loves other women – which is the approach that will be adopted throughout the remainder of this essay.

Authorial Influence: The Implied Author and the Character Stephen Gordon

Aside from the conflation of gender, sex and sexuality and the fact that the conceptualisation of multiple queer and trans identities was yet to be developed, a possible reason why the early readers of *The Well* felt so strongly about Stephen's representation is due to her status as, in Frow words, a “quasi-person” (2016, 113). According to Frow, a “quasi-person” is a “composition of a person based in norms of social personhood and elaborated according to the conventions of particular genres” in which they are not only given a body and a name but also become the spoken and unspoken object and subject of discourse (113). He points out that what is at play in the composition of a person is the “predication of the existence, implicit or explicitly stated, of a person-like being and of a storyworld in which actions take place” (2016, 113). Seemingly, in the case of *The Well*, it appears that some readers came to struggle with resolving the tension between the fictional and the real; the character and the author. Instead, they brought Stephen into the real world in which she, during a historical time with limited lesbian literary representation, became the representation of love between two women – even though she might not be a lesbian character at all.

In relation to this, another reason why Stephen historically has been read as a lesbian rather than a trans character is, arguably, due to the presence of the implied author Radclyffe Hall. She, just like Stephen, identified herself as a sexual invert and only engaged in romantic and sexual relationships with women throughout her life. In her biography of Radclyffe Hall, or John Radclyffe Hall as she went by, Una Troubridge writes about Hall's thought process on writing *The Well of Loneliness*. Troubridge, who notably was Hall's long-lasting partner until her death, reveals that Hall wanted to write and publish a book on sexual inversion with the intention of making it available to the public, especially to those who were unable to access technical and medical treatise on the subject (1961).

According to Troubridge, Hall was thoroughly convinced that a book dealing with sexual inversion could only be told by a sexual invert, as they alone could be qualified to speak for that specific group of misunderstood minorities. Nevertheless, while Troubridge explains that Hall's characters "came alive to her" to an extreme degree and that many of her feelings and reactions were represented by Stephen, most of the circumstances and experiences were not. In fact, Troubridge affirms that the only character that she believed Hall wrote herself into and identified with spiritually, mentally, and physically was Christophe Bénédict in *The Master of the House* (1932), who notably was a man.

Based on this information, it will thus be suggested that while Hall's knowledge and influence should be acknowledged and kept in mind, the main focus should be on the character Stephen, not the author, Hall. However, considering how critics once tended to read the novel as lesbian and, in those readings, conflate the character Stephen with the author Hall, certain things about the author-text and reader relationship need to be addressed.

Wolf Schmid defines the implied author as the "author-image evoked by a work" as "constituted by the stylistic, ideological, and aesthetic properties" of the text. Grounded in the text indexes, Schmid explains that the implied author thus comes to have both an objective and subjective side, which each individual reader then perceives and evaluates differently (2013, 1). When objective, the implied author is seen as a "hypostatis of the work's structure" whereas when subjective, it is seen as a "product of the reader's meaning-making activity," which relates to reception (2). Seemingly, the issue in some of the negative critiques about *The Well* is that the critics' implied authors become conflated with the actual author, Radclyffe Hall. More specifically, they read Hall's novel as a kind of autobiography, an idea which, again, Troubridge dismisses.

The topic of the author and its influence has been heavily debated throughout literary history, arguing whether it is of any relevance or not. Arguably, Roland Barthes' argument that classic criticism has neglected an essential aspect of literature by not having paid proper attention to the reader and reader-text relationship is valid. The same can be argued about Michel Foucault's emphasis that more attention should be directed to the authorial function rather than the author as an interpretative subject. However, their poststructuralist view that writing is a "neutral, composite, oblique space" where the subject disappears along with identity (Barthes 2018, 1268) and the

author is “a function of discourse” that “must be stripped of its creative role” (Foucault 2018, 1269) runs the risk of undermining the importance and influence of authorship and author-text-reader relationships, especially in female and queer literature.

Hence, when Barthes claims that language only knows “a ‘subject’ and not “a ‘person’” and Foucault states “[w]hat matter who’s speaking?”¹⁵ they are indirectly arguing that language and text are neutral and free from bias (2018, 1269, 1271; 2018, 1396, 1409). Critics such as Virginia Woolf, Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter and Lanser have all contested these “classic” poststructuralist notions concerning language and authorial influence, arguing that these types of narrative, literary and linguistic theories discard the fact that an internalised masculinity marks the supposedly “neutral” and “universal” language¹⁶ (1929; 1979; 1977; 2000).

Indeed, even before Barthes’ claim that the linguistic “I” is nothing but “the instance of saying I,” Virginia Woolf pointed out the masculine influence of “I” in *Room of One’s Own*, stating, in the context of reading men’s writing, that

after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I.’ One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether that was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure. Back one was always hailed to the letter ‘I.’ One began to be tired of the letter ‘I.’ Not but what this ‘I’ was a most respectable ‘I’; honest and logical; hard as a nut; and polished for centuries by good teaching and good feeding ... But – here I turned a page or two, looking for something or other – the worst of it is that in the shadow of the letter ‘I’ all is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree? No, it is a woman. (2018, 862)

In this passage, Woolf exposes several vital aspects of language, its use, and its cultivation. Firstly, when she describes the linguistic “I,” she does so with stereotypical masculine-coded words such as “respectable,” “honest and logical,” and “hard as a nut,” all of which encapsulate the perception of the hegemonic Western “gentleman.” Secondly, she points out that the English language in which the pronoun “I” is included has been “polished for centuries”; in other words, shaped and influenced by its primary authorial actor: men. Finally, she ties together the underlying argument and critique of

¹⁵ Foucault borrows this quote from writer Samuel Beckett, which can be found in *Texts for Nothing* (published originally as *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien* in 1955 by Les Editions de Minuit). Dirk van Hulle offers a closer discussion of Beckett’s texts in “Undoing Dante: Samuel Beckett’s Poetics from a Textual Perspective” (2006).

¹⁶ In line with the topics discussed in this essay, the focus will here be given to feminist and queer scholars. However, plenty of other literary scholars have done work on Barthes, Foucault and the concept of the author; one of the most famous being Seán Burke in his book *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (1992).

the “I” being gendered male by claiming that women are not included in the English “I” but placed in its shadow. Seemingly, Woolf does not seem to share Barthes’ conviction that language or the subject is “neutral” and an “empty process” outside “the very enunciation which defines it” nor that it functions without a need to be “filled with the person of the interlocutors” (Barthes 2018, 1269).

Notably, this problematisation applies to other languages as well. In his article on Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976), David Leiwei Li discusses Kingston’s perplexity concerning the English “I,” the generic Chinese “I,” and the traditional Chinese female “I” in which the latter means “slave.” He explains that although the English language “does not contain a specially designated pronoun for the second sex as the ancient Chinese” does, “the Anglo-American “I” in the male-centered English language poses similar tribulation for female holders of the same pronoun” (1988, 504). Li also includes Woolf’s passage above, concluding that the “assertive English ‘I’” with its “assured stance” appears to alienate women due to its masculine connotation.

This “alienation” or “othering” is a process which Gilbert and Gubar also affirm when answering their question of where the female writer is supposed to “fit in” in a literary history which is “overwhelmingly male” and “patriarchal” by saying that she, at first glance, is an “anomalous, indefinable, alienated...freakish outsider” (2018, 1842-1844). In the book chapter “The Female Tradition,” Elaine Showalter argues similarly, pointing out that although women’s literature has been read and praised (especially during the time of the rise of the novel and writers such as Jane Austen, George Elliot and the Bronte sisters), there seems to be a difference between “female literature” and works that “happ[e]n to have been written” by female writers (1977, 4).

According to Showalter, it thus appears that early female novelists, although often self-conscious and aware of their individuality and personal experiences, struggled with being “self-defining” (1977, 4). Although one might be tempted to question Hall’s gender identity as a woman due to her identification as a sexual invert, it does not change the fact that she was perceived by society as a woman and, therefore, most likely identified her as a woman’s writer. Regardless, upon reading *The Well*, it becomes clear that Hall is aware of the struggles that non-male writers, such as herself, have dealt with.

Indeed, albeit a successful published author by the second half of the novel, Stephen is struggling with her writing from a young age. On the one hand, writing is a

refuge, “a heavenly balm” that lifts “the load of the spirit” and brings her “a sense of relief.” On the other hand, it is also a kind of torment for her, for despite all the “queer hopes...queer longings...queer joys...courage...and refreshed awakening” that it enables her, it also haunts her. More specifically, it does so with “[a]sudden impenetrable darkness, a sudden vast void all nothingness and darkness; a sudden sense of acute apprehension.” Hall takes this sense of loss one step further, writing: “I’m lost, where am I? Where am I? I’m nothing — yes I am, I’m Stephen — but that’s being nothing—” (2014, 61). This sense of loss and inadequateness follows Stephen even as she becomes a successful author in the sense that she never manages to resolve the difficulties that come with being a female-perceived and queer author in a male-dominated occupation (Hall 2014, 196-197, 210-213).

The fact that Hall’s and Stephen’s experiences as writers are haunted by a process of “othering” is worthy of attention. The person Hall and the character Stephen may not be equated; nevertheless, their similarities indicate that Hall’s experiences have directly or indirectly influenced Stephen’s experience in the story. Then, to read *The Well* from a poststructuralist perspective, only focusing on what is stated in the written text would be to ignore an important aspect of non-hegemonic writing and the struggles to conform or subvert to language expectations. However, due to the similarities between Hall and Stephen and the tendency to lump them together, emphasis should still be put on the actual character. In other words, there needs to be a balance where the author, using Habed’s words, may bridge the “biological facts” or “will” of the writer and the socio-cultural circumstances in which a character is produced (2021, 499).

After all, the ability of the fictional character is, as Frow argues, to engage the reader “effectively” and “to do emotional as well as representational work” (2018, 109). Ultimately, they are brought “alive” through a process of recognition” in which the “affective investment,” that is when a reader can frame “what kind of being” a character is and then connect to them through some resemblance to themselves. This type of identification process can then either lead to an identification “of” the character or identification “with” the character. Naturally, when it comes to stories that revolve around matters such as sexuality, gender and class, or race, ethnicity and age, there will always be, according to Frow, a “continued tension between reading character as a contingent particularity and reading it as the representative of a larger class of persons”

(117). Evidently, considering the various interpretations and critiques, this tension between character and person that Frow discusses also seems to apply to *The Well*.

Conversely, one might use Hall to contextualise the story, but Stephen needs to remain a fictive character situated in the particular societal context of her fictive world. However, as will be discussed, whilst the context of Stephen's fictive genderqueer life may differ from now, many of her feelings and emotional struggles are very much representative of those experienced by genderqueer people in real life today. Hence, by looking at Stephen's experiences and how they affect her, one might not only get a glimpse into some of the emotional turmoil and struggles of a genderqueer person during the early twentieth century but also of a genderqueer person today. This type of literary representation and analysis will not only affirm genderqueer people, in the words of Stephen, "the right to [their] existence" (Hall 2014, 399) but, hopefully, make people and society acknowledge it, and perhaps understand it better too.

Shaping Queer Experiences: Shame and Gender Performativity in *The Well's* Heteronormative Society

There is no denying that queer history and experiences are filled with dark, traumatic, and painful struggles. Consequently, a common problem within gay, lesbian, and queer scholarship is the tendency to align queer experiences, subjectivities, and health with either unescapable unhappiness or unwavering happiness (Giordano 2018, 1-3; Liu 2017, 47). Hence, with shame and loss often being prevalent in older queer literature, the contemporary reader is left with the choice to ignore that painful past by not reading literary works such as *The Well* or read it while being mindful of the historical context. The latter includes being critical of the power structures and norms that spur the shaming process of those who do not conform to these structures and norms. As Heather Love reminds us, *The Well* is merely one record of queer suffering and not the reason for it (2000, 126). Most of the blame for the supposedly "bad" queer melancholic representation in stories should thus not be directed at the writers, but at the societal conditions that are behind the marginalisation and oppression of them.

In other words, the gay, lesbian, and queer scholarship that advocates for queer normalisation would do well to re-think their position on queer shame and loss as something inherently problematic. Instead, and in agreement with scholars such as Liu, Giordano, and Love, attention should be shifted to the affect of shame and loss in queer experiences as a way to understand and lay claim to painful, difficult, and complex

history. More specifically, such a shift will make it easier to dismantle the roles of shame and loss in relation to otherness, which may provide further possibilities for understanding the socio-cultural aspects underscoring queer shame and how it can enable a less stringent theorisation of it within lesbian, gay, and queer scholarship.

Aside from this, another reason why shame and loss will be discussed is due to their role in providing arguments for viewing Stephen Gordon as a trans character rather than a lesbian one. While not always having been the case historically, factors such as colonisation, slavery, and the rise of Abrahamic religious influences imposed heteronormative norms and binary gender categories, which – especially the Christian Church in the West – ultimately led to the ostracisation of transness (Feinberg 1996; Butler 2024; Stryker 2017; Stryker 2022).¹⁷ In the process of being made into an “Other” through shame, many trans people start to experience what today is theorised as minority stress and gender dysphoria. However, intricately intertwined with these negative aspects, there are also positive notions of resilience, victory, and pride.

The reason why gender dysphoria will be emphasised is that it is a requirement for receiving medically gender-conforming care such as hormones and surgeries in most Western countries, which further stresses the influence of its presence in trans experiences.¹⁸ Within a Western context, minority stress, especially gender dysphoria, can thus be seen as highly indicative of transness as well as representative of most trans experiences – including Stephen’s.¹⁹ The sense of loss and shame are often intertwined

¹⁷ In Stryker’s *The Transgender Studies Remix* (2022) see, for example, Wesley’s “Twin-Spirited Woman” and Lugone’s “The Coloniality of Gender” for further examples and discussion about the relationship between colonisation and ostracization of transness.

¹⁸ According to the 2015 U.S Transgender Survey, 78% of the responders reported that they had wanted to receive hormone therapy at some point in their life (95% of transgender men and women). Additionally, more often than less, a gender dysphoria diagnosis is a requirement for legally having one’s preferred gender recognised/changed. However, while a diagnosis often is required in order to receive gender-affirming care, many trans people oppose this requirement, as it indicates that there is something “wrong” with them and, furthermore, that there *has* to be something “wrong” with them in order to receive gender-affirming care. Conversely, the issue of medical emphasis becomes paradoxical as it, on the one hand, enables recognition of one’s gender identity but, on the other hand, suggests that a recognition of one’s gender, aside from one’s own, is required for it to be acknowledged and seen as authentic.

¹⁹ Note: while extremely common in cultures where transness is considered “sinful,” “wrong,” or an “anomaly,” not all trans people experience gender dysphoria, meaning that it does not define whether a person is trans or not. For example, as Feinberg explores in *Gender Warriors*, gender dysphoria was not a common experience for Native American transgender people before colonisation since their gender fluidity was not limited to or questioned by the concept of binary sex or physical expression. As she discusses, this applies to other ethnic and cultural groups around the world as well. In other words, while this essay discusses minority stress and gender dysphoria as they are treated and prevalent in the dominant white Western culture, it is important to remember that minority stress and gender dysphoria, as a part of queer shame and loss, are intertwined with various intersecting socio-cultural factors and thus has and still differs socially, culturally, and geographically.

with gender dysphoria. In Stephen's case, these feelings trap her in an even bigger sense of otherness and loneliness which eventually merges with her sense of identity. For the entirety of Stephen's life, this battle with gender dysphoria and her gender incongruence is an ongoing process.

For example, after having been born, she is described as yelling for hours "as though outraged to find [her]self ejected into life" (Hall 2014, 7). While infants are supposed to be screaming once birthed, Hall emphasises Stephen's screaming as a part of her dejection of being born a girl when she "should" have been a boy. More so, this first sign of anger and loss foreshadows Stephen's sexual inversion and, ultimately, the pain which will accompany it. Stephen is often conscious of her disconcerting "love and hatreds" and feelings of frustration, in which her response is to throw temper tantrums. Notably, while this could be perceived as normal behaviour for any child her age, Stephen is described to be extra sensitive in this matter, "working herself up over everyday trifles" and bursting into tears "at the first sign of opposition" (Hall 2014, 8). In this example, the reasons behind Stephen's temper tantrums might be undefined. However, considering their similarity to the outbursts, reactions, and emotions of future Stephen, they all seem to share the purpose of showcasing Stephen's conflicting sense of being different as well as her defiant spirit to the (gendered) role and "fixed" identity she has been given in life.

In fact, this is exemplified only a few pages later when Stephen, dressed like her childhood hero, "young Nelson," is dismissed by the maid Collins, with whom she is in love. Feeling "thoroughly deflated," "strangely unhappy," and "snubbed", Stephen goes to her room where she "tear[s] off" her beloved male clothes and replaces them with the female ones she hates (Hall 2014, 13). In this scene, Stephen's dejected state is not due to being romantically rejected by the one she loves but due to having her self-identification denied. Certainly, just before Collins's dismissal, Stephen explicitly states to her that she "must be a boy" because she "feel[s] exactly like one," which is why Collins's rejection causes her to feel gender dysphoric. It is only when Stephen is made aware that her sense of self as a boy is perceived as nothing but an illusion or a game of charades by people around here that she starts feeling "all wrong" and like she is only "pretending to be Nelson" (13). Seemingly, it is her longing to be someone "quite real" and not just "Stephen pretending to be Nelson" that ultimately causes Stephen to go on and torture her dolls.

Having been accused of not being “feminist enough” by second-wave lesbian feminists, I would like to defend Stephen’s actions in this scene, arguing that they do not stem from a hatred of women. Instead, Stephen’s violent reaction to the dolls should be understood as her transferring her gender dysphoria as well as her frustration of having to experience it onto the dolls, which represent the body and societal ideals surrounding it that shackles her from being allowed to be her true self. What Hall does here, then, is that she enunciates the previously undefined feelings underlying Stephen’s emotional meltdowns, namely gender dysphoria. As defined by the fifth edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013), gender dysphoria marks an “incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender” (513). This incongruence, as shown in the example above and which will be discussed more later, often causes a lot of distress and severely impacts the trans person’s mental health in a negative way.

In this scene, Stephen fulfils 6 of the 8 criteria in category A for Gender Dysphoria in children that the DSM-5-TR names.²⁰ These include showcasing a “strong desire to be of the other gender or an insistence that one is the other gender” (A1); a “strong preference for wearing only typical masculine clothing and a strong resistance to the wearing of typical feminine clothing” (A2); a “strong preference for cross-gender roles in make-believe play or fantasy play” (A3); a “strong preference for the toys, games, or activities stereotypically used or engaged in by the other gender” (A4); a “strong rejection of typically feminine toys, games, and activities” (A6) and finally a “strong desire for the primary and/or secondary sex characteristics that match one’s experienced gender” (A8)(513). The critical part here is that Stephen also fulfils Criterion B, which emphasises that the conditions in category A are associated with “significant distress or impairment ... in important areas of functioning” (513), such as the social setting already discussed.²¹

In a sense, Stephen’s gender dysphoria can be understood as the consequence of a ruthless awakening that her subjective understanding of herself is not shared or

²⁰ DSM-5 states that for a child to be diagnosed with Gender dysphoria the following criteria must be met by A: “[a] marked incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender, of at least 6 months’ duration, as manifested by at least six of the following (one of which must be Criterion A1)” and B: that “[t]he condition is associated with clinically significant distress or impairment in social, school, or other important areas of functioning” (2013, 513).

²¹ Naturally, Stephen is not a real person, and can, technically, not be diagnosed. The use of the DSM-5-TR is included here to strengthen the claim of doing a trans reading of her. Notably, and as discussed in a previous footnote, the use of a medical diagnostic tool to assign a gendered “status”, becomes paradoxical.

taken seriously by those around her. The entire process of Stephen having to experience and learn about the nature, patterns, and regulations of the world she is living in whilst also trying to position herself in this world according to her understanding of it is not uncommon in literature, especially not in the bildungsroman which also is the genre of *The Well*. However, with Stephen being queer and born a woman, there is an additional element of “awakening” that is not present in the definition of the “original” male-oriented bildungs process.²²

According to Susan J. Rosowski, this process of awakening moves inward and toward improved self-knowledge, which in turn leads to “a revelation of the disparity” between the acquired self-knowledge and the so-called “nature of the world” (1983, 49). Thus, for Stephen, who indeed is trying to find value and identity in a world defined by heterosexual “love and marriage,” the journey she undertakes does not result in the “art of living” as it would have if she had been born and perceived as male. Instead, she is forced to realise that such an “art of living” is unattainable for her. “Trapped” in a woman’s body, Stephen’s awakening thus becomes one marked by limitations and otherness. Stephen’s thumping of the dolls’ “innocuous faces” and mutterings of “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” (Hall 2014, 14) stems from a need to deal with the emotional turmoil of her awakening as a genderqueer person.

So, if the scenes discussed above can be taken as some of Stephen’s earliest forms of experiencing gender dysphoria and minority stress due to a process of being limited and alienated, it is also worth pointing out how her resistance also leads to her experiencing gender euphoria. As a form of resistance, Stephen’s temper tantrums help her eject both the outward and inward negative feelings that have been projected onto her by others and internalised by herself, which is what causes her to feel “relieved,” “cheerful,” and “docile” afterwards. More importantly, however, these outbursts are not only described as a way for Stephen to “hit back at life” but also help restore her “self-respect” (Hall 2014, 7). The story makes it clear that Stephen, especially as a child, is practising resilience because she is unwilling to accept her position and dejected feelings.

²² Based on the original by William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, C. Hugh Coleman defines a bildungsroman or apprenticeship novel as “a novel which recounts the youth and young manhood of a sensitive protagonist who is attempting to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning and pattern, and acquire a philosophy of life and ‘the art of living’” (See, Rosowski 1989, 49).

This type of resilience corresponds to what Blewitt-Golsch (2009) discusses in her thesis on minority stress, where she explains that resilience can be understood as the behaviours, attitudes, and resources that people who are being faced with adversity either enact or utilise in order to achieve an improved physical and mental effect (33). Interestingly, Stephen's persistent resilience throughout the novel is often forgotten, glossed over, or ignored. Instead, critics of *The Well* tend to focus on their dislike of the representation of melancholy and internalised misogyny. Arguably, a dismissal of Stephen's resilience risks undermining a pivotal part of the novel: its defence of sexual inversion and non-heterosexual love. From her childhood up to adulthood, Stephen is adamant in her belief that her sexual nature is just as natural as anyone else.

Conversely, while the shame and loss do occasionally overwhelm Stephen and cause her doubts, she more often bears the shame, recognising it as unjust and defending herself against it. One of the most impactful instances of this is when she defends herself against her mother after Angel's betrayal. Having had enough of her mother's spiteful scorning of her entire existence, including accusing her of being so unnatural and sinful that she feels "physically sick" (Hall 2014, 182), Stephen holds up her hand in a manner "commanding silence" and says:

'As my father loved you, I loved. As a man loves a woman, that was how I loved ... If I could have, I'd married her and brought her home ... If I loved her the way a man loves a woman, it's because I can't feel like I am a woman. All my life, I have never felt like a woman, and you know it – you say you've always disliked me, that you've always felt a strange physical repulsion ... I don't know what I am ... though whatever it is, it was you and my father who made this body – but what I will never forgive is your daring to try and make me feel ashamed of my love. I'm not ashamed of it, there's no shame in me.' (Hall 2014, 183)

In this passage, Stephen not only defends herself and others like her but also rejects the shame directed at her. Moreover, her comment that she "has never felt like a woman," together with her inability to claim a binary identity, further asserts Stephen's transness. Stephen's statement here echoes transgender artist and writer Kate Bornstein's thoughts about her trans identity. She explains that her decision to transition from a man to a woman was not based on the conviction of her feeling like a woman but rather on an "unshakable conviction" of her not being "a boy or a man" (2016, 65). In *The Well*, attention is, as Taylor explains, constantly drawn to the fact that Stephen either "feels like a man, or certainly does not feel like a woman; looks like a man, or certainly does not look like a woman; wants to be a man, or certainly does not want to be a woman"

(1998, 290). In agreement with Taylor then, this “absence of a feeling, rather than its presence” that Bornstein talks about evidently also applies to Stephen’s experience. Hall’s protagonist might not be able to claim an identity as a heterosexual transgender man, nor does she have to in order to be trans.

Going back to the aspect of shame, Stephen is constantly seen battling notions of shame in which she sometimes comes out victorious and sometimes does not. The previous scene discussed above was an example of the former. However, only a few pages later, Hall provides the reader with an example of the latter when Stephen goes to her father’s study and finds his books on sexual inversion. Reading about sexual inversion and finding her name in the margins, she becomes overwhelmed with grief as well as shame, loss and melancholy: “Oh, Father – and there are so many of us – thousands of miserable, unwanted people, who have no right to love, no right to compassion because they’re maimed, hideously maimed and ugly – Gods’s cruel; He let us get flawed in the making” (Hall 2014, 186). This response brings attention to the power that medical recognition may hold in the process of identification, including both its positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, Stephen is able, through her father’s “diagnosis” of her, to embody an identity as an invert. As a consequence, she is finally given an “explanation” of her “condition” as well as proof that she is not alone in feeling the way she does. On the other hand, this confirms that there is something “wrong” with her which ultimately enhances her feelings of shame, loss, and melancholy. In Stephen’s case – since she views her sexual inversion from an essentialist point of view – the medical labelling ends up doing more harm than good.

While embracing a certain label to recognise oneself as part of a group may bring one a sense of relief, it can also restrict oneself to a new set of expectations and norms, which also will change with time. Evidently, as the continuous change and theorisation of gender and sexuality have proved, these categories are not rigid nor solidified. It is, in the words of Butler, thus “impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those categories” (1993, 19). Put differently, this means that no terms or conceptualisation of them can be taken as a definite fact. Thus, while Stephen takes the sexologist’s theorisations of sexual inversion as a definite description of her sexuality and gender, they are, nevertheless, unable to fully conceptualise the range in which gender and sexuality operate. In the novel, Hall points this out by having Adolphe explain to Stephen that all doctors, regardless of how “good” they may be, “work in the dark” half of the time when trying to “solve [their] problem” (Hall 2014,

354). According to him, the only one who can know the “truth” of the invert is an invert. Naturally, from a non-essentialist view, the last statement does not hold. For while a queer person is more likely to be able to relate and explain queer experiences, these kinds of categories cannot, as history has shown, be “known” by anyone – including doctors.

Shame is, without a doubt, a consistent part of Stephen’s life. However, she does not let it consume her to the degree that she stops fighting against it. To exemplify, at one point, Stephen is seen struggling and resisting feelings of shame and loss. Albeit emotionally distressed over the fact that she may forever be “incomplete” as a person and writer if she is never to experience love in all its forms, she still points out that it is unfair and unjust. Moreover, as she goes on to scorn her body, again calling it “maimed” and “insufferable,” she ends up falling silent mid-sentence due to suddenly feeling “shy” and “too much ashamed” to continue speaking. Nevertheless, the moment she finds her assistant Puddle looking at her with sorrow and pity, she instantly collects herself and sharply tells Puddle not to mind her ranting and that she should forget all about it (Hall 2014, 196-197). The shame here is conflicting to Stephen. On the one hand, she does, in the moment, have feelings of shame about her “sexually inverted” body, but on the other hand, she also seems to be ashamed of admitting to it, which, in combination with Puddle’s reaction, makes her brush it off so she can go back to work.

What is interesting with Stephen’s shame and shame in general is, as Sedgwick remarks, how bad treatment by someone else, including their embarrassment and stigma, can flood into another person who, in turn, assumes the role of a shameful subject (2003, 37). In agreement with Sedgwick, shame is a communicative exchange that forms, in her words, through “a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication (36). In other words, Stephen is not the one producing shame but the one receiving and mirroring it. Paradoxically, by doing so, she is nonetheless transferring that shame onto other subjects similar to her, consequently contributing to an ongoing circle of shame.

During a night out at a gay bar called Alec’s, for example, the narrator makes a note of this, saying that since all too many sexual inverts have been covered in shame and called “unholy and vile,” so they too have gradually “sunk down to the level upon which the world [has] placed their emotions” (Hall 2014, 352). Moreover, Stephen herself is, to an extent, included in the “world” mentioned above. Out of all the queer characters in the novel, Stephen is the one who is struggling most with the

internalisation and re-distribution of shame. This can be seen in her continuous rejection, disgust, and humiliation of other queer persons whose behaviour and appearance she deems shameful, whether that be her friend Brockett's feminine hands (205), queer alcoholics or drug addicts (354, 368-370).

Here it feels necessary to point out a couple of things. Firstly, a lot of the shame Stephen expresses towards other queer people is not due to their sexual preferences or identities but due to class and race. Although marginalised in society because of her sexual identity and sexuality, Stephen faces less stigma and dire consequences than most queer characters in the novel due to her upbringing and financial and social status as a famous, white, wealthy upper-class writer. A major reason why Stephen often falls into a state of melancholia and shame is due to the loss of not being able to take part in or provide her partner with the life they could have had in a less heteronormative and accepting society. Furthermore, this bitterness and sadness are amplified by the fact that if Stephen had been born with the sex corresponding to her sense of gender identity, she could have gotten a man's life. After all, a man's life is what Stephen feels "should have been hers" (Hall 2014, 91), including her family home, marriage to Mary and social respect from society (344, 392). To put it plainly, Stephen is feeling snubbed of a life she has always felt entitled to, which is why she is feeling "possessed" by loss and a "great sense of incompleteness" (91). Arguably, the combination of her sexual inversion²³ and the material, social and relational opportunities it costs her is partially what contributes to why she is combating shame, loss, and melancholy more than other characters in the novel.

The second thing is that the shame Stephen harbours for herself and others is often questioned or countered by her more positive partner and friends (Hall 2014, 187, 354-355, 371). Stephen's story aside, *The Well* is filled with a positive and encouraging representation of queerness and queer people who refuse to submit to pessimism and self-chosen loneliness.²⁴ It is true that the novel leaves the reader with a sense of hopelessness regarding Stephen's ending as well as the even more tragic end of Stephen's friends Barbara and Jamie. However, although Stephen is the main protagonist, one should remember that *The Well* is much more than her story.

²³ This includes her longing to be a man and gender dysphoria for not being offered validation and acceptance for her queer gender identity and sexuality.

²⁴ These include characters such as Valérie, Brockett, Adolphe and Dickie.

Additionally, while Stephen purposely ruins her relationship in the end by “giving up” Mary to a heterosexual life with Martin, that does not necessarily mean she will remain in her self-made loneliness forever. Arguably, Stephen’s conviction that she must let Mary go for Mary’s sake is, as she tries to make herself believe, not based on selflessness but on her inward sense of failure to come to terms with her gender envy and dysphoria caused by it. In other words, the real reason why Stephen feels like she no longer can live a life with Mary is due to society’s refusal to accept her and allow her to live as a man although she physically appears to be female. It is precisely this fact that answers Newton’s question. Read as a lesbian, Stephen makes lesbians squirm because she suggests that women love women not because it is natural but because they are born in the wrong bodies. Put in this perspective, the lesbian critique about Stephen being a lesbian misrepresentation for her endorsement of heterosexuality is quite understandable. Blackburn et al. manage to capture why a queer literary representation like Stephen’s risks doing the opposite of its intention:

[C]onsider a book in which the only character to come out or be outed as gay lives a lonely life until he or she is killed or kills himself or herself...Such a book conveys an ideology, or way of viewing the world, in which being gay and out (or outed) is a pretty miserable existence. Even if the author’s intent is to conjure pity among straight people rather than fear among gay people, readers understand that being gay in this world comes with dire consequences. (2015, 14)

In the case of *The Well*, Hall’s goal to argue for the naturalness of sexual inversion and convince the general society about their right to be treated as ordinary people by evoking sympathy tends to become lost to some queer readers. Instead, they get caught up in the shame, loss, and melancholy where they either do not relate to those often emphasised, negative experiences, consequently deeming them bad representations, or they end up having their similar feelings amplified, affirming their suffering and struggle as inevitable (Faderman 1981, 322-323; Stimpson 1981, 368-369, 375; Cook 1979, 731-732).

In addition to the issue of Stephen’s loneliness, the critique of many lesbian women stemmed from their issue of not identifying as sexual inverts but as lesbians. To them, the idea of being born in the wrong body was “freakish” to the extent that they would rather “tolerate even the worst heterosexual inequities” than view themselves “in such a way” (Faderman 1981, 323). Yet, although the critique against the perception that if a woman loves a woman, “it must be because she is really a man” (317) might

be fair considering the context, it is, nevertheless, a perception underscored by transphobia. Faderman proves this even further when she discusses how transsexuals are “the modern ‘congenital invert’” who, together with medical men “are convinced ... that they are trapped in the wrong bodies” and “fixated ... on the notion that there is ‘appropriate’ masculine and feminine behavior and that same-sex love is sinful” (317). Seemingly then, critics/readers like Faderman put themselves in a bind due to neither wanting to accept Stephen as a “good” lesbian character nor acknowledging her as trans. In the end, Stephen becomes, in Bornstein’s words, a “gender outlaw” (2016, 14) both in the novel and in critical discourse. What this statement from Faderman also shows, is that while it is crucial for scholars and queers alike to discuss the issue of heteronormativity and internalised homophobia within the queer community, it is equally as important to discuss the internalised transphobia that permeates the queer community, scholarship, and literary discourse as well.

Lastly, and significantly so, one must not forget that while Stephen clearly is struggling to deal with shame, melancholy, and gender dysphoria, these things are not definite nor bound to lesbianism (or male homosexuality or transness for that matter).²⁵ Thus, in agreement with Sedgwick’s thoughts on Tomkin’s theorisation, shame can be perceived as a kind of performance that “effaces itself,” “points and projects,” and “turns itself skin side out.” To them, shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, and shame and exhibitionism “are different interlinings of the same glove” (2003, 38). These types of shifts or circulations are prevalent throughout *The Well*, where Stephen, at one moment Stephen’s displays her pride and, at the other, shame or even a conflicting mixture of the two, as can be seen in some of the examples already discussed.

The real difficulty arises when other affects, such as guilt, which, according to Tomkins, concern itself with moral transgression, intermingles with the feeling of subjective inferiority of shame (2008, 630). Moreover, as Giordano points out, it is important to note that shame and resilience, whether through pride, dignity, or defiance, have to be “negotiated and maneuvered” depending on the situation and time (2018, 17). Having Tomkins’ theorisation of shame in mind, it is thus easier to understand why Stephen ultimately decides to push Mary into the arms of Martin rather than continue being in a relationship with her.

²⁵ As, again, exemplified by Valérie, Brockett and Adolphe.

Notably, for the longest time, Stephen fights for her right to be with Mary, and she does so not only out of selfish reason but because she, at her core, firmly believes she can provide Mary with an equally good life as any man. She admits that she might not be able to give her a child, but she makes it clear that a child would not be necessary for their life to be complete. Instead, they would be “the one to the other” in a “limitless relationship,” Stephen being the “father, mother friend and lover” and Mary “the child, the friend, the beloved.” Together as unashamed “glorious outcasts,” they would, despite the world’s condemnation, “rejoice” and be “triumphant” (Hall 2014, 272). If this mindset, which clearly is filled with resilience, dignity, and pride, had been constant for Stephen, the end of *The Well* would have been inherently different. The reality, however, is that no emotion is fixed and constant but fluid and shifting, meaning that, borrowing the words of Giordano, “there is no such a thing as the strong individual who is capable of resilience and the weak sensitive one, who is victimised” (2018, 17). In other words, this kind of binary system does not exist but is, like most things, on a continuously changing spectrum, which can be exemplified by Stephen’s sudden shift from being determined not to let Mary go to doing precisely that.

The reasons why Stephen decides that she and Mary can no longer be together are many and complex. At first glance, Stephen’s decision seems to stem from guilt: “for to her there had come the despairing knowledge that the woman she loved was deeply unhappy” (Hall 2014, 392). It is only when Stephen realises the negative effects that the competition over Mary’s love has on her that she admits “defeat” and decides that the only true gift of love she can give Mary is “the gift of Martin” (392). Guilt is most definitely at play here, but it is heavily intertwined with reoccurring feelings of shame and inferiority, as can be seen in the following extract:

Never before had she seen so clearly all that was lacking to Mary Llewellyn, all that would pass from her faltering grasp, perhaps never to return, with the passing of Martin — children, a home that the world would respect, ties of affection that the world would hold sacred... and the peace of being released from the world’s persecution. And suddenly Martin appeared to Stephen as a creature endowed with incalculable bounty, having in his hands all those priceless gifts which she, love’s mendicant, could never offer. (392)

Here, Stephen expresses an opposite view to the previous one. The guilt is partially to blame, and it is what spurs her to make a sacrifice. However, in this instance, Stephen is not only feeling that the action of being in a relationship with Mary is wrong and

inadequate, but she also feels that she is wrong and inadequate.²⁶ In this case, shame seems to be what underlies her guilt; a shame which has been forced upon her by socio-cultural forces to the point that it affects her subjectivity. The unworthiness and inferiority she feels come from outside sources, which she, through mirroring, internalises and reiterates through constant repetitiveness. As Goldberg writes: “The shame-bound person has learned from others and now accuses himself of the ‘crime’ of being surplus, unwanted, and worthless” (1991). In other words, the shame does not originate from her but from the people around her. It is for this reason that shame needs to be approached rather than dismissed in scholarly studies and society at large. For shame to be reduced, attention must be directed to understanding why people shame others and what needs to be done socially, culturally, and politically.

Why is this important then? Why does it matter in the context of Stephen? Simply put, with gender being a fundamental part of one’s identity, the shaming of someone’s gender identity may negatively impact that person’s subjective understanding of themselves and, with that, their well-being (Butler 2006; Giordano 2018; Liu 2017). Since queer shame seems to be unavoidable and thus a focal point in queer identity formation, it cannot be ignored. As Liu argues, the attempts by gay and lesbian movements to fully separate themselves from shame have proven unsuccessful. In order to transcend both the conservative and hegemonic discourse on gay and lesbian pride, and to come to terms with how shame can be understood as an oppressive (as well as a changeable) societal force, he thus suggests that shame needs to be theorised as “an affective capacity to circulate (non)normativity, trauma, and pleasure across bodies” (2017, 50). In other words, and as has been pointed out before, shame should be viewed as a circulatory affect rather than as an essential aspect of one’s identity. Naturally, often passed on by white privileged and hegemonic groups to queer and racialised groups, shame does affect a person’s subjectivity to various degrees. Shame cannot be avoided but much like the word queer, it can be reclaimed and used to advocate societal change.

In a nutshell, the repetitive act of shaming lies in communicating a dislike for someone failing to conform or fulfil the requirements of societal norms. In the context of *The Well*, this can be seen in the treatment of Stephen from the moment she is born

²⁶ Giordano distinguishes guilt and shame as the former being a case of “I did *that* wrong” and the latter a case of “*I* did that wrong” (2018). See her chapter “A brief account of shame and its psychological impact” for a more in-depth discussion.

but more in detail as her identity and subjectivity are taking form. Notably, some examples of this have already been mentioned. However, in the following one, in which the reader gets insight into Stephen's mother, Lady Anna's thoughts, attention will be placed on where the process of shaming begins. Describing Anna as "going mad" due to Stephen's likeness to her father, the narrator writes: "this likeness to her husband would strike her as an outrage — as though the poor, innocent seven-year-old Stephen were in some way a caricature of Sir Philip; a blemished, unworthy, maimed reproduction" (Hall 2014, 9). To Anna it does not matter that Stephen is "handsome," her soft skin still remains "almost distasteful" and where her "largeness" and "crude lack of grace" in her movements speaks of "a certain unconscious defiance" (9). Here, Stephen is not consciously or purposely doing anything to challenge the gendered norms in her society and yet. She is still doing so by simply existing. During this time, if born female, one was to look and act in line with the feminine norms and gendered role of the "ideal" late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century woman. Put differently, the biological sex set is determined by gender but also sets the framework for how the assigned gender ideally should be performed.

Indeed, as Simone Beauvoir wrote in 1989, one is not "born" a woman but "becomes" a woman (1989, 273) in which the body becomes an active part in embodying specific "cultural and historical possibilities" (Butler 1988, 521). Judith Butler's theorisation on gender performativity helps to develop further how "being a woman" or "being a man" come to be "inherently unstable affairs." This, she explains, is due to them being "beset by ambivalence" because of a "a cost in every identification" and a "forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses" but that nevertheless ends up "choos[ing] us." Nevertheless, we ultimately still "occupy, reverse [and] resignify" these norms to the extent that they fail "to determine us completely" (Butler 2011, 86), which also is the case with Stephen.

Conversely, by unconsciously and consciously performing masculinity, whether that be due to personal preference and/or encouragement by and admiration for her father – which embodies both the ideal hegemonic British man and the ideal and glorified empathic father – Stephen is very much occupying, reversing and resignifying the norms. This explains why Stephen's mere existence and mannerisms are seen by Lady Anna, the ideal white, upper-class feminine woman, as an "unconscious defiance" even when Stephen occasionally tries to "perform" a feminine gender. This

“defiance,” i.e. breaking the norms, is what spurs feelings of shame to occur and is transmitted to the shameful subject, who in turn receives and duplicates.

The novel showcases this numerous times when Stephen attends social gatherings such as garden parties and county dinners. In those settings, she struggles to conform to a woman’s expected grace and softness, stumbling over herself and finding herself unable to smile and converse properly with either women or men. In the company of women, she “spoil things” when trying to be “agreeable” (Hall 2014, 67), even to the point that women favoured her silent grumpiness. On the other end, men found the contrast of her female sex and apparent masculinity weird and, although not explicitly said, intimidating. Consequently, she ends up being resented by them for being “too clever” or “too dull” (67). The gist of it is that Stephen is too “queer” to fit into either binary group.

Thus, aware of how she fails to perform her social role as an upper-class woman, she receives and duplicates the shame of those around her. Moreover, she also produces and projects her own shame from being conscious of the societal norms she knows she must conform to if she is not to be shamed. In turn, when shame is produced and duplicated as an affect of indignity, defeat, and alienation (Tomkins 2008), it is further amplified by the response of embarrassment and humiliation that follows and she feels like there is no escaping her awkwardness. In the words of Tomkins, the shame becomes an “inner torment” and “a sickness of the soul” (351). Consequently, when Stephen is struck by shame during social gatherings she, “[p]erplexed and unhappy,” withdraws to sit in her father’s company to hide, depriving herself of other social interaction (Hall 2014, 68-69). Ultimately, between the choice of feeling like a shameful other or simply feeling lonely, Stephen chooses the latter as it is the option which does not directly transmit the message that she as a person is “wrong” or “abnormal.” As a “gender outlaw,” she becomes stuck in the “no-man’s land of sex” (Hall 2014, 69).

Clearly, then, the societal norms and roles regarding gender and sexuality during the early twentieth century affect Stephen’s experiences and, thus, her identity formation as queer. By unconsciously and consciously breaking down the female/male and feminine/masculine binaries, Stephen challenges these categories as rigid and fixed. Moreover, she proves what Butler says about gender being a “stylised repetition of acts” that is constituted in time and where these performative bodily acts constitute identity as “a compelling illusion”; “an object of belief” (1988, 519-20). Done under

the societal circumstances of the time, the person who is constantly performing these acts will ultimately contribute to the production, endorsement, and subversion of the notions of gender, sexuality, as well as masculinity and femininity.

So, aside from examples which already have been used to show how Stephen performs gender, how does Stephen subvert but also endorse the gendered norms of her time? Arguably, this is partially determined by the lens through which one views Stephen's gender identity and sexuality. We need to start with the assumption that Stephen is a cisgender woman according to the perception of the general society in the book and by critics who read her as lesbian. Consequently, Stephen's masculine-coded name, body, mannerisms, interests and preference for masculine-coded activities and clothes all become gender-subversive and "queer" acts. The narrator, along with numerous characters, emphasises this throughout the story²⁷ offering comments like how it is a pity that "she's got none of [girls] pretty little ways" (Hall 2014, 13); how preposterous it is for her "to ride like a man" (81) and how "queer-looking" and "mannish" she is for wearing a collar and tie (144). Thus, when Stephen performs actions "reserved" for men, such as "helping" her mother cross the road, hunting, fencing, and driving a car, these performative "pre-gendered" acts and gestures, as enacted by Stephen's gendered masculine female body, become subversive. More specifically, they break the manufactured illusion of women's expected femininity and role within society's compulsory heterosexual ideal, proving that gender, as a socio-cultural construction, "can neither be true nor false" but a merely produced "as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (Butler 2006, 186). Similar to crossdressing and drag, the performativity of identity formation is, as Butler suggests, contingent on three dimensions of corporeality, namely biological/anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance (187). Arguably, included in this, there are also notions of sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, etc.

In Stephen's case, the one factor which remains an enigma is her gender identity. This, as the meaning of her sexually inverted identity, crosses the boundaries and moves between anatomy, social gender, sexuality, and spirituality. Paradoxically, with gender identity being subversive through performative acts, the same performative

²⁷ In fact, the word "queer," which in the context of the novel lacks the political connotation of today, is easiest understood as "odd" or "strange" and is included about sixty times in the text in various situations, which most certainly points to how Stephen subverted gender expectations. For a more in-depth analysis of Hall's use of the word queer and its connotations at the time, see "The Case of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*" (Baer and Liu 2022).

acts also endorse them. Not only do her masculine name and physical descriptions of being “narrowed-hipped,” “wide-shouldered,” and having “a man’s muscles” contribute to presenting Stephen as male rather than female, but her masculine interests and mannerisms further endorse the idea of a heterosexual order. Enacting the hegemonic man of this time, Stephen chooses to take the masculine role of the breadwinner, the protector, and the pursuer because that is the role she believes she must take. Much like her parents, she shares the ideal of either being a fine gentleman or a fine lady, which is why her inability to be either causes her such distress.

Regardless of the terminology one wishes to label Stephen with, i.e., whether she is lesbian, trans, or simply queer, Stephen’s masculinity remains a kind of double-edged sword. On the one hand, society’s perception of her as a woman makes her masculine subversive in the way it was discussed earlier. On the other hand, however, the masculinity she presents as either a butch lesbian or a transmasculine person endorses various degrees of heteronormativity and hegemonic order. In other words, by conforming to heterosexual values, she contributes to upholding the same powers that continue to oppress her.²⁸ However, assuming Stephen is a trans person who feels and wants to be a man, her insistence on trying to act like the perfect gentleman and thus conforming to heterosexual ideal makes sense.

The expectation to conform to either masculine or feminine norms as trans is a complicated issue. On the one hand, many trans people often feel the need to, in contemporary terms, to “pass” as either a man or a woman. For most transgenders/transsexuals, there is no room for either androgyny or looking even the slightest like the gender they were assigned at birth. While Stephen is not supposed to act masculine at all due to sexual inversion being a “sin against creation” (Hall 2014, 12), it feels worth pointing out that had Stephen lived in contemporary society she would still have been expected to transition and pass into a stereotypical looking man in order to be seen and treated as man. Again, if we recall the requirements for gender dysphoria, it is clear that one must exhibit tendencies to want to act or be like the opposite sex. The requirement that there must be marked incongruence between one’s experienced gender and the assigned sex is contingent on the idea of a clear distinction of the female-male binary.

²⁸ It is important to note that this has less do with physical attributes and clothing and more so with behaviour.

Hence, while it is important to engage in a discourse about hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine transgender people contributing to the endorsement of heteronormative ideals, one must not forget that they, in a sense, are forced to perform in this manner to get their gender validated/affirmed. Being raised as a son and educated as a son by her father due to being “all the son that [he’s] got” (Hall 2014, 52), Stephen is simply performing her gender according to the male norms she is surrounded by and must conform to in order to become the son/man she was meant to and wants to be. This explains why she does not only dress like a man but also embraces the masculine role of a man and the duties it entails in her relationships. She wants and becomes the pursuer, the breadwinner, and the protector in her relationships because that is what is expected of her “being the thing she [is],” that is, the “mannish” sexual invert.

Conversely, the reason why I do not wish to push for a definite label even within the trans spectrum is because there is no certain way to confirm its authenticity or assure that it would not have changed with time. Ideas and knowledge on gender and sexuality are constantly changing, in which labels shift or get replaced with new ones. Regardless of the reading one wishes to make, it is important to acknowledge that Stephen, borrowing the words of Susan Stryker, is and will remain “unavoidably gender non-conforming [and] genderqueer” (2017, xi). Like Stryker, although reversed, Stephen’s gender identity as trans will always, in various degrees, be perceived differently from both cisgender women and cisgender men. Furthermore, being born a woman, she will always carry with her experiences and knowledge of being treated as a woman, albeit she does not feel like one.

Still, Hall tries to depict this “in-betweenness” of the masculine and feminine as a strength that can be used for a greater purpose in the sense that it enables Stephen to “write with a curious double insight” (Hall 2014, 187). Moreover, the emphasis that Stephen should do this for the sake of other people like her indeed derives from Hall’s conviction that a story about the lived experience of sexual inversion can only be written by a sexual invert. It again brings attention to the issue of the implied author and the fact that Hall’s experience and view on sexual inversion influence how it is incorporated into the novel. Nevertheless, as the mixed interpretations of *The Well* prove, the reader’s identification or disidentification with the novel is varied and multifaceted.

Interestingly, even though Hall points out the variation of queer identities in the circles Stephen is part of, critics are keen to turn a blind eye to this aspect. Arguably,

they seem determined to ignore that the queer people in the story are described to be “so numerous and so fine that they often defied the most careful observation” (Hall 2014, 319). As Taylor notes, Hall’s depiction of the diverse queer subcultures is what emphasises Stephen Gordon’s queer experience as a singular one (1998, 291). Neither Hall nor the story intends to represent Stephen Gordon’s queer experiences and feelings as universal. Hall simply provides insight into one invert’s life in the hope of earning sympathy for the struggles a person in this marginalised group was likely to have during this time.

For while *The Well* deals with a lot of the darker and negative aspects of queer experiences during this time in which the fate of Stephen’s friends Jamie and Barbara is the most tragic²⁹, it also points to some of the positive and beautiful aspects. One such aspect is the welcoming, safe, and supporting queer community that Valérie Seymore has built with her money and influence. Hence, for those struggling to stomach Stephen’s shame, loss and melancholy, this author suggests that they turn their attention back to other characters such as Valérie and Adolphe Blanc who optimistically reminds us that the world, in fact, is not “as black as it is painted” and that with great courage queer people will one day rise from the degradation and “demand of the world compassion and justice” (Hall 2014, 354, 371) – which they also have and will continue to do until it is achieved.

Still, to ignore the more painful and melancholic aspects of Stephen’s queer experiences would be a fault. In the hope of earning sympathy, Hall’s purpose with the story was to provide insight into the painful struggles of trying to be queer in a society which will not accept it. Today, trans people are still struggling with having their identity acknowledged, but even more so to have people recognise and fully understand the depth of the emotional struggles and pain they are experiencing. It is no longer enough to merely argue for Stephen’s genderqueer identity. Rather, one needs to analyse her experiences, painful and melancholic as they may be, with the intention of understanding her distress and, more importantly – the reasons for it.

²⁹ Barbara dies due to untreated pneumonia which causes her partner Jamie to commit suicide (Hall 2014, 362-66). This severely affects Stephen and is arguably one of the underlying contributing factors to why she starts questioning whether or not she will be able to properly care for Mary (even though she has the financial security that Jamie and Barbara did not, in this case a proper home and access to medical care.) Notably, Hall uses the tragic fate of Jamie and Barbara as an example of the life of poverty, bad health and death that Angela feared.

Conclusion

As this essay has shown, the matter of Stephen Gordon's gender and sexuality is complex. The historical circumstances and differing terminology make the issue of disclosing Stephen's gender and sexuality nearly impossible. For this reason, the application of queer theory and affect theory may help detangle the complexities of gender, sexuality, shame, and queer identity formation. The former's emphasis on gender as performative and transitory and sexuality as fluid enables a reading of queer experiences that is not limited to a specific time in history. More specifically, gender and sexuality can be analysed both within its historical context and in relation to other contexts. As has been argued with the latter, there is no way to get rid of shame as it continuously circulates between bodies. However, by looking closer into shame, the structural powers that are behind the circulation of shame can be traced. Affect theory, thus, has the power to mend the infected relationship between some queer groups and shame, making it possible to view shame as a part of queer *experiences* but not a part of queer *identities*. In other words, both queer theory and affect theory offer tools to understand how social and cultural aspects impact the notions of gender and sexuality, more specifically, how they are formed, subverted, endorsed, negotiated, and circulated.

The reason why I opt for queer stories such as *The Well* to be analysed in less rigid and more fluid terms is that the possibilities for understanding various queer experiences expand. It allows for various interpretations to be made without closing the door to other ones. Representation matters, especially for marginalised minorities such as the genderqueer person Stephen's character represents. As I read the novel, I not only identified with Stephen Gordon's pain and struggles but was also reminded of the need to bring all that pain and distress to the surface and point out some of the reasons *why* these feelings arise in the first place. Because if we have the *why*, it becomes easier to identify the structures and powers that need to be questioned and challenged in order to initiate change. For as much as I, along with many other trans people, wish to be legally and socially recognised, I first and foremost want people to understand *why* our identities are not allowed recognition and, more importantly, *how* that makes us feel and affects our lives. Stephen Gordon's existence, although fictive, is a valuable example of bringing attention to these issues as her experiences resonate with not only

mine but plenty of other genderqueer readers – just as they did for lesbians during the twentieth century.

The lesbian and gay movements have, unarguably, paved the way for the queer and trans movements, making it possible for a genderqueer reading such as this one to be made. However, it is important to remember that queer, and trans people were part of those movements as well. Trans and queer people who have not fit the more rigid notions of lesbian and gay identities and experiences have always existed but have, due to oppression, not been allowed the same representation as their heteronormative and binary counterparts. With the rise of trans visibility, it is thus not too surprising that *The Well* has caught the eye of many trans readers. For the longest time, *The Well* was read as a lesbian story. Then a transgender story. Now it is a trans genderqueer story. In a couple of years, it might just be a queer story or something else entirely. The novel's dethroning as *the* lesbian novel into *one* out of many lesbian, queer, and trans stories is due to the increased recognition and representation of various gendered and sexual identities in society as well as written and published literature. During the hundred years since *The Well's* publication, there have been multiple feminist, lesbian, gay and queer movements which have all, in various ways, contributed to the LGBTQIA+ fight for acceptance, equality and the right to exist. *The Well* is one of those contributions. This essay is another one.

Regardless of terminology, *The Well* will always remain a story which deals with the struggle of being gender non-conforming and non-heterosexual in a cisgender and heteronormative society. For both good and bad, the lesbian, queer and trans communities respectively owe much to Radclyffe Hall and her story. *The Well's* influence as a record of queer experience can thus not be overstated. Hence, while there is nothing wrong with arguing for a particular interpretation of Stephen Gordon, it is my firm conviction that one should avoid arguing for a rigid and definite understanding of her gendered and sexual identity. After all, it has been proven that such readings lead one into a corner filled with frustration and, more severely, erase other queer visibilities and possibilities. Thus, as currently defined, the term “genderqueer” is a good option to use when approaching the *The Well* and its “sexually inverted” protagonist, as it enables a reading that is not limited to a binary or definite conceptualisation of the term. Then, instead of being confused or frustrated that Stephen's experiences do not correspond “accurately” with a certain label, one can instead appreciate how the fluid

and complex nature of those experiences captures the unlimited range of queerness and queer struggle.

In this essay, the attention is directed at those who move between, outside and around the borders of the binary. Much like Stephen Gordon, trans people today are struggling with things such as shame, loss, dysphoria, and melancholy due to societal expectations and norms. More so, they are exhausted from having to fight for their right to exist, socially and legally, while having to deal with the consequences of experiencing an incongruence between their assigned sex and experienced gender. Today, people may have heard about “gender dysphoria” and what it entails, but few know what it *feels* like, where it comes from or why it is so harmful to trans people. Stories like *The Well* deal with those feelings, while essays like this one lay them out plainly for people to see and feel in hope that it will make them acknowledge and listen to them.

Stephen Gordon might not be Radclyffe Hall, but Radclyffe Hall’s experience as queer certainly influences her, thus reflecting queer struggles that many queer people, especially those battling shame and gender dysphoria, can relate to. And for those who cannot relate, Stephen’s story can, as Hall intended, highlight some of the societal and structural issues behind the pain, melancholy and shame that need to be addressed and fixed. Notably, Stephen is merely one queer character, *The Well* one queer story and Radclyffe Hall one queer writer. I am also just one reader, and this essay is only one minor contribution to a much bigger and more complex cause. There is plenty more to be said about *The Well* and Stephen Gordon, both separately and within a larger literary and queer context.

Therefore, in line with what has been discussed in this essay, I highly encourage readers within and outside academia to read *The Well*, not with the intention to define her but to understand her experiences and struggles as queer. Turn *The Well*’s content inside out, dare to touch the pain, shame, and melancholy, make note of the pride and resistance, and question the powers and structures which shame and oppress. I also encourage any reader of *The Well* to read other queer novels and compare them, as there is much that can be learned about the development of queer issues, resistance, and experiences. Furthermore, while this essay focused on character in relation to gender, sexuality, there is still plenty to be discussed in terms of class, ethnicity, religion, age, etc., as all these factors intersect and contribute to how shame comes to circulate and attaches itself to certain bodies. Stephen Gordon might have been oppressed for being

genderqueer, but being upper class and white, she had a lot more privilege than many other queer characters in her story; a privilege she, notably, also shared with her creator Radclyffe Hall.

In the end, a lot can be learned about trans and queer experiences by looking at Stephen Gordon as well as the other characters in *The Well*. The same can be said about looking at Radclyffe Hall's and other queer people's lives. Despite different conceptualisation, terminology and context, the queer experiences in Hall's novel are not that different to those queer people experience today. Thus, despite its problematic elements, including its outdated conceptualisation and terminology about gender and sexuality, *The Well* acts as literary proof of trans and queer existence and experience that many trans and queer people today identify with. And the fact that they do speaks of a need to continue to engage with queer literature and highlight both the pride and resistance but also the struggles of shame, loss, gender dysphoria, melancholy, and marginalisation, which any trans person, such as myself, can testify remain eerily similar to what they did hundred years ago.

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