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# A Dyke's Life: Sexual Identity and Gender Performance in Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness

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# A DYKE'S LIFE:
# SEXUAL IDENTITY AND GENDER PERFORMANCE
# IN RADCLYFFE HALL'S
# *THE WELL OF LONELINESS*

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis, *A Dyke's Life: Sexual Identity and Gender Performance in Radclyffe Hall's* The Well of Loneliness, is written by Erica L. Ellsworth and is submitted in Summer 2000 to Minnesota State University, Mankato in Mankato, Minnesota in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

This thesis studies sexual and gender identity and gender performance in *The Well of Loneliness* by utilizing postmodern theory. The protagonist in the novel, Stephen Gordon, is not only one example of the many identities of lesbianism, but she is also an example of a multiplicitous identity. This thesis also questions whether we can find the exact moment or reason why an identity is formed. An exploration of not only *The Well of Loneliness* but also of a character study of Stephen Gordon is important to this dialogue because both studies validate the contradictory and complimentary relationship between sex and gender.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION:
## ALL ABOARD THE POSTMODERN IDENTITY TRAIN

Identity is not inborn; rather it is constructed. A person's identity is created from the cultural interactions and the people a person encounters throughout their life. Arguably, identity is a never-ending quest. Identity is neither concrete, nor fixed. Stephen Gordon, Radclyffe Hall's protagonist in *The Well of Loneliness*, is an example of a character with a fluid and changeable identity. When viewed as a starting point to lesbian literature, Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* provides an overview of lesbian literary tradition as well as identity politics.

In 1928, Radclyffe Hall wrote what is now called the "must read" lesbian novel: *The Well of Loneliness*. According to Lillian Faderman, Hall "believed that her novel would provide lesbians with a moral and medical defense against a society that viewed same-sex love as immoral or curable" (*Surpassing* 317-18). Hall's novel was banned both in England and in the United States due to her frank and honest (if not negative) portrayal of underground lesbian life and her representation of what Havelock Ellis termed "sexual inverts" (sexual inversion was Ellis's term for

homosexuality). Nevertheless, Hall was able to get the book published in the United States in the 1930s and most of Europe (translated into eight languages) by the 1940s. Illegal copies of the novel were shipped to England via France and then generally confiscated and burned. England would not lift its censorship ban on *The Well of Loneliness* until 1959, sixteen years after Hall died of cancer.

Hall and her novel changed how lesbians were perceived in society and literature. Prior to Hall's work, there were pieces of literature, like Sappho's poetry, that dealt with lesbians and lesbian identity. *The Well of Loneliness*, however, was the first piece of literature to directly talk about lesbians and lesbianism. *The Well of Loneliness* offered a glimpse into the life of a lesbian. Because Stephen Gordon, Hall's protagonist, was seen as being a mirror image of Hall, society was further offered a real life example of a lesbian: Radclyffe Hall. Fiction became fact, and the ways lesbian history was interpreted were changed -- all because of *The Well of Loneliness*.

In this novel, we see a lesbian identity that has become part of the debate among literary critics, theorists, and historians. The essence of lesbian history, and thus the criticism of lesbian works, is not only dependent upon history but also on how the present shades history. Lesbian history and lesbian criticism have worked together and

against each other to create a body of lesbian theory. Lesbian criticism is relatively young, having begun in the early eighties, and lesbian history is sometimes based on conjecture. According to Julie Abraham in "History as Explanation: Writing About Lesbian Writing, or 'Are Girls Necessary'?", theory and history both expand and contract each other because a modern perspective is placed on a historical moment that influenced a piece of literature (256). Whenever a modern perspective is placed on a piece of literature written in an earlier era, the nuances of the earlier era are negated and clouded with modern perceptions. In other words, lesbian history is dependent on the lens of the person interpreting that history. Similarly, when we begin to look at how history has influenced criticism, we see that same clouding on criticism. Our interpretations begin to be based on the same contemporary musings we have on history.

Lesbian history, and thus lesbian identity, is also greatly influenced by the device of encoding. Encoding is a literary and social device that writers use to mask the "socially unacceptable" in their works. With the use of encoding, a narrative introduces a lesbian identity without describing the identity in great detail. The reader decodes this narrative. Encoding allows for this specific identity to be explained without risking censorship. By using the

literary device of encoding, authors are able to put something akin to secret messages within their text. While to the unassuming reader these messages would simply be part of the text, readers who are looking for this message would find a prize -- a piece of themselves within the text. Similarly, Marilyn R. Farwell's essay, "The Lesbian Narrative: 'The Pursuit of the Inedible by the Unspeakable'," cites the physical body as a device of encoding because the lesbian both represents the female body (within patriarchal control) and the lesbian body (outside patriarchal control); therefore, the lesbian body passes because it looks female (157-58). Passing, then, becomes an after-effect of encoding. According to Margaret Reynolds, symbols and actions in literature written by women (lesbian writers) can serve as metaphors or pieces of encoded text because the interpretation is open to the reader and the critic (xiv). If a lesbian reads a text and sees herself in the encoded metaphor, she will see a text that relates to her life experience. If a heterosexual female reader reads a text and does not interpret the encoded metaphor as lesbian, then she too has found a text that she can relate to her life experience.

Desire and erotics also influence and shape the definition of lesbianism and of lesbian sexuality because they shape the ways texts are interpreted and criticized.

Desire and erotics are not dependent on heterosexuality or homosexuality; rather, they are dependent on interpretation. When applied to literature, desire and erotics can shape interpretation of literature because the reader is able to apply herself to the literature. Desire is the want and need, usually sexual, two women share for one another; erotics is both the sexual and the emotional dynamics between two women (Allen 177). Erotics, on the other hand, is the sexual and emotional questioning and answering that the characters feel as a result of the physical desire. Desire can exist without erotics, but erotics can not exist without desire. The emotional must be expanded by the physical.

Lesbian criticism tells us that lesbians in literature and in history have been ranked as a medical anomaly or a carnivorous flower, or they have been ranked by the genres of realism and romanticism. The lesbian as medical anomaly is the invert. Society would, morally speaking, have to accept her because she can not change an inborn characteristic. Conversely, the lesbian as carnivorous flower is the third sex. Here, the lesbian is both man and woman, yet is neither man nor woman; she is the agent of

desire as well as the recipient of desire. Unlike the lesbian as medical anomaly, the lesbian as carnivorous flower is dangerous because she is outside patriarchal control.

In *The Well of Loneliness*, the lesbian is a medical anomaly. Because Hall uses a medical definition to explain Stephen, she is utilizing the technique of explaining queerness in medical terms. In her time, this was acceptable because it gave people a reason to sympathize with inverts -- they were medically abnormal; thus they could not control their abnormality. By using the definition of medical anomaly, society was given a way to hate but within the boundaries of medicine. Further, using the definitions of lesbian realism and lesbian romanticism, *The Well of Loneliness* can be labeled realistic because it is a "realistic" depiction of an invert. Arguably, however, the novel could be either realistic or romantic because it depicts the reality of two tragic heroines. Within the boundaries of the definitions of medical anomaly, carnivorous flower, realism, and romanticism, *The Well of Loneliness* is undefinable.

Theory further suggests the importance of language in our understanding of lesbian identity. There are a number of ways lesbians are defined, and even more numerous ways lesbians define one another. Definitions do, however,

overlap and work together to form meanings that apply to individuals as well as communities. Because meanings differ and overlap, working definitions of lesbianism are needed to create a common social construction framework that will aid in the study of Hall. Bonnie Zimmerman defines lesbian as "a way of knowing and acting -- a mode of communication between self and world" ("Perverse" 136). Conversely, Radicalesbians, a 1970s lesbian-separatist feminist group, defines lesbian as "the word, the label, the condition that holds women in line" (163). Carolyn Allen defines lesbian as a "sign [of] sexual desire between women" (177). Teresa de Lauretis defines lesbians in terms of sexual sameness, outside a masculine definition, and sexual indifference, within a masculine definition (142). A lesbian, therefore, is many things or states of existence at any one time.

Within definitions of lesbianism is the concept of butch (masculine) and femme (feminine). A lesbian's definition takes on the form of a fluid being, marked by a masculine (not patriarchal) or feminine appearance. Historically and socially, butch is the lesbian who looks or acts masculine, cross-dresses, plays the role of strength and provider, and generally is stereotyped into the role of husband. Femme, on the other hand, is the lesbian that

plays opposite of butch as the submissive, feminine, and stereotypical wife role. The concepts of butch and femme further divide and combine the definitions of lesbian.

Although these definitions appear to be quite different, there are similarities because a person still has the power to manipulate definitions to fit her personality, self-naming. Lisa Kahaleole Chang Hall cites the power to self-name as the condition in which one's identity is able to grow and change: "Our identities never become final because new experiences continue to affect the way we see ourselves, and these new identifications in turn affect the kinds of experiences we can have and the kinds of communities we can create" (229). Chang Hall's definition, therefore, allows for lesbianism to be an exploration that leads to a fluid identity. Fluidity, according to de Lauretis, is the condition of existence that allows the definitions of lesbianism to be debated (152). Fluidity, then, allows for recognition of Self (an identity independent from another identity) while understanding the position of Other (an identity dependent on another identity). Definitions about lesbians and lesbianism will change from person to person as each lesbian self-names. The static definition, however, will be that lesbians and lesbianism are not fixed. Once again, lesbians and lesbianism reflect a fluid existence. With this in mind,

Vera Whisman points out that defining lesbian is an attempt by the lesbian community to combine past, present, and future together while still maintaining an elasticity and fluidity (49, 58). History allows for perceptions, but does not create a concrete meaning. Maintaining a modern perspective while exploring a past perspective and hypothesizing about a future perspective allows definitions of lesbian to change and grow as questions are posed and answered. Further, Zimmerman theorizes that a lesbian's position allows her to be a heterosexual disrupter because she is not controlled sexually by men or patriarchy. The state of heterosexual disrupter allows the lesbian to constantly shift the definition of lesbian, resulting in a fluid existence ("Lesbians" 4, 12). Being able to define Self outside man allows lesbians to be Self and Other simultaneously.

Combining self-naming with the variety of definitions pertaining to lesbian creates the possibility of icons, or images, of lesbianism to become engraved not only in texts but also in social constructions. Sonja Ruehl, for example, offers a definition of self-naming that combines with other definitions to form an icon: Radclyffe Hall. Hall chose to offer herself as a public symbol. For instance, Hall's "militant stand, both as author and public personality, was to start a 'reverse discourse' towards *self*-definition by

those oppressed under the category" of sexual invert (Ruehl 18, original emphasis). By publicly labeling or naming herself, Hall became an icon. In becoming an icon, Hall not only offered herself as a symbol, but also gave lesbians an example of how to form lesbian identities. She was able to do this by offering many examples of the invert's life that was a mirror of her own life. She began to show her literary audiences the variety of lesbians -- a variety that allowed audiences to find pieces of themselves within her prose. Hall also created a paradox. In defining herself as a lesbian and her friends as lesbians, she gave a picture that there was an icon of lesbianism, herself, but also that there were also offshoots of lesbianism, her friends. In other words, Hall created the idea that there is a "real" lesbian and at the same time there is no "real" lesbian.

Lesbians and their definitions change from situation to situation and environment to environment. The constant within these definitions, however, is the need (or want) of lesbians to see themselves reflected in culture. Once a concrete, yet fluid and changing, social image of lesbian is established, lesbians can begin to look for that image, a reflection of their own existence, in the arts and especially in literature. Lesbians looking for their mirrored self in literature and culture are looking for the difference by which society has labeled them.

In *The Well of Loneliness*, Hall is able to provide images of people who are "different" from their society: inverts and members of the third sex. *The Well of Loneliness* offers a starting place for lesbians to find images of lesbianism in literature; in fact, we can view the novel as the birth of lesbian literature. The themes and characters of this ground-breaking novel have became the classic example of what lesbian literature could be. Martha Vicinus writes that lesbian literature mirrors lesbian social construction, a "self-conscious effort to create a new sexual language . . . that included not only words but also gestures, costume, and behavior" (445). To relate to lesbians in literature, lesbian readers have to see their words, gestures, costume, and behavior in lesbian texts. Catherine R. Stimpson furthers Vicinus's definition of what lesbians want in literature by explaining how body politics play into the perceptions of lesbians in literature:

> Of course a lesbian is more than her body, more than her flesh, but lesbianism partakes of the body, partakes of the flesh. That carnality distinguishes it from affectionate friendships in which women enjoy each other, support each other, and commingle a sense of identity and well-being. Lesbianism represents a commitment of skin, blood, breast, bone. (301)

Lesbians can see their realism or their physical commitment that goes beyond establishing women-identified space, yet still see their romanticism or emotional commitment that seals physical commitment.

Although lesbians look for themselves in lesbian texts, that image is not always the same. The image of lesbians in texts matches the image the lesbian reader is looking for. Moreover, this image is fluid and changes as the reader or text changes. De Lauretis argues, "if all lesbians had one and the same definition of 'lesbian desire,' there would hardly be any debate among [lesbians], or any struggle over interpretations on cultural images, especially ones that [lesbians] produce" (152). Since lesbians differ in their expectations or perceptions of a lesbian image, literature, mirroring social construction, creates a body of lesbian images that exist within a lesbian narrative space.

Postmodernist thought, especially the works of Judith Butler, is an important tool in theorizing and critiquing lesbian identity. Postmodern thought allows lesbian theory and criticism to expand beyond traditional theories. It also allows lesbian theory and criticism to redefine works and theorists and critics to reread and reinterpret lesbian-themed literature. Postmodern theory allows for a displacement in literature: the ability for a piece of literature to hold several different meanings and

interpretations throughout different times. In essence, a piece of literature can be defined multiple times, each time allowing for a further exploration and uncovering of literature. *The Well of Loneliness*, for example, first can be seen as a tragic love story and reread as a piece of lesbian history and further reread as a literary exploration of inversion. Each rereading allows for a new area of the book to be discovered, and each rereading displaces the previous reading. Displacement can then lead to a fluidity and a deviation from the "norm" of literature. It can lead to discovering multiple meanings in texts.

In order for postmodern theory to help redefine literature through displacement, pre-existing categories, like that of identity, have to be evaluated and destroyed. Butler writes that "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression" ("Imitation and Gender" 308). By allowing the categories to remain, the oppression of binary and fixed definitions remains. In other words, theories and criticisms like lesbian theory and criticism exist because they are not part of the "regulatory regime." In fact, Butler theorizes that by permanently making, for example,

the sign of lesbian unclear, theorists are allowed to displace interpretations of works like Hall's that never took into consideration the difference that is embodied by many definitions.

Butler allows, however, that dominant theory still has a place for lesbian-themed works, lesbian theory, and lesbian criticism. She writes that "lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the namable" ("Imitation and Gender" 312). The idea of lesbianism is therefore acceptable because it is not a concept within social constructions, the "regulatory regime." On the surface, this would seem to be a negative interpretation of how to allow postmodern theory to interpret literature. It is quite the contrary, however. Butler's idea allows for theorists and critics to read works like Hall's and conjecture intent and meaning while also allowing readers to interpret a hidden meaning. Postmodern thought thus gives Hall's work a fluidity to exist in many worlds of thought.

Postmodern theory also destroys the definitions and parameters that it sets up. Postmodern theorists can create a paradigm and then deny that paradigm without changing the tenets of postmodern thought. This is done by displacing

word associations to create a feeling of uncertainty. In "Imitation and Gender," Butler states that "there are no distinct expressive or casual lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality. None of these terms captures or determines the rest" (315). This is a significant idea, because we may look at *The Well of Loneliness* as a work that builds a foundation of how sex is negated by gender (especially when gender is presented as an extension of fantasy and sexuality -- consider Stephen's need to be masculine and male). The reality, however, is that sex, gender, gender performance, sexuality and fantasy do not depend on one another. Logically, then, they can not negate one another. Sex, gender, gender performance, sexuality and fantasy are independent of one another. Consequently, when postmodernists begin to reinterpret lesbian literature, they begin to displace the ideas that sex, sexuality, and gender are dependent on one another. Characters and themes can be reinterpreted and displaced over and over again. There would then be no real conclusion or an end to theorizing about Hall, her influence on *The Well of Loneliness*, or *The Well of Loneliness* as a novel.

*The Well of Loneliness* is a novel that needs to be reread and reinterpreted in postmodernist terms because it deserves to be theorized within the context of disruption and fluidity. *The Well of Loneliness* is a novel that can

shed light on how lesbians lived in Hall's time, but also it is a novel that explains the reasons that drove Hall to write about not only her experience, but also the experiences of the inverts around her. Postmodern theory is thus the tool that allows theorists and critics to reinterpret *The Well of Loneliness* based not only on the fluidity of postmodern thought but also on the fluidity of the novel itself. Butler theorizes that "gender is drag, and if it is an imitation that regularly produces the ideal it attempts to approximate, then gender is a performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core" ("Imitation and Gender" 317). Stephen's performance within *The Well of Loneliness* allows for a variety of illusions that encompasses all definitions of lesbianism. Past interpretations of *The Well of Loneliness* have not dealt with the gender performance in the novel or the complexity of identity within the novel.

This thesis looks at gender identity and performance in *The Well of Loneliness* by utilizing postmodern theory, which even in its chaos and confusion, allows for a reexamination of *The Well of Loneliness*. This thesis will look at how Stephen's identity is not only one example of the many identities of lesbianism, but also an example of a multiplicitous identity. In the end, postmodern theory will give a brief glimpse of what further theoretical and

critical work can be done with *The Well of Loneliness*. The next chapter, Chapter II, reviews critical works. The general information written about Radclyffe Hall and *The Well of Loneliness* will be considered as well as theoretical works on lesbian identity and lesbian literature. Postmodern theory, especially that of Judith Butler, also will be discussed. Chapter III of this thesis looks at cultural definitions of sex and gender. The ways in which postmodern thought can blur sex and gender boundaries will be explored. Stephen's ability and inability to fit into cultural definitions will be investigated. Chapter IV examines the multiplicity of identity, in particular Stephen's identity. Postmodern thought and the third sex also will be discussed as a means to multiplicity and the complexity of identity. The conclusion, Chapter V, discusses the use of postmodern theory which can reshape how *The Well of Loneliness* is reread.

# CHAPTER II

## WHERE IS THE REAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE?: A ROAD TRIP OF CRITICAL WORKS

The formation of lesbian identity and how that identity plays out in a narrative is an integral part of the lesbian novel. In general terms, lesbian identity has been discussed in theoretical works. Specific lesbian identities like that of Stephen Gordon have been only peripherally discussed in critical works. Works written about *The Well of Loneliness* are minimal. The critical work that concerns Hall and her novel and the critical work about lesbian identity, however, provide an overview of the theories that can be applied to *The Well of Loneliness*. The works of Judith Butler not only illuminate the critical works that discuss *The Well of Loneliness* but also the critical works that address lesbian identity.

No novel in the English language before Hall has dealt with the subject of lesbianism or female inversion. In Hall's time, inversion was a medical term that implied homosexuality was congenital and thus the homosexual could not be blamed for his or her "condition." Hall's ideas about inversion are shaped by Havelock Ellis. In his writings about inversion, sexologist Havelock Ellis coined

the term inversion which can be loosely defined as homosexuality. It was Hall's intent not only to explain inversion to the non-medical public but also to present an invert that was moral and hard-working -- a character with whom everyone could identify and thus sympathize. Lillian Faderman writes that "Hall believed that her novel would provide lesbians with a moral and medical defense against society which viewed same-sex love as immoral and curable" (*Surpassing* 317-318). Hall succeeds, then, in creating a narrative space where lesbians and female inverts can define themselves and see themselves within the literature of the period.

When the novel was first published, critics of *The Well of Loneliness* viewed the novel as either censurable or a blueprint of how to be a lesbian. Bonnie Zimmerman writes that the novel "was shocking enough to be condemned by moralists, apologetic enough to be approved by sympathetic liberals, and explicit enough to be eagerly welcomed by lesbians" (*Safe Sea* 7). To the non-critics, *The Well of Loneliness* was received as a work that created and presented the ultimate lesbian image: Stephen Gordon. Even today, critics and theorists tend to view *The Well of Loneliness* as a how-to model for lesbianism and Stephen Gordon as the ultimate image of a butch lesbian.

Creating a character like Stephen with whom readers could sympathize was intentional. Jane Rule writes that "Radclyffe Hall's intention was to write a sympathetic and accurate book about inversion" (50). In the 1920s, "sympathetic and accurate" were encoded and lesbians were able to see these two emotions in the novel. The encoding in the novel was enough for lesbians to see themselves and apply their own definitions of identity; yet the novel was also specific enough about lesbian life to be condemned. The condemnation can thus be seen as a way to put lesbian identity in the place of Other which has always been an excluded part of society. There is also the "Otherness" of the book. The "Otherness" in the book refers to the feeling that Hall was writing about someone whom any reader knew; yet the characters are also people no one ever knew -- the "Others." The topic Hall writes about is also different in that no one had tried to write a sympathetic novel about inversion. Perhaps *The Well of Loneliness* has survived because Hall's theme is groundbreaking, yet timeless.

One of the unique aspects in *The Well of Loneliness* is Hall's ability to play with definitions about identity. Esther Newton's "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman" discusses how *the Well of Loneliness* struggled to break rigid definitions. She writes that "Hall's creation, Stephen Gordon, is a double symbol,

standing for the New Woman's painful position between traditional political and social categories and for the lesbian struggle to define and assert identity" (289). This means that while identity can be based on many interpretations, the real struggle is overcoming the multiple (and possibly fragmented) definitions of identity to establish a singular image of identity. This makes sense, according to Sonja Ruehl, because Hall and "her fictional heroine, Stephen, became points of reference for women who, in a time when landmarks were few, were struggling to make sense of their attraction to other women . and to find a social identity by which to live" (15). Stephen was the starting point for lesbians in their struggle to identify themselves. Ruehl concludes that "we can see a process beginning with the definition of lesbianism in medical-scientific theory and reaching a point where lesbians have politically articulated a demand to define themselves" (35). It is up to lesbians to continue the definition process; however, The *Well of Loneliness* created a place to start.

Stephen was the first lesbian protagonist in English literature. Her endurance today can be seen as an extension of the challenge that lesbianism presents to the dominant culture. Leigh Gilmore writes that "Lesbianism appears as an identity that remakes a challenge to heterosexual

dominance into an approximation or imitation of gender dominance" (610). Lesbianism, especially that of Stephen Gordon, is a challenge to dominant gender systems, and that challenge creates a place for lesbians to produce their own identity.

While there is no set definition of lesbian or lesbianism in literature, there are recurring images of "typical" lesbians. The two most distinct lesbian images in literature, according to Faderman's "What is Lesbian Literature?: Forming A Historical Canon," are the medical anomaly and the carnivorous flower (50). Faderman defines medical anomaly as any lesbian that can fit into a sexologist category and carnivorous flower as the beautiful deceptive lesbian. If the images are divided in this way, definitions that label lesbianism as deviant will be prevalent because the two definitions depend on the negative (either flawed or deceptive). Catharine Stimpson argues that lesbian literature is divided into lesbian romanticism and lesbian realism. She theorizes that lesbian romanticism is more Sapphic and contains binaries (i.e. happiness and sadness) and that lesbian realism is more social and psychological (307-308).

The vastly different definitions of lesbian and lesbian literature do not stop with the works of Faderman and Stimpson. Sherrie Inness writes that when *The Well of*

*Loneliness* was published, there were three social and cultural thoughts about homosexuality. These assumptions, again, defined lesbians as unhappy and doomed. The first assumption was that lesbians were mannish (looked and acted like a man). The second was that lesbians could recognize one another because of their likeness. The third was that lesbians were always unhappy (308). These images are seen in *The Well of Loneliness*; yet they are also rejected in the novel by the encoding that allows readers to decode an image that is applicable to their own lives.

Culture is also important in shaping literary characters. The characters in *The Well of Loneliness* are shaped not only by their creator, Radclyffe Hall, but also by the culture in which Hall lived, a culture that was aristocratic and inverted. Further, almost eighty years later when we read *The Well of Loneliness*, we place our own definitions and experience on Hall's characters. Thus, both culture and reader shape how we define and interpret the characters in *The Well of Loneliness*.

Readers inevitably come up with their own thoughts about a character's identity. Because readers will define lesbian characters in different ways, it is important for the definition of lesbian not to be rigid or static. Vera Whisman writes that the "process of defining who is a lesbian is much more than a word game. It is a collective

attempt to make sense of our history, figure out our present, and strategize for our future" (49). Identity politics is thus the process that gives identity a name. Whisman concludes that "there is no essential and timeless lesbian, but instead lesbians who, by creating our lives day by day, widen the range of possibilities" (60). Definitions of "lesbian" are not fixed; rather they change with the person. Zimmerman theorizes that lesbian literature and history are always shifting to meet the specific time where readers live ("Lesbians" 9). She further concludes that lesbian critical readings allow for a blurring of the boundaries of what a "lesbian" really is and a bigger arena for diverse definitions. The bottom line, however, is that *The Well of Loneliness* created an image with which "lesbians were able to identify themselves, *often for the first time*, albeit in the very language of their oppression" (Dollimore 90).

Once lesbians are able to define themselves in their own terms, they can begin creating the framework for criticism and theory about lesbians. This ultimately influences literature. The theoretical work that has been written about lesbians and lesbian literature is influenced by the definitions of "lesbians" and lesbian literature. Julie Abraham's "History as Explanation: Writing About Lesbian Writing, or 'Are Girls Necessary?'" discusses how

the ever-changing definition of "lesbian" has complicated lesbian criticism: ". . . if we are going to be able to acknowledge and then study the literature lesbians have produced, the question of definition must itself be problematized rather than resolved" (274). By creating one definition of lesbian, we exclude. In other words, there is no real one definition; rather, there are numerous definitions that can be applied to "lesbian" and lesbian literature.

A definition of a "lesbian" in the 1920s differs and is similar to that of a "lesbian" in the 1970s. Identity politics creates a place for lesbian identity to exist. Radicalesbians defined "lesbian" in terms of a restrictive condition. Their definition of lesbian seems to be limiting. It is important, however, because this definition places the term on the continuum of identity labels. Lisa Kahaleole Chang Hall writes that "identity politics is about making connections between personal histories and a larger political and social context" (218). In other words, the Radicalesbians's definition of lesbian identity is merely one of the many identity labels for lesbian. Chang Hall further concludes that there is no one single identity that constitutes lesbian (225). This is important because the result leads into Chang Hall's idea that "Our identities never become final because new experiences continue to

affect the way we see ourselves" (229). The definition of lesbian is thus not static and can be implied in numerous different ways, especially in literature where many single identities are reading and looking for a definition within one cultural identity. De Lauretis agrees with this observation: "If all lesbians had one and the same definition of 'lesbian desire,' there would hardly be any debate among us, or any struggle over interpretations of cultural images, especially the ones we produce" (152). When a variety of images exist, definitions are not disrupted but are displaced. As Shelly Skinner points out, "Hall articulates a lesbian experience in order to move toward providing a space for a particularly lesbian identity" (21). Skinner does not say what this identity is, nor does Hall. Hall did not have to set the definition of Stephen's identity, probably because this space of identity was not static or restrictive.

Zimmerman, however, in her article "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism" writes that the reader, the critic, and the writer all create their own definitions of "lesbian" within works. By blurring who a "lesbian" is and how that "lesbian" exists in literature, the reader, the critic, and the writer are able to create a multitude of definitions of "lesbian." This blurring allows for more freedom in finding lesbian

literature while at the same time creating a "rule of thumb" of what lesbian literature can be. Zimmerman's idea is a bit contradictory; however, it establishes a basic definition of what lesbian literature can be while not providing a static, restrictive definition of "lesbian." Zimmerman comments that "all inclusive definitions of lesbianism risk blurring the distinctions between lesbian relationships and non-lesbian female friendships, or between lesbian identity and female-centered identity" (121). Identity is how a person defines one's self. Identity is not based on theory or criticism; rather identity is based on how a person interprets his or her place in society.

Abraham further argues that history also will convolute the definition, because as history is written, the definition of what is being written (i.e. lesbian) changes within each moment of history. She writes, "any writing about lesbian writing must also take into account the historical moment at which the work in question was produced: what that generation of women was looking at and what the spirit of that particular age was telling them" (256). Abraham's article is thus a summary of how definitions of lesbian are made up of both literature and history, and how the definitions of "lesbian" change as the age of the critic and the work change.

Martha Vicinus's "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong': The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity" also explores the historical implications of defining lesbian. Vicinus theorizes that "present-day sexual identity of both homosexuals and heterosexuals is socially constructed and historically specific" (433). In other words, the definition of any identity, homosexual or heterosexual, is tied to a specific social construction and a specific time frame. Similarly, Margaret Reynolds' introduction to *the Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories* theorizes that history and literature are very dependent on one another. She does believe, however, that saying literature is a direct reflection of history is misleading:

> Lesbian history is strange. It is made up of many unknowable private facts and a few public inventions. Lesbian literary history is stranger still. It has one early and powerful exponent in Sappho. Then, because positive concepts of lesbianism mostly disappear, anything that can be construed as "lesbian writing" disappears too. (xiv)

Vicinus believes that history and society create identity definitions while Reynolds believes that the history that creates definitions and identity have disappeared. Both critics are correct. Lesbian history is hidden and lesbian

identity is hidden within this history. Consequently, when we write of lesbian history and try to place lesbian literature in that history, we are conjecturing and creating a space for history. Like Abraham, Reynolds also seems to comment on the realization that we can theorize on what was (i.e. lesbians in history and literature), but that theory is only conjecture.

Zimmerman implies that the use of encoding allows for blurry boundaries to exist. Encoding permits for a blurriness that points to but does not define lesbianism. In her "Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Subtexts: Toward a Theory of Lesbian Narrative Space," Farwell says encoding creates a narrative space that allows for a body of lesbian literature to exist. Like Zimmerman, Farwell believes that there has to be a blurring to create this narrative space:

> Confusing the boundaries between subject/object and lover/beloved undercuts the heterosexuality which is based on this dualism. The point in the narrative space. It happens most often when two women seek another kind of relationship than that which is prescribed in the patriarchal structures, and when it occurs in the narrative, it can cast a different light in the rest of the novel, even on those portions that seem to affirm heterosexual patterns. (98)

By establishing a relationship that is outside the social norms, a narrative space is created for lesbians.

When characters act on their dualism, narrative space is created. The narrative space continues to exist because there is no one definition within that space. Numerous identities can exist within a narrative space because the identities create the space. Farwell's "The Lesbian Narrative: 'The Pursuit of the Inedible by the Unspeakable'" theorizes that a narrative space is created because a lesbian body is created. She writes that "the lesbian narrative is not necessarily a story by a lesbian about lesbians but rather a plot that affirms a place for lesbian subjectivity, that narrative space where both lesbian characters and other female characters can be active, desiring agents" (157). This space is positive and affirms all female bodies; thus, the affirmation allows for a lesbian body to exist.

The lesbian body is not seen as a lesbian body, but rather as a female body that is encoded and can be decoded as lesbian by the lesbian reader. By encoding, we create a space for lesbianism to exist. At the same time, however, the blurring of definitions of lesbianism is allowed to exist. There is the possibility for multiple definitions. Shari Benstock warns that "the denial of all forms of lesbian experience, including artistic and aesthetic

experiences, and the suppression of lesbianism by and within history have defined it as an excluded Other within cultural tradition" (183). Definitions of lesbianism and lesbians must, therefore, be inclusive of all differences. Lesbianism, throughout literary and social history, has always existed within the realm of the "Other." When authors blur their messages through encoding, this "Other" becomes "Subject." "Other" can exist within a lesbian-themed text and appear to be "Subject" because of encoding, or hiding, a meaning that will only make sense to a target reader (an "Other").

Zimmerman takes up the idea of encoding more directly in her article "Perverse Reading: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature." In this article, she writes, "we [lesbians] have a different perspective, certainly on everything involving sexuality, gender identity, and human relations. One woman's happy ending may be another's disappointment. And one woman's embarrassment may be another's reward" (144). Narratives must take into account all possibilities of lesbian existence. If the narrative includes encoding, multiple interpretations result. Again, however, the identity of the reader, or how the reader chooses to label her identity, allows the reader to see the encoded messages within the text and to interpret them, or not to see the

encoded message and take the narrative at its literal level. The identity of the reader, critic, and writer results in a variety of interpretations in a piece of literature, which in turn creates a variety of images.

Postmodern theory reworks what has been done in a new light of deconstructing and replacing images. Postmodern theory deconstructs all to create a new construction that revisits and recritiques works. Robyn Wiegman warns, however, "this lesbian interpretation is decidedly artificial, not because the lesbian's relationship to the postmodern is in any sense inauthentic but rather because there is not, as yet, a constituted object of inquiry known as 'the lesbian postmodern'" (1). Postmodern theory does, however, help us to see the lesbian as an ever-changing image. Wiegman writes that "the lesbian is 'not a woman' but the lesbian is not -- cannot continue to be -- 'the lesbian' either" (16). The lesbian is always changing to meet the needs of her identity.

Postmodernist thought also gives insight into the understanding of lesbian bodies. Cathy Griggers explains that lesbian bodies are different and through postmodern thought we begin to see the difference because we begin to reexamine those bodies: ". . . as lesbian bodies become more visible in mainstream culture, the differences amongst these bodies also become more apparent" ("Lesbian Bodies"). The

differences are important because they allow for divergent identities that are only beginning to be made. Griggers also writes that "lesbians in postmodernity are subjects-in-the-making whose body of signs and bodies as sign are up for reappropriation and revision." Within postmodern culture, there is no feeling that definitions of lesbians are fixed.

Postmodern thought is important in rereading and critiquing lesbian literature, according to Carol Guess, because "currently, much feminist (and lesbian, and queer) writing relies precisely on such reductive binary divisions" (22). Postmodern thought provides new directions in examining lesbian literature, which will inevitably give us new insights into lesbian literature. Guess does warn, however, that "Postmodernist theory thus appears to pose a threat to lesbian identity even as it promises to produce less exclusive and more flexible ways of conceptualizing gender" (19). If postmodern theory is always uncovering new meanings in texts and within identities, it can also deconstruct those texts and identities. Postmodern theory does not offer a promise that once something is defined it will always match its definition.

The threat of postmodernist theory is that there are no boundaries or rules. Boundaries allow for rules and certain expectations. When using a theory, a critic expects that

there will be certain rules to abide by. In postmodern theory, there are no rules to follow because postmodern theory is about breaking rules to find new meanings in texts. Because there is a lack of boundaries, it seems that postmodern theory is totally deconstructing the identity of lesbian. Rather, it is enlarging the arena for lesbians to exist. This is very significant because "defining the boundaries of a given identity inherently results in leaving someone out, and it may at times appear more useful -- and more 'fair' -- to attempt to avoid boundaries altogether" (Guess 20). Boundaries thus limit the identity of all involved. Postmodern theory allows for the flexibility in rereading lesbian literature. With postmodern theory, the lesbian becomes more fluid. This fluidity allows for multiple images.

Postmodern theory is a good choice in analyzing lesbian literature because postmodern thought allows for a non-restrictive reading of a text that does not permit character identities to be forced into categories. Harriet Malinowitz in "Lesbian Studies and Postmodern Queer Theory" feels that postmodern theory is a good choice in critiquing lesbian literature because "multiple threads of identities intersect in exceedingly complex and unpredictable ways . . . the meanings of even seemingly singular parts of our identities are unruly and evade consensus" (262).

Postmodern theory allows for this disruption and intersection of identities. This body of thought provides a new way of looking at literature, like *The Well of Loneliness*, that otherwise may not have been given the chance to be viewed as a piece of lesbian literature. With postmodern thought, there is a chance for a number of critics to read one text and come up with multiple meanings and theories. Postmodern theory allows for multiple rereading of *The Well of Loneliness*. For example, there can be one reading of Stephen's identity, one reading of social criticism of the time, one reading of the multiple queer identities in the novel, and so forth.

Judith Butler is a postmodern theorist whose ideas are helpful in critiquing Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* because her theories allow for the deconstruction and construction of identity. Like many postmoderns, Butler's observations are able to push the envelope of identity by all at once creating and destroying identity. There are three main Butler works that apply to how gender performance within the context of *The Well of Loneliness* displaces and creates a fluidity of lesbian identity: "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," and *Bodies That Matter*. In all three works, she theorizes that gender is undefinable and definable at the same time.

In "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," Butler looks closely at language and visibility as well as binary systems and how language constructs gender. All of these ideas dissolve into the issue of gender as performance. Before an identity is formed or a gender performed, language gives a set of rules. Butler writes that "the domains of political and linguistic 'representation' set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed" ("Subjects" 1). Because women and lesbians inhabit the space of Other, they are not capable of linguistically naming themselves. This is problematic. The problem is solved, however, by a binary system. Women are not men; lesbians are not heterosexual. The binary system allows for the Other, lesbian or woman, to name herself in terms of what she is not. Even though the binary language system is restrictive, it gives lesbians a place to start defining and redefining themselves. Before women can use and disrupt the binary system, they have to rewrite or rethink the notions of feminist critique. Butler points out that "If a stable notion of gender no longer proves to be the foundational premise of feminist politics, perhaps a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable" ("Subjects" 5). If language can not name politics, it can not name feminism and feminism can not be the foundation of an identity. In other words, if there is neither the political nor the linguistic system to

name one's self, we need to create a new system that allows for the new identity. The new language, like the old, however, will construct a gender. Language is dependent on society to construct its meanings. Meanings would not exist if there were not some point of reference, like social commentary. For example, would masculinity denote being man-like if society had not already deemed that masculine related to man? When the social commentary changes, so do the definitions. Gender may be different or similar to the definition that the subject is trying to create. That does not matter. Butler writes that the constraint of language is what gives boundaries to what one defines ("Subjects" 9). No matter who speaks the language, language will construct gender.

The bottom line with Butler, however, is that gender is more complex than language or even identity politics: "Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time" ("Subjects" 16). If the complexity of gender makes boundaries cease to exist, then it is only logical that gender performs itself to create meaning. Butler summarizes this thought: ". . . there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be the results" ("Subjects" 25). Gender is thus defined by the

expressions that are made to act out the gender. The more a gender is performed, the more it takes on meaning. Butler concludes in "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire" that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). Gender performance consequently becomes identity when it is played over and over and begins to produce an image. This image emerges as identity. Gender, if it is not within a boundary, is able to create any image. Butler writes that "gender is a performance that *produces* the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core" ("Imitation" 317). Logically, gender is defined before sex. Gender, not biological sex, thus involves images that can or can not name gender. In other words, gender is the performative illusion that creates the idea that we know how to name gender. This identity, however, will reemerge each time the gender is performed.

Butler's "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" tackles language and how language can act as a destabilization of the sign of lesbian through defining identity categories. Butler writes that "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very

oppression" ("Imitation" 308). The categories of identity are thus ways to continue to create boundaries for identity. If we destabilize these identity categories, we then destabilize the sign of lesbian because we have deconstructed the category of lesbian. According to Butler, deconstructing categories is not difficult according to Butler because there is a certain degree of not being able to control the sign of lesbian ("Imitation" 309). Since the sign of lesbian is not fixed, deconstruction is inevitable. What is most important, however, is to realize that sex, gender, gender presentation, and identity do not rely on one another. Rather, they are independent variables that can name a person; however, not all of these terms must be present to name a person ("Imitation" 315).

Because Butler sees both sex and gender as constructions, it is important to look at her ideas about sex. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler tackles the notions of 'sex.' She writes that sex is a construct (1). Sex is socially constructed through language and exists because of its construction. If that is true, then sex and gender are constructed to create an image of identity. But on whose terms? Does the identity holder create his or her own image or is that image given to him or her? Butler argues that it is language, not sex or gender, which is setting identity boundaries:

> . . . sex is a contrived premise, a fiction, then gender does not presume a sex which it acts upon, . but rather, gender produces the misnomer of a prediscursive 'sex,' and the meaning of construction becomes that of linguistic monism, whereby everything is only and always language. (6)

Sex and gender are constructs that depend on language. Once we strip away that construction, we are left only with the language that described sex and gender. Sex and gender are not paramount to identity; rather, the language that describes sex and gender is paramount to identity. Identity can not and does not exist within the parameters of sex and gender. How people perceive the performance of gender and how that perception reacts to the performer's sex is significant to identity. Stephen Gordon does not have an identity because she has a sex and gender. Yet, she has an identity because she embodies the thoughts (hers and society's) about her sex and gender.

There is no large body of critical works written about *The Well of Loneliness*. There is, however, a large body of literature that has been written about lesbian literature, sexual and gender identity, and postmodern theory. When

this larger body of work is coupled with the smaller body of work that pertains directly to *The Well of Loneliness*, we have an overview that can influence our understanding of how identity is played out in the novel.

# CHAPTER III

## WILL THE REAL STEPHEN GORDON PLEASE STAND UP?: THE BURDEN OF CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS

The cultural definitions of gender and sex that occur when the two are disrupted offer a glimpse into the understanding of the identity of Stephen Gordon. In fact, the key to understanding Stephen is to realize that her gender and sex are separate and to look at the factors contributing to the construction of that gender. Her gender is not dependent on her sex, and her sex does not set the definition of her gender. The lines that connect Stephen's sex and gender are not distinct; they are blurred and are at times contradictory. This blurring creates a space where Stephen can be masculine in spite of and because of her female sex. Likewise, her biological sex exists in spite of and because of her masculine gender. The disruption of Stephen's sex and gender is the starting point in understanding the significance of the blurring of identities that results in Stephen's identity.

Culture helps to set the definition of gender. Gender does not depend on biological sex; rather, gender depends on how culture defines masculinity and femininity. Butler tells us that "gender is culturally constructed: hence

gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly as fixed as sex" ("Subjects" 6). Visual markers identify gender; yet they can mask sex. Culturally, we rely on the visual picture we get to interpret the meaning of what we see. These markers are generally cultural; for example, baby girls are wrapped in pink blankets and baby boys are wrapped in blue blankets. While we may see a baby girl in a blue blanket, we rarely see a baby boy wrapped in a pink blanket. This contradiction reveals that even visual markers are not always dependable in identifying sex, let alone gender. Since gender can be played multiple ways, regardless of biological sex, we depend on what we see as the cultural marker, like a pink or blue blanket. In fact, we expect a baby girl to be wrapped in a pink blanket and a baby boy to be wrapped in a blue blanket. When this expectation is not met, we are at a loss as to how to name the person's gender. Butler's argument that gender is socially constructed is important because it establishes that gender can be performed any way a person wants to perform their gender. Further, her argument is freeing because gender is completely independent of biological sex.

Radclyffe Hall's Stephen Gordon disrupts the culturally established visual image of a woman because Hall gives Stephen a masculine gender and thus the gender markings of a man. Stephen is not and cannot be the Violet Antrim,

Stephen's childhood neighbor, in dresses, curls and bows. Furthermore, Stephen is not the daughter her mother wanted; rather, she is the son her parents hoped for. Her physical appearance sets her apart from her parents' and her culture's expectations because it is described in masculine terms. However, the masculine image that Stephen portrays is at odds with her underlying female biological sex. When people see her masculinity, they expect her to be a man. If Stephen's gender were her only marker, her masculinity would mask her biological sex. Gender would be her only marker. If Stephen's gender can be male because she acts male, certainly her sex could also change to match her gender. No one would ever know that her sex and gender did not match. That, however, is not an option in Stephen's culture. In fact, her culture assumes that Stephen will change her gender to match her biological sex. Stephen's culture expects her to conform to femininity because she is female. Instead of riding horses with her father and dressing in trousers, Stephen is expected to wear dresses and bows in her hair and to have tea parties with the other girls in her social class. Her culture cannot perceive a masculine woman or a feminine man. To her culture, such a creature would be abominable and would not fit in the culture because her

gender would not match her biological sex. Since Stephen is female, her culture expects her to be feminine and when this is not possible she is viewed as an impostor.

Cultural expectations will not allow for the impostor, which only further isolates Stephen's masculine gender and her female sex. The cultural expectations surrounding sex and gender are especially evident and telling in Stephen's birth. While waiting for her birth, Stephen's parents believed her to be a boy. Based on this belief, they plan for a boy; however, a daughter is born. At birth, Stephen is described as having "a narrow-hipped, wide-shouldered little tadpole of a body" (13). This is significant because the first description of Stephen's gender is described as masculine, regardless of her biological female sex. This initial description sets up the image of Stephen as a boy, an image that is not capable of being anything else, especially when she is given the masculine name Stephen that her parents had planned on giving their assumed male child.

Stephen's masculine image is further solidified by others in Stephen's life. In fact, as a child, Stephen's first nanny, Collins, describes Stephen as a boy: ". . . doesn't Miss Stephen look exactly like a boy? I believe she must be a boy with them shoulders, and them funny gawky legs

she's got on her" (19). Collins's verbal remarks match the image that has already been established for Stephen by other people's perceptions.

Collins's remarks to Stephen are significant because they affirm the identity Stephen's gender, not her genital sex, has established for her. Furthermore, Stephen hears the images that people use to describe her, which influences her self-constituting notion of gender. These images are in masculine terms, and Stephen begins to see herself in masculine terms. In fact, her face is described as "the strong line of the jaw, the square, massive brow, the eyebrows, too thick and too wide for beauty" (52). This makes an impression on Stephen because she knows that her image is not only the replica of her father but it also fulfills the prophecy of her birth -- that she will be a boy. As Stephen matures, her physical appearance becomes more masculine. At the age of seventeen Stephen's figure is described as "handsome in a flat, broad-shouldered and slim flanked fashion; and her movements were purposeful, having fine poise, she moved with the easy assurance of the athlete" (73). Naming her as a boy at birth is a foreshadowing of the person Stephen will inevitably emerge as. She is the culmination of what her parents wanted: a son.

Women in Stephen's time, like her mother and Violet Antrim, were expected to entertain guests, visit other women, wear dresses, act feminine. Stephen lacks these traits. In other words, Stephen's apparent masculine gender, which is derived from her clothing and social actions, are at odds with the biological fact that she is female. Stephen does not have the feminine traits to interact with other girls. She is devoid of social graces and is also completely devoid of feminine wiles. She does not act coyly, she does not flirt, and she is incapable of acting dainty and helpless. Her outward appearance is that she is in control and she can take care of herself. This is completely at odds with the social expectations of a woman in Stephen's time. Stephen's culture expects her gender to match her sex.

Gender, however, is not necessarily a direct match for biological sex. Butler argues that gender is constructed. Gender relies on society to define it; sex, however, relies on biological factors for definition. Sex, in other words, does not construct gender. We can see sex, but gender is more about interpreting signs. In other words, society constructs our understanding and perceptions of gender. If gender, unlike sex, is a social construction, then the construction that describes gender can be reworked and rethought. If this construction of gender can be rethought,

so can the images associated with how gender should or is expected to act. For example, a person with a penis is considered to be male (biological sex), but gender does not offer this "clear-cut" distinction because it does not necessarily have biological markers. There are no anatomical or biological signs that name gender.

Gender does, however, have markers like clothing and actions. Generally, these visuals are stereotypical and socially constructed (remember the pink and blue blanket example). Unlike biological sex, these markers can be changed in a multitude of ways dependent on how a person wants to wear or perform their gender. Gender can be worn, in the case of clothes, or played, in the case of actions. Gender changes as the person who performs gender changes his or her performance. Further, Butler writes that "'sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time" (*Bodies* 1). Sex is an ideal construct because it relies on the physical markers. Ideally, a man will have a penis and a woman will not. There is no room for interpretation. Therefore, sex is fixed throughout time. If a person with a penis wears a dress, the visual marker indicates that the person is feminine, yet the biological sex is still male. The sign of gender (the dress) and the

biological sex marker (the penis) are at odds. Visually gendered markers contradict the underlying sex, not allowing for a clear cut interpretation of biological sex.

It is the inability to define Stephen outside sex and gender roles that creates a disruption in assigning Stephen an identity. From social definitions, Stephen is neither a masculine male nor a feminine female. She is an outsider in her culture where she feels that she is different; yet she can not describe her difference (201). Socially and culturally she has no existence because her identity is not definable. Arguably, Stephen has unique identity because she is a combination of both categories. Her culture, however, does not necessarily have a place for people like Stephen who are capable of having a multitude of gendered identities. It is her inability to fit into a category that causes Stephen to doubt who she is. Not being accepted culturally and socially, Stephen is uncertain of who she is and of her place in the world. She is unable to name herself. Hall writes that Stephen "did not know the meaning of herself" (187), because "she had always been trying to be someone else" (100). She knows she is female because she has been told she is female, but she also feels she is destined to be male. In trying to define her self, Stephen combines masculinity with a female biological sex.

Stephen's own perception of her self as well as the social perceptions that are formed as a result of Stephen's actions show the fluidity of her identity. Stephen's first perceptions of her self are the by-product of her parents' expectation to have a male child. This lays the foundation for how she will conceive her identity later in life. Lady Anna, Stephen's mother, describes Stephen in masculine terms throughout her pregnancy: ". . . [w]hen the child stirred within her she would think it stirred strongly because of the gallant male creature she was hiding" (12). In utero, Stephen acted strong; therefore, she was a male child. It is through this (mis)perception that Lady Anna and Sir Philip, Stephen's father, assume that their child is a son, and they begin to prepare for their first child and heir.

Stephen's gendered actions name her sex (rather than vice versa). This places a cultural expectation on Stephen; she is expected to be a strong figure like her father in order to succeed in life. Even though Stephen is born a girl, she is raised to believe she can strive to become a boy. Despite her biological sex, Stephen is given the impression that she can overcome her body and become the male child that her parents wanted. In fact, Sir Philip tells Stephen early in life, "I'm going to treat you like a boy, and a boy must always be brave, remember" (29). If Stephen is brave, she will be a boy. In rewriting her

gender role, Stephen learns that bravery and honesty are benchmarks of masculine identity. Because she takes her father's words to heart, she begins to act like a boy and expects to be treated as such. Stephen's biological female sex thus disrupts her social construction of masculine self. Once Stephen is able to "overcome" her body, her gender becomes fluid. This fluidity allows Stephen to play the masculine role. Butler's writings reflect this idea:

> . . . when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. ("Subjects" 6)

Stephen's way of disrupting her gender is to expect and desire to be treated and perceived as a boy. She subsequently disrupts her sex not only because "sex is absorbed by gender" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 5) but also because gender "produces the misnomer of a prediscursive 'sex'" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 6). Gender displaces the binary pair by absorbing and "mis"-producing the idea of sex.

Even though Stephen does not know how to name herself in her culture's terms, those around her do. People see Stephen's femaleness because they know she is the daughter of Lady Anna and Sir Philip. They also see a mixture of masculinity in her actions and dress. People look at Stephen and say she is "A queer looking girl, very tall, wears a collar and tie -- you know, mannish" (160) or she's just a "masculine-looking girl" (166). Stephen is described as both masculine and as female. Even though these descriptions are at odds with her culture and society, this influences the identity that Stephen will eventually embrace. The identity that Stephen can embrace is not fixed; her identity is comprised of a gender that she can perform as she chooses.

Since Stephen is able to change and mold her gender and sex identities to match who she feels she is, she disrupts the definitions and language that describe her. Because Stephen's identity is so contradictory (masculine/feminine) when described in binary terms, a new set of cultural definitions must be allowed. Dominant language systems are displaced when sex and gender are disrupted. The fixed definitions of sex and gender are no longer applicable because sex and gender transcend that rigidity.

Disruption, according to Butler's argument, has the potential to restructure the relationship so that sex and gender are not dichotomous but also not necessarily dependent on one another for explanation. For instance, female biological sex does not mean a person necessarily has a feminine gender. Thus, sex and gender would no longer be binaries nor would they retain dominant language definitions. Meaning applied to bodies would no longer be dependent on sex and/or gender; consequently, once the meanings associated with sex and gender are displaced, bodies are not dependent on biology (sex) or social construction (gender). In this state of non-binaries and the absence of dominant language meanings, sex and gender cease to depend on each other for meaning. Disruption allows for the possibility that sex and gender are able to intersect with one another. Intersection would thus be the location where the boundaries of sex and gender are blurred, and the two are capable of merging to form one identity. In other words, gender would not be a consequence of sex nor sex a consequence of gender. Bodies in this state would not necessarily be dependent on the two binaries; however, this state would allow for the idea that sex and gender could coexist to form another identity or multiple identities.

The intersection between sex and gender would then allow bodies to morph into fluid existences that account for bodies at different times and places. Bodies would have the ability to assign meanings to themselves depending on the time and space in which they exist -- to self construct identity. Without binary definitions, bodies could label themselves in a variety of ways depending on where they are and what they are doing at any given time. One such definition could center on desire becoming a place for a body to define itself. If a body is masculine because it desires the feminine, desire defines identity. The body's identity is only decided by what the person desires. This changes, then, with each desire the body encounters. There would still be no fixed definition.

Butler's arguments lead to questions of whether or not there is a disruption and/or intersection between sex and gender in *The Well of Loneliness*. In the novel, Angela, Stephen's first love, bemoans to Stephen, "If you were a man . . ." (176). According to Angela, then, if Stephen's definition of self or her actions can match the definition of a man within a dominant, binary language system, Stephen would fit into the label of man and would be accepted by society as a man. Angela can only accept Stephen if she meets a set definition -- masculine male or feminine female. Stephen, however, can't fit wholly into either of these

categories. In fact, when Stephen tries to explain her identity to her mother, Stephen says, "All my life I've never felt like a woman" (201). Even Stephen can't define herself in terms that are binary in nature. Later, however, Stephen is able to admit that her identity may not be definable. She tells her mother, "I don't know what I am; no one's ever told me that I'm different and yet I know that I'm different" (201). Because there are no words to name her, Stephen can define herself as different. She doesn't fit into any definable binary categories. Her identity begins to form, then, because of her relationships with the culture that has no name for her.

Disruption of an established cultural norm does create a certain uneasiness. Because Stephen plays with gender, molding her gender to fit what definition she needs at any given time, she suffers a break from her family that is never repaired. This break is especially evident with her mother, Lady Anna. Lady Anna accuses Stephen of having "unnatural cravings of [her] mind and undisciplined body" (201). If Stephen could control her mind and her body, she would not have a gender that is odd to Lady Anna. It is not just Stephen's inability to control her urges that creates the break with her mother. Lady Anna feels a "physical repulsion, a desire not to touch [Stephen]" (200) when Stephen is an infant because Stephen does not act feminine.

Again, Stephen is at odds with her mother's definition of acceptable gender play. Stephen's gender performance is in accordance with how her parents treat her (as a boy); yet this performance is repulsive to Lady Anna because it is not feminine (in accordance with Stephen's female sex). Lady Anna's inability to comprehend a sexuality so different from her own leads her to exile Stephen because Stephen is not only unnatural but "a sin against creation" (200).

Instead of devastating Stephen, her exile gives her a chance to once again change her perception of her gender identity and sexuality. She tells her mother "All my life I've never felt like a woman" (201). She knows that her gender play does not match her sexuality, so she changes how she defines herself by not defining herself in binary terms that couple gender and biological sex. Ultimately as a result of her exile, Stephen is able to define herself in terms of the third sex. She tells her mother "I don't know what I am; no one's ever told me that I'm different and yet I know I am different" (201). Stephen no longer defines herself in her mother's terms or in society's binary terms. This whole interaction with Lady Anna is significant because Hall presents social norms and acceptable behavior in Lady Anna's comments. Instead of accepting her mother's words, Stephen tries to argue that her existence is as normal as her mother's existence. In essence, Stephen is arguing

against social constructions of how her sex and gender should interact. Because her definitions of acceptable biological sex and gender are rigid, Lady Anna is not able to see that her daughter's gender performance is as normal as her own. This uneasiness for Stephen is accompanied by a freedom that comes with the inability to fit neatly into one identity category.

When there are no words to describe her identity, Stephen begins to see her identity in terms of whom she desires. Hall believed that desire was not fixed, so identity was not fixed. She "believed that sexual orientation was not determined by how one acts, but rather by whom one desires" (Glasgow 10). Eventually, Stephen's romantic relationships do reveal the disruption and intersection of her sex and gender; at that point her ability to name herself can be explained on the basis of whom she desires.

Martin is Stephen's first relationship. Stephen and Martin's initial meeting foreshadows the relationship that is inevitable for them: "Stephen met Martin and Martin met Stephen, and their meeting was great with portent for them both, though neither of them could know it" (92). It was this instant attachment where they "suddenly knew that they liked each other . . . " (92). What is significant about Martin and Stephen's first meeting is the feeling that

Stephen has met a male soul mate that will be her best friend. In fact, in their initial conversations, "[Martin] spoke simply, as one man will speak to another, very simply, not trying to create an impression" (92-3). Stephen has found a person who accepts her for what she is, a masculine woman. During their initial meeting, Stephen "felt natural and happy because here was a man who was taking her for granted, who appeared to find nothing eccentric about her or her tastes, but who quite simply took her for granted" (93). Stephen and Martin are not seeing one another in terms of sex and gender; rather, they are seeing one another in terms of a compatibility that does not depend upon sex nor gender.

As they spend more time together, both begin to feel comfortable and drawn to one another in an unexplainable way. In fact, Martin stays near Morton "because of Stephen who was filling a niche in his life long empty, the niche reserved for the perfect companion" (94). The perfect companion is without sex or gender in Hall's description. Stephen meets Martin's requirements because she is Stephen, not because she is masculine or feminine.

The perfect companion, however, is implicitly long term, like a marriage (which brings in connotations of masculinity and femininity as complements of one another). Stephen, however, sees Martin in a more platonic way. She tells him "you're the only real friend I've ever had, except

Father -- our friendship's so wonderful, somehow -- we're like brothers" (95). Stephen sees Martin as a way to fit into the masculinity of her society. He is her friend, but, more importantly, he is her male friend. This is significant because "she who had longed for the companionship of men, for their friendship, their good-will, their toleration, she had it all now and much more in Martin, because of his great understanding" (96). Stephen finally fits into the male world of her society as a result of her relationship with Martin.

This relationship, however, is doomed because of sex and gender roles. Stephen loves Martin as a brother and Martin loves Stephen as an intimate companion, a wife. When Martin tells Stephen he loves her, Stephen "openly mourned the friend who had failed her, and herself she mourned for failing the lover" (105). On one hand, Stephen's "masculine" pride is wounded because her best friend (brother) has overstepped the assumed male boundaries that Stephen has erected. On the other hand, Stephen's "feminine" pride is damaged because she realizes that she cannot play the role of the female lover to Martin's role of male lover. In this instance, Stephen's "masculine" and "feminine" existences collide, dissolve, and repel leaving

Stephen with the understanding she is different -- not masculine or feminine. This relationship, however, will inevitably allow Stephen to forge her own identity.

Stephen's second romantic encounter is with Angela Crosby: "As their eyes met and held each other for a moment, something vaguely disturbing stirred in Stephen" (133). Stephen is immediately attracted to Angela. When Stephen first sees Angela in Upton, she "was impressed by the pluck of this stranger" (130). Angela is an American who married an older English aristocrat; she is Stephen's neighbor and her first real sexual attraction. Unlike her encounter with Martin, Stephen feels a physical response to Angela. This physical response is based on Stephen's initial feelings that Angela needs to be taken care of. When Stephen describes Angela's physical appearance, it is in terms of delicacy:

> All the colour that she had seemed to lie in her eyes, which were large and fringed with fair lashes. Her eyes were of rather unusual blue that almost seemed to be tinted with purple, and their candid expression was that of a child -- very innocent it was, a trustful expression. (131)

Angela is childlike and Stephen sees that child in need of protection. This opinion is derived from Stephen's masculinity and her belief that she is like her father. She is chivalrous and she will treat Angela as Sir Philip treats Lady Anna.

Angela's effect on Stephen is significant because, as in the relationship with Martin, Stephen is once again required to feel and react to emotions that seemingly contradict her assumed sex and gender roles. Stephen's reaction to Angela is instant and strong: "Then it dawned on the girl that this woman was lovely -- she was like some queer flower that had grown up in darkness, like some rare, pale flower without blemish or stain" (132). Angela is perfect in Stephen's thoughts. As a result of her perceptions of her masculine gender, Stephen believes that her reactions to the feminine Angela are right and in accordance with social and cultural expectations. After all, masculine Stephen has fallen in love with feminine Angela. The binaries of gender compliment one another regardless of sex.

Stephen and Angela are not, however, a match made in heaven. Society in Stephen's time dictates that intimate relationships be between a man and a woman. Regardless of Butler's theories that gender can be played any way, displacing sex, Stephen cannot displace the fact that her

gender and sex are not the socially accepted compliments of Angela's sex and gender. In a very real and ultimately tragic way, Stephen's sex and gender collide. There is no hiding that Stephen is female and she can not hide that she is masculine. Her gender, however, creates a physical response that challenges the expectations Stephen knows her society has about sexual relationships. This physical response is disturbing to Stephen because it is the first time she is physically (sexually) and emotionally (mentally) responsive to another person (particularly female). As Harriet Malinowitz theorizes, Stephen's sexual and gender identity are evasive and not within "social" boundaries. There are no rules for Stephen's response to Angela.

Stephen is not able to define herself in her own terms, rather, she forms an identity from the multiple interpretations others have of her. Therefore, the interpretations of the people she interacts with are significant because they will ultimately play a crucial role in the multiple identities Stephen embodies at the end of the novel.

# CHAPTER IV

## IS THERE A REAL STEPHEN GORDON?: MULTIPLICITY AS A MEANS OF IDENTITY

Throughout the novel, Stephen is not one identity; rather, she is the fragmentation of many complex and multiple identities. This identity is of Stephen's own making. Her self-naming is up to her; however, it will be influenced by her romance with Mary, her final relationship in the novel, and her ability to rename herself because of that relationship. Her relationship with Mary is significantly different from her other two romantic encounters because Stephen is faced not with a social construction of gender or a biological construction of sex but with neither. She is able to name herself outside of other people's perceptions of her, if she chooses.

Stephen is not given a rulebook that narrowly defines her sex and gender. She is not told if you are biologically female, you are feminine. Gender takes on meanings and definitions from society. Since gender is dependent on language, there has to be a social significance to name gender. The naming of gender is done with matching biological sex. Society assigns the label that if you are biologically female you are feminine. This does not mean,

however, that femininity is a by-product of female sex or masculinity of male sex. Rather, they are by-products of the social expectations of gender. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler writes, "if gender consists of social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not *accrue* social meanings as additive properties but, rather, *is replaced by* the social meanings it takes on" (5). Therefore, Stephen's assuming the protective, responsible role in her relationship with Mary is similar to the role that her father played; yet it does not physically change her sex. In fact, as Butler points out, Stephen is still biologically female but her gendered role of male allows her to give the *perception* that she is *biologically* male. Ergo, Stephen's gender displaces her sex while at the same time intersecting with her sex to form an identity.

Stephen's intimate relationship with Mary can answer many of the questions associated with the disruption and intersection of Stephen's sex and gender roles. The responsibility that Stephen feels for Mary results from the expectations Stephen's parents put on her as a child. Responsibility and protectiveness denote the social roles that her father played for her mother; consequently, Stephen will reenact these roles for Mary because Stephen feels the social expectations of a man. Both she and Mary are in physical danger due to their involvement in the war (they

are ambulance drivers in France). With the realization of the danger she and Mary are in, "A queer, tight feeling would come round her heart, she would know the fear that can go hand in hand with personal courage, the fear for another" (281). Stephen feels responsible for Mary and Mary's well being. This causes Stephen to emotionally react.

This response is similar to the reaction Stephen's masculinity had to Angela's childlike qualities. Unlike her earlier romantic encounters, however, Stephen does not feel guilt and she is sure how to react to Mary. This romantic encounter has none of the physical and emotional uncertainty and doubt of the previous romantic encounters. She realizes what it is like to feel fear (protectiveness) for another person, and she realizes that loving includes a fear for the safety of the other person. These are new emotions for Stephen. As opposed to the physical revulsion she felt with Martin and Angela's entrapment of Stephen, she now feels not only a desire but also a protectiveness for Mary. After she writes her third book (second great success), Stephen tells Mary that Mary is protected, and this makes Stephen feel "wonderfully self-sufficient and strong, wonderfully capable of protecting" (366). Just as her father provided security for her mother, Stephen now provides security for Mary.

Stephen's protective behavior towards Mary suggests the stereotypical aspects of their relationship. For instance, Mary takes care of Stephen while Stephen is the breadwinner in the relationship. Mary makes sure that Stephen's physical and emotional needs are met while Stephen provides a home and financial security for Mary. There are also the unexpected emotional reactions involved in the relationship that enable Stephen's identity to be further defined. Stephen is emotionally tied to Mary, something that Stephen has never felt in a relationship. Stephen is also conscious of Mary's emotional needs and responds to them; for example, when Mary is shunned because of her relationship with Stephen, Stephen tries to shield Mary from social opinion.

Stephen and Mary's relationship points to a collision of Stephen's sex and gender that displaces cultural expectations for men and women. As a female, Stephen can depend on a man to care for her (though she chooses not to); however, her masculinity forces her to care for someone who is more feminine (which she chooses). Her gender overrides the social expectations of her sex and her sex is redefined. Her gender performance creates a disruption because it is not only masculine (protectiveness, performing husband-like duties) but feminine (emotional care-giving). The

disruption of sex and gender reveals Stephen's ability to combine her performances into multiple identities that defy not only her sex but also her presumed gender.

The social meanings that gender takes on do not change biological sex; rather, the social meanings associated with biological sex begin to change. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler writes, "if gender consists of social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not *accrue* social meanings as additive properties but, rather, *is replaced by* the social meanings it takes on" (5). However, Stephen's assuming the protective, responsible role that her father played does not physically change her sex. However contradictory, it is both her sex and her gender that define her as a person because they displace and negate one another. Stephen would not be Stephen if her masculinity did not displace her female sex and vice versa. Her ability to appear to rename her sex is telling in that she can perform both sex and gender to form an identity.

In both disruption and intersection, postmodern bodies are able to exist. According to Jacqueline Zita's writings, postmodern bodies have the ability to be multiple selves dependent on the location of a body: "Postmodernism supplies a set of ontological commitments needed for a world in which the body appears to be malleable, protean, and constructed through and within discourse" (105). A body must be capable

of embracing and rejecting sex and gender in order for multiple identities to exist for that body. Consider Stephen. She is not defined. Without definition, she is able to be adaptable and versatile -- a postmodern body. Within this infinite state, "different" bodies (bodies that do not meet at the "norm") are able to create meanings conceived from the disrupted and intersected space of sex and gender. This is the space where the third sex can exist.

Hall describes Stephen as being a member of a third sex, an invert. A member of the third sex is a combination of gendered and sexed definitions. Joanne Glasgow writes of Hall's interest in the third sex that "one result of this blurring of biology and gender performance was the widespread interest in the phenomenon of 'the third sex'" (9). The third sex inhabits the space that is undefinable. The third sex is both male and female and not male and female. There is and is not masculinity and femininity within the third sex.

The third sex is an identity that stands outside the identities of masculinity and femininity and the ideas about heterosexuality. The third sex combines masculinity and femininity and creates new, always changing identities. This identity also toys with notions of heterosexuality -- embracing one moment, rejecting the next. The third sex depends on dominant language systems (binaries) to define

itself while at the same time rejecting them through redefinition. This identity plays with the idea that women can be masculine, men feminine; that men can have intimate relationships with other men or women with women; or, for that matter, that there can be no gender identity and no intimate relationships. In other words, binaries are used for description; yet they are rejected because they do not quite describe the third sex. Hall uses the third sex not only to give Stephen a place to exist and explore her identity, but also to critique and reject that existence and identity. Stephen can fit into the definition of the third sex because she is a masculine woman who has intimate relationships with feminine women. She rejects social gender definitions, which are binary and do not match her sex (masculine woman) while embracing the idea of a binary relationship (masculine coupled with feminine). Because Stephen exists within and outside sex and gender boundaries, we can apply Butler's idea that "'the lesbian' emerges as a third gender that promises to transcend the binary restriction on sex imposed by the system of compulsory heterosexuality" ("Subjects" 19).

It is through her existence within the tenuous and changing definitions of the third sex that we begin to see Stephen as a postmodern body. Postmodern thought gives a certain elasticity to definitions because postmodern thought

challenges static modes of thinking. Harriet Malinowitz writes that postmodern theory can "deconstruct altogether the premise of group coherence based on shared characteristics such as gender and sexuality, insisting that identity is multiple, fragmented, and unstable" (262). Postmodern theory thus deflates the idea that masculinity and femininity are dependent on biological sex or that they mean the same exact thing at any given time. Stephen is postmodern because her identity changes and adapts. She is masculine, but the ways she plays her masculinity, like as a hunter or an ambulance driver, do not change her sex. Stephen's identity changes and her story are important because they inevitably mirror the expectations of postmodern thought. Malinowitz argues that "a chief project of postmodern theory has been to puncture the master cultural narratives that swallow up anarchic and infinitely complicated human difference" (265). Stephen's story is an example of how postmodern theory challenges ideas about identities through the critique and rejection of a variety of identities. Her story is also significant because it can be removed from its own historical time and critiqued in our time while still maintaining a sense of who Stephen is. Zita writes that "the body under postmodernist imagery can be extracted from its historically concrete daily context

and 'shifted' into an ever-increasing multiplicity of positionalities" (89). In another new time, Stephen will be reread and her identity multiplied over and over.

Stephen's story also reveals how sexuality is not necessarily dependent on gender or sex. The common idea about sexuality and intimacy is generally tied to the idea that masculinity and male are attracted to femininity and female. This binary idea is further tied to the concept that masculinity, femininity, male and female are all fixed definitions that are not able to change over time. Thus, a female can not be masculine and a male can not be feminine. Sexuality would only exist within the parameters of strict binaries (male-female, masculine-feminine).

Once we begin to talk about third sex and postmodern thought, the variations of sexuality are greatly increased. Further, these variations offer a vast spectrum of choices for identity. For example, Stephen's masculinity can exist because it is an extension of her evolving identity. Mary's femininity can exist intimately with Stephen's femaleness because static binary definitions of relationships are deconstructed. This marks a chance for Stephen's identity to be fluid and change as she grows. Stephen's realization about her gender and her sex is the catalyst for change in her life. At each step, she becomes more aware of her self-identity and is able to accept her sexuality. Her

awareness allows her to typify a body that is fluid and capable of existence and definition outside the dominant, binary language system. Stephen's fluidity allows her to be feminine and non-feminine as well as woman and non-woman at the same time. By rejecting these binary definitions, she becomes a postmodern body.

Throughout the novel, Stephen's sex and gender characteristics blur and then become more defined as she matures. As she begins to accept her sexual identity, Stephen is able to blur her sex and gender roles so they overlap and form her identity. Because her sexual identity is blurred, she does not fit into the standard definitions of sexuality. It is not unusual or even "usual" for Stephen to embody a variety of identities and meanings. In fact, Stephen, as a postmodern body, is able to change her identity as she changes her body's time and place. Since her identity is fluid, not concrete, Stephen eventually escapes social labeling that places a single socially constructed label on her self. When a picture of self is formed, "multiple threads of identities intersect in exceedingly complex and unpredictable ways . . . but also because the meanings of even seemingly singular parts of our identities are unruly and evade consensus" (Malinowitz 262). Stephen's multiplicity shapes her identity.

Lesbian bodies are able to both embody and reject definitions of sex and gender in the creation of a queer/lesbian notion of body. Understanding the fluidity in the definitions of lesbianism is the key to realizing that there is no "real" lesbian or no standard definition of a "real" lesbian. As a result, lesbian bodies can denote "different" bodies. Lesbian bodies, like Stephen's, are not dependent on the definition of woman because lesbians do not necessarily meet the gender definitions of woman. Wiegman writes that "the lesbian is 'not a woman' but the lesbian is not -- cannot continue to be -- the lesbian' either" because a lesbian does not either inhabit the space that is marked "woman" nor can a lesbian inhabit a space marked "lesbian" (16). That is, she does not necessarily exist within a binary language system. However, by means of biological sex, lesbians are biologically female and thus able to occupy some space known as "woman." Consequently, lesbians are capable of existing within the boundaries of "woman" while simultaneously not existing within those locations of identity.

Stephen's displacement of her sex and gender by the end of the novel do not make her the "perfect" lesbian; rather, her disruptions make her a perfect example of lesbianism. Lesbians and their definitions change from situation to situation and environment to environment. Teresa de

Lauretis points out that all lesbians can not and do not have the same definitions of *lesbian* because similar definitions negate the need for theory and discussion of the possibility for lesbians to exist within the domain of dominant language systems (152). When bodies have their own perceptions of self, the ability to be self-labeled (though the label would not be static or have the ability to change) is evident. The diversity of bodies, particularly bodies that live outside of the "norm," is the reason that postmodern theories apply to philosophies concerning the body.

In the end, Stephen is not one identity; she is a person who has multiple identities that change with the times and places she exists in. While Stephen begins to come to terms with her identity, she is still unexplainable to the society around her. Therefore, the interpretations of the people she interacts with in her society are significant because their definitions of Stephen ultimately play a crucial role in the person Stephen is at the end of the novel: a member of the third sex. It is the embodiment of multiple identities that allows Stephen to become a member of the third sex. The third sex label suggests Stephen's ability to perform her gender as masculine or feminine or a combination of both -- whatever she chooses. She is allowed this membership because she finally embodies

her masculinity (the ability to send Mary to Martin suggests her masculine protectiveness) and her femininity (her ability to give life to the voices of the third sex that haunt her).

Regardless of her intimacy with Mary and the feeling that she has found her companion in life, Stephen's identity remains unnamed because she is still finding that she does not fit easily into existing identity categories. It is this difficulty in naming herself in her society's terms that causes Stephen to question her relationship with Mary. Stephen knows how she feels and she knows the outcomes of her previous relationships. She sees her life as no place for Mary because it is uncertain. Stephen's life lacks the stability of a traditional relationship between a married couple, like the assurance that Mary would be protected if Stephen should die. Most of all, Stephen's life can not give Mary the guarantee of children or social acceptance.

After she sends Mary away, Stephen is faced with a room "thronging with people" (430). Although there is no one in her room, for the first time in the novel, Stephen is feeling the identities of the inverts around her. As the figures in her room begin to dissolve into Stephen, "their madness became articulate through her, they were tearing her to pieces, getting her under" (431). Stephen is ceasing to be merely Stephen; she is now becoming the voice of the

inverts who have no voice. Her identity is not one identity because she embodies the voices of all inverts. Her identity becomes a multiplicity of identities. Hall's use of dissolving the voices of inverts into Stephen's consciousness is indicative of Stephen's multiplicity. She embraces multiplicity and that multiplicity is postmodern. Stephen's multiplicity is, in turn, a sign of the third sex. The third sex can be an extension of binary ideas about gender which removes the stigma of Stephen's gender not matching social standards regarding femininity and masculinity. Stephen is not female or feminine and she is also not masculine or male. Rather, Stephen is any sex and any gender she chooses to be. There are no boundaries to her identity. She is now truly postmodern because her identity does not allow for one single definition.

# CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION:
## IS THIS THE POSTMODERN TRAIN?

In life, Hall suffered the same uneasiness that her creation Stephen suffered about her gender performance (her imagined masculinity). Hall believed that if she were brave and moral, she, and thus inversion, would not be reproachable. She felt that "God made her [inverted] and that she was good" (Glasgow 10). Many critics read *The Well of Loneliness* as a thinly veiled description of Hall's life. Glasgow writes that "almost invariably readers of *The Well of Loneliness* have read John's portrait of the protagonist Stephen Gordon either as autobiography (which it is not) or as John's last word on the nature of inversion (which it is also not)" (9). There are similarities in Hall's life and the fictionalized life of Stephen Gordon. The greatest similarity (notwithstanding the Hall and Stephen mirror image) is their love triangles. Stephen had Mary and Angela while Hall had Una and Souline. Hall's desire to protect and care for both Una and Souline and Stephen's desire to protect and care for Angela and Mary also create an uneasiness because none of the relationships fit into a binary definition of an intimate relationship. Without the

boundaries to create the relationship, there is the feeling that something is missing. What Hall, and ultimately Stephen, names is legitimacy that would have been in the relationship if one of the women had been a man. Early in her letters to Souline, Hall writes here that "had I been a man I would have given you a child" (qtd. in Glasgow 55). Hall realizes her inability to provide what her society saw as a stable relationship between two adults: a relationship that procreated. Notwithstanding, Hall still believed

> Nature has such vast ideas of her own, and its useless & foolish to kick against them. If you don't like her ideas it cant be helped, you've just got to make the best of it, and try to believe that everything is meant, that nothing in natures scheme is ever wasted. (sic, qtd in Glasgow 52)

Despite the uneasiness both Hall and Stephen felt, Hall's sentiments that Nature has Her own plan provides a reason as to why the disruption of sex and gender are plausible. In fact, Hall's uneasiness and answers to that uneasiness give life to an ever-changing example of what can exist within the disruption of sex and gender -- Stephen Gordon.

Inversion or the third sex was rarely, if ever, talked about in Radclyffe Hall's time. Sexuality and gender were static, predetermined existences that were accepted, not

talked about, and not questioned. Sexuality and gender that did not meet the norm or the binary definitions of the time (male to female, heterosexuality), did not exist in polite society. Those that were of the third sex inhabited the underground world of bars and drug hangouts that Radclyffe Hall wrote of in a vivid description in *The Well Of Loneliness*. Hall's novel and her courage to write a book about inversion, and in essence her own life, broke a silence about sex and sexuality. Michel Foucault writes,

> If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (6)

In breaking this silence, Hall and her character Stephen Gordon became icons and symbols of what a lesbian really is or can be. Through their iconography, Hall and Stephen are an early example that it is possible to break socially established notions of binary existence and sexual identity. Their example suggests that fluidity can transcend time and place and that identity is never fixed.

Hall's work, even though censored, allowed for later authors to write about inversion and homosexuality. Most important, however, is the controversy and censorship of Hall's work, which has generated some discussion about Hall and how she chose to write about the life of an invert. What has been written about Hall and *The Well of Loneliness* seems to imply that this is all Hall ever had to say about inversion. As Glasgow points out, this is not true. Hall wrote poetry and prose, as well as other books about inversion, *Adam's Breed* and *The Unlit Lamp*. Interestingly, these works have never been associated with the scandal that accompanied the appearance of *The Well of Loneliness*. This is significant because Hall continued to think and rethink her ideas about inversion. In a sense, she was a postmodern thinker that was always deconstructing and constructing her ideas about inversion, only to deconstruct and construct again.

Much of the literary and historical studies that relate directly to *The Well of Loneliness* pertain to the censorship of the book and to the idea that Stephen is the mirror image of Hall (the fictional characterization of Hall). There is much more to Hall and to the novel than the censorship trial and the autobiographical argument, not to mention her ideas on inversion in her other works. Specifically, looking at

Stephen as a postmodern character is a way of opening the interpretations of *The Well of Loneliness* and Hall's thoughts about inversion.

Stephen Gordon is a complex character. She is the daughter of British nobility, she is a scholar, she is an athlete, and she is an outsider and exile. All of these labels fit Stephen; yet they don't necessarily fit her all the time. She is able to fulfill many different definitions because her identity is not yet set. According to Butler, "The naming is at once the setting of a boundary" (*Bodies* 8). Stephen is not named; thus, there is no boundary to the identity that she is or the identity(s) she may become. The attempts at naming Stephen's identity by naming her gender contribute to Stephen's ultimate place within the third sex. Stephen's membership in the third sex allows her to become a chameleon -- a postmodern body.

Stephen Gordon exists within the microcosm of her own separate identity and she exists within the larger dialogue about postmodern identity. Her early playing at gender is the first indication that she is performing a role that will shape her identity. When she chooses to pretend to be Lord Nelson, she is morphing her female sex with an alter ego masculine gender. This feels right for her, and it also gives her a foundation to continue to perform her gender throughout her life. Stephen's gender performance never

stops. She wears dresses to please her mother. She has long hair because of her feminine vanity. She chooses suits that are masculine yet feminine. She is an ambulance driver, yet she is also an author. Her performance is full of compliments and contradictions. Throughout the entire novel, however, Stephen never compromises the fact that she feels different. At first, the difference involves not wanting to participate in girlish games as a child then not wanting to date. Later in life, Stephen feels that she does not fit in with the motley assortment of inverts that inhabit Valerie's salon and Alec's bar. Stephen never fits in; yet she is never completely excluded. She straddles the line between being the ideal example of lesbianism and inversion to being no example.

Postmodern theory is not the ultimate answer to solving the complexity of gender performance or identity politics. It does, however, give a skeleton key to the multiple doors of identity. Postmodern theory is a tool to ask questions which do not necessarily lead to answers but rather lead to more questions and more discoveries. All the answers to the questions about the character of Stephen Gordon will never be found. Postmodern theory, however, allows for critics to look at Stephen and formulate their ideas. In another year or decade, another critic will use postmodern theory to examine Stephen and come up with different interpretations.

Whose interpretation is right? Both and neither. Each new examination of Stephen leads to a new discovery about Stephen and each new discovery begs more questioning. The one certainty that postmodern thought does offer about Stephen is that her identity is not fixed and her gender, sex, and sexuality do not necessarily match or compliment each other. Stephen is a Pandora's box of possibilities.

This thesis is a place to revive the conversation about what makes identities and why gender performance works to create identities. It is also a place to begin to question whether we can find the exact moment or reason why an identity is formed. Stephen Gordon is a good example to use for this dialogue because she is so many things rolled into one character. Stephen is also important to this dialogue because she embodies the discord/symbiotic nature between sex and gender. Her character is a catalyst for asking questions and never really finding the answer, but finding that there are even more questions to ask. This is the excitement of postmodern thought. There is no final answer in a postmodern exploration. Postmodern theory is not a road map for a journey that will come to an end. Rather, postmodern theory is a beginning of a journey that has no real known destination.

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