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Sexuality and Gender in 1928: Between *Orlando: A Biography* and *The Well of Loneliness*

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Introduction

The general aim of this thesis is to discuss the representation of gender identity and sexuality in two novels: *Orlando: A Biography* by Virginia Woolf and *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall. These novels will be analysed primarily in terms of the complexities of identity and the challenges of narration amidst societal constraints. Additionally, this thesis will examine which of the two novels is more innovative from a feminist perspective and in the discourse of homosexuality and androgyny at the beginning of the 20th century, exploring how each author navigates and subverts traditional gender norms and societal expectations. This study will also investigate the specific elements within these works that led to the banning of *The Well of Loneliness*, contrasting it with the reception of *Orlando* to understand the broader cultural and political implications of their respective treatments of gender and sexuality. The year 1928 is particularly significant as well, as it was a period of notable development in queer life and sexology around Europe. This context will be explored to understand how these cultural and scientific advancements influenced the themes and reception of the novels.

Although queerness is the main focus of this research, I will also investigate other aspects relevant to the analysis in terms of feminism. By integrating these multiple lenses of exploration, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Woolf and Hall challenged and reshaped the narratives surrounding gender, sexuality, and identity in early 20th-century literature. This investigation will also highlight the enduring relevance of their works in contemporary discussions on feminism, queer theory, and the ongoing struggle for gender equality. My general methodological approach will involve observation, analysis, and comparison, utilising contemporary intersectional feminist, queer, and transfeminist perspectives.

1. The Discourse on Sexuality and Gender in Woolf and Hall's Time

This chapter outlines the methodology used to investigate two books: *Orlando* and *The Well of Loneliness*. The two books were both published in 1928 and illustrate innovative notions of gender theory and sexuality. As a matter of fact, *Orlando* presents a change of sex of the protagonist, while *The Well*'s main character is an inverted woman. These concepts were still experimental for the first part of the 20th century; therefore, the authors deeply influenced the development of gender theory and sexuality. Woolf and Hall have divergent approaches to exploring the themes of gender identity and sexuality, and the consequent portrayal of queer experiences in their stories. As a matter of fact, due to their rendering of society, religion, narrative perspectives, and sexual impulses, combined with the historical moment in which these two novels appeared, *The Well of Loneliness* was banned, while the other, *Orlando*, was widely acknowledged. This chapter asserts that both novels exhibit innovation within their respective contexts, yet they approach queerness in distinct manners. *Orlando* is distinguished by its inventive narrative technique and language, shaped by contemporary sexological and psychological theories, still concludes with a heterosexual relationship, reflecting the societal norms of the Victorian era. *The Well* adopts a more conventional narrative style. However, its content is notably radical in the representation of homosexuality, incorporating numerous religious elements that played a significant role in the book's censorship.

The contrast between the two literary works invites an exploration of the elements that influenced the reception of each work. This thesis addresses the question of Hall's novel, which can be perceived as more radical due to its direct confrontation with societal taboos, or the possibility that Woolf's ability to subtly critique and survive within the constraints of her time make her approach more revolutionary. Additionally, the personal circumstances of each author – Hall's open lesbianism versus Woolf's marriage to a man – may have played a significant role in the differing receptions of their works. By examining these factors, one can assess which

author more effectively addressed feminist issues, offering a nuanced understanding of their contributions to the portrayal of gender and sexuality in literature. To achieve this, the methodology includes a study of the social, legal, and religious context, together with the laws of the time. In addition, it is pursued an analysis of 19th and 20th centuries sexological and psychological studies. This approach aims to understand the context in which the two authors were writing, providing a comprehensive backdrop for their literary works. The understanding of this context will be useful to the comparative literary analysis of the texts, contextual examination of their receptions, and an exploration of contemporary critical perspectives. By integrating close readings with the aforementioned research, this study aims to uncover the intricate dynamics between authorial intent, societal norms, and literary innovation.

The authors' description and handling of sexuality and gender identity are key to understanding the two different ways they were visionary and ahead of their times. However, they made their statements in two completely different ways. Woolf writes a novel that can be identified with the field of magic realism, the first magic realist novel written in the English Language. The author builds her fiction with historical accuracy, but then she adds a magical element. Indeed, her protagonist has a lifespan of three and a half centuries, thus having the possibility to depict the English historical and political situation in a temporally extended setting (Steffens 37). On top of that, in the middle of the story, her main character changes sex and becomes a woman.

Hall, on the other hand, employs the tradition of Victorian realism in her narrative, yet she infuses it with a "modernist concern with interior consciousness" (Green 278). Although *The Well of Loneliness* wistfully depicts an idealised longing for agrarian and country-house society, reminiscent of the characteristics found in traditional novels, Hall brings innovation through her portrayal of Stephen Gordon, the protagonist, who defies tradition by embodying lesbian love in its purest form. Hall is therefore constructing an alternative to heterosexual love

and a new “fictional trajectory” with her seemingly traditional narration (Green 278-9). Thus, while Woolf's *Orlando* stands as the pioneering example of magic realism in English literature, Hall's work emerges as a ground-breaking milestone in the realm of lesbian literature. The employing of different literary genres, the innovative magic realism and the traditional Victorian one, is also contributing to the spread of the queer ideals. In addition, the use of a more established genre has played a part in the banning of *The Well*.

The debate arising from the different methods employed by these writers in exploring gender identity and sexuality has not only amalgamated their ideas of gender identity and sexuality with their epoch but also created a sensation in a still conservative society. The divergent features considered by this paper include the historical context of queerness, religion, linguistic choices, narrative perspective, and the sexual orientation of their characters. The different fields are believed to be the reason of the success of these novels in queer literature, but also the cause of the judgment of law of only one of the two.

1.1. Queerness in 1928

According to the *OED*, the term “sexual orientation” was developed in 1931, only three years after the publication of Woolf and Hall’s novels. Originally, it referred to “(the process of) orientation with respect to a sexual goal, potential mate, partner, etc.” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). This definition emerged amidst a period of significant historical and scientific innovation in the early 20th century, notably influenced by the pioneering theories of psychoanalysis put forth by Sigmund Freud. It is therefore helpful to explore the historical and scientific events preceding 1928, providing essential context for the development of ideas surrounding sexuality and gender, and particularly for the emergence of queerness.

Freud, in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), gives two definitions. The first one deals with bisexuality, explaining that “a bisexual disposition is somehow concerned in inversion, though we do not know in what that disposition consists, beyond anatomical

structure. And secondly, we have to deal with disturbances that affect the sexual instinct in the course of its development" (143). The term "bisexual" was generally used to describe cases of people with an anatomical undetermined sex, notably the condition of hermaphroditism (Freud 135). In his research, Freud introduces two technical terms: sexual object and sexual aim. The sexual object is the person from whom sexual attraction proceeds, while the sexual aim is the act towards which the sexual instinct tends. The psychologist encourages loosening the bond between sexual instincts and objects of attraction, giving space to a new conception of the term and creating "deviations" (135-6). This idea of hermaphroditism is, in a way, well represented in *Orlando* since the main character shows deviations in their sexual instincts.

The second definition developed by Freud is the one on "absolute inverts," that are people with deviations in respect of the sexual object. According to the author "their sexual objects are exclusively of their own sex. Persons of the opposite sex are never the object of their sexual desire, but leave them cold, or even arouse sexual aversion in them" (Freud 136). For these individuals, people of the opposite sex evoke little to no sexual attraction and may even provoke aversion. Freud's categorisation highlights deviations from societal norms regarding sexual objects of desire, providing a framework for understanding diverse expressions of human sexuality. In Freud's definition of the invert, it is possible to recognise the figure of Stephen Gordon. However, Freud was not the only one generating theories at the time. Indeed, other scholars, such as Havelock Ellis, Otto Weininger, Joan Riviere and Edward Carpenter, advanced their ideas on sexuality and gender identity.

Indeed, together with the physical definitions of hermaphrodites given in Freud's theories, the sexologist Havelock Ellis tried to go beyond the body, and determine the psychological aspect of the phenomenon. One of Ellis's most significant contributions to the field was his monumental seven-volume work titled *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, published between 1897 and 1928. In these volumes, Ellis explored various aspects of human sexuality,

including sexual inversion, transgenderism, fetishes, and sexual deviations. He believed that psychologically, individuals typically aligned with either male or female identities, although in exceptional cases, there might be a discrepancy between their psychological and physical sexes. Ellis declares: "With this exception I regard acquired inversion as rare, and I should not be surprised to find that a more minute investigation would show that even in these rare cases there is a congenital element." (41). Hence, the sexologist establishes that inversion is not only physical, as underlined by Freud, but psychological and congenital as well.

A decade later, in 1908, Edward Carpenter published *The Intermediate Sex*, aiming to challenge and possibly change the perception of homosexuality as degenerate. In fact, within the avant-garde movement, there was a widespread belief that individuals with dual-gendered qualities, referred to as inverts, excelled at bridging gender divides, a trait highly esteemed among artists. This connection fostered the notion that inverts exhibited similarities to artists and geniuses (Helt 136). Carpenter, in the first pages of his work, declares that "if the modern woman is a little more masculine in some ways than her predecessor, the modern man (it is to be hoped), while by no means effeminate, is a little more sensitive in temperament and artistic in feeling than the original John Bull" (16-7). He believes that there is a growing acknowledgment that the sexes should not be seen as two completely separate groups with distinct habits and emotions. Instead, they are better understood as the two ends of a spectrum within one group – the human race (17). As a consequence, sexual science began integrating aesthetic notions of androgyny. Many experts of the time were trying, therefore, to explain the phenomenon of what today we would call "queerness" involving their society and started to give answers based on scientific studies. Woolf was influenced by the theories of Ellis and Carpenter, which also shaped the beliefs on sexuality within literary circles of her era (Helt 137).

The hypothesis on the nature of homosexuality were various. As claimed by Weeks, in the London of the late 17th century it was present a growing male homosexual subculture – female homosexuality was not condemned and developed its own characteristics – characterised by gender inversion or transvestitism. After two centuries, this movement became similar to the modern homosexual subcultures, with the creation of meeting places, organised events, and a distinctive style. However, at the end of the 19th century, the belief of homosexuality as a "medical model", arising from a controversy about immorality and various sexual scandals of the time, started to spread (Weeks 172).

Consequently, the law was modified. In 1885, the Labouchere Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act condemned all homosexual activities between men to up to two years of hard labour. Next, the law against immoral purposes was modified and subsequently clarified by the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1912. Although less strict compared to the death penalty for sodomy, removed in 1861, it affected a wider range of people. On one hand, the trials helped to create a public idea of male homosexual identity, on the other hand, many scandals divided society, reaching their peaks with the trial of Oscar Wilde (Weeks 172-3). Wilde's trial was also the triggering factor for Hall to start to write *The Well*, which underwent a trial in its turn years later. Indeed, the alleged depiction of sodomy in a literary work was employed to insinuate the inclinations of its author in a debate centred on the interpretations of friendship within both the novel and Wilde's letters (Reay 219). As a lesbian author, Hall was deeply moved by the case, and decided to attempt a narration that defended homosexuality. However, in the same way as Wilde, Hall's sexual desires were taken into consideration for the banning of her book.

As a result of the legal situation created, a medical model of homosexuality was developed, which is similar to the concept of species created by Freud in 1905. There was a transposition from a religious idea of queerness as a sin to the element of medical sickness or

mental illness. Numerous "scientific" studies started to appear in Europe between 1889 and 1908. The studies tried to analyse how homosexuality worked, i.e., if it was acquired through time, or if it was congenital; curable, or impossible to eradicate. These scientific theories created boundaries for homosexuals, at the beginning of the 20th century, within which they started to define themselves (Weeks 173).

Conversely, by taking into account female homosexuality, it is possible to notice that it did not get the same social pressure and discrimination. Women identifying with the lesbian subculture frequently featured typically male characteristics, which are present in Hall's novel as well. Weeks believes that *The Well of Loneliness* is "pervaded by stereotyping and a final sense of the tragic destiny of the born invert." (180). Nonetheless, compared to male homosexuality, the female homosexual subculture had limited development. Wilde's trial, which created a big scandal in the1890s and was the starting point for the creation of Hall's novel, was indeed a much bigger event than the 1920s trial of Hall that led to the ban of her novel.

The middle way between male and female homosexuality was bisexuality. In a 1929 psychoanalytic study authored by Joan Riviere, it is posited that openly exhibiting distinct attributes of the opposite sex was seen as a manifestation of bisexuality. Another case is that of a homosexual man, who harbours a desire to embody femininity. These dual characteristics find a partial convergence in the complex character of Orlando. Indeed, Orlando represents a third way, the way of the androgynous, who is mobile and changes continuously. The character can be seen as an individual with attributes of the opposite sex, therefore bisexual, due to their androgynous features, but also as a homosexual man who embodies femininity, after the sex change. According to Helt, "*Orlando* disputes this notion that gender has a biological essence." (44). Stephen Gordon is not part of the same category and represents a homosexual woman with masculine traits. As a result, Orlando and Stephen characterise two opposing views of

homosexuality of the beginning of the 20th century, which are relevant to the results the two books will obtain. Indeed, these novels can be seen as responses to the debates of their time. By exploring different perspectives on gender identity and sexuality, they engage with and reflect the contemporary discussions and conflicts surrounding these issues. *Orlando*, through its fluid and transformative approach to gender, challenges traditional norms and highlights the fluidity of identity, resonating with the growing discourse on gender and sexual fluidity. On the other hand, Stephen's more rigid and defined experience underscores the societal constraints and prejudices that existed during that era. Both novels, in their distinct ways, respond to and critique the prevailing attitudes towards homosexuality and gender.

Caughie remarks that the novel uses a recurring metaphorical image of a constantly moving tapestry to symbolise the shifts in themes and narrative throughout. In the midst of all these contradictions and sudden changes in perspective, Woolf presents her renowned androgynous statement "For here again we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix" (132). Her theory, stated by the biographer, is not presented as a philosophical or feminist one, nor as a solution to conflicting ideas, but rather as a means to stay in a state of suspension between opposing beliefs, which were the conjectures circulating during her time. She does not take a single stance, but multiple. According to the author, in everyone, there is a shifting between masculine and feminine traits, sometimes only visible through clothing (Woolf 132). Androgyny represents this fluctuation between positions, embodying a fundamental ambiguity. In *Orlando* the element of androgyny is reflected not just in terms of sexuality, but also within the text and language. According to Caughie, androgyny is a refusal to make a definitive choice between sexes, but it does not deny the possibility of choice (1989, 44).

What changes with *Orlando* is the idea of the androgynous mind, which Woolf delineates in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). She believes that usually, in the male brain, masculine traits tend to dominate, while in the female brain feminine traits prevail. To obtain a

balanced mind, these traits need to be harmonised and equal. Both genders, in this way, inherently possess qualities of the other, facilitating mutual understanding and interaction (102). Nonetheless, in the study conducted by Riviere it is also explained the psychological process of the invert: the Oedipus complex, which presents a situation of rivalry with the mother, might influence an individual, such as Stephen Gordon, to become an absolute invert, that is, as Riviere puts it, a homosexual woman with a need for recognition of her masculinity "having robbed her of the penis, destroyed her and reduced her to pitiful inferiority, she triumphs over her, but again secretly; outwardly she acknowledges and admires the virtues of 'feminine' women" (180). However, the theory of sexual inversion, which is heterosexist and suggests that women who love other women are essentially men, fails to explain same-sex attractions in feminine and bisexual women, particularly when their partners are not masculine (Helt 137).

Consequently, another theory by sexologist Otto Weininger was considered to explain same-sex attraction in women. His law of sexual affinity points out that "homosexuality showed that the woman who attracts and is attracted by other women is herself half male" and that "homosexuality in a woman is the outcome of her masculinity" (66). According to him, when analysing the historical evidence with this principle in mind, it is possible to observe that the extent of freedom and the proportion of masculinity present in a woman are virtually the same. In this case, people attracted to same-sex individuals are not identified as only male or female, but they were regarded as both. Indeed, while discussing hermaphroditism, he declares that "in the case of human beings, however, it appears to be psychologically true that an individual, at least at one and the same moment, is always either man or woman" (79). These theories were used by the emerging queer groups of the time to explain their sexual orientation.

Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, regarding sexuality of the end of 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, declares that "until Freud at least, the discourse on sex – the discourse of scholars and theoreticians – never ceased to hide the thing it was speaking about"

(53). Despite claiming scientific neutrality, this discourse was evasive, focusing on aberrations and perversions rather than sex itself. It was also heavily influenced by moral imperatives, reiterating societal norms under the guise of medical science. Thus, it became linked with an insistent and intrusive medical practice, eager to express its aversions and quick to align with law and public opinion. This practice was more subservient to the powers of order than committed to the pursuit of truth. At best, it was naively innocent; more often, it was intentionally deceitful, complicit with the very things it condemned. It created a morbid form of pornography that became characteristic of fin de siècle society (53-4). After Freud's theories, homosexuality was thus transposed from a practice of sodomy, where the homosexual was an aberration for society, a grave sin condemned by the courts, to an hermaphrodism of the soul, where the homosexual became a species "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43).

Therefore, according to Foucault, the alignment of medical and scientific discourse with societal norms reinforced existing power structures and stigmatised non-normative sexual behaviours, particularly homosexuality. By medicalising these behaviours, the discourse pathologized them, leading to increased social control and marginalisation. The intrusive and moralistic nature of medical practices served more to enforce societal judgments than to pursue unbiased scientific understanding. Furthermore, the shift from viewing homosexual acts as isolated incidents to defining homosexuality as a distinct identity created enduring categories that were subject to scrutiny, regulation, and control. This not only entrenched the notion of homosexuality as a pathologized condition but also contributed to the formation of a morbid interest in documenting sexual perversions. Ultimately, these shifts influenced the treatment and perception of sexual identities, leaving a legacy of stigmatisation and control that shaped the experiences of sexual minorities. Following Foucault's theory, this thesis observes that the

protagonists of *Orlando* and *The Well* are consequently a product of the scientific discourse of their time, heavily influenced by a stereotypical portrayal of homosexuality and inversion.

Foucault's book was published in 1976 and considers the repression and consequent emergence of sexuality in a timeframe spacing from the 17th to the 20th centuries. Foucault describes the role literature played in the discourse of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and physical hermaphroditism, advancing social regulations in the realm of sexual "deviance". He states that "sexuality must not be described as a stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient to a power which exhausts itself trying to subdue it and often fails to control it entirely" (101). At the beginning of the 18th century, through the "psychiatrisation" of pleasure, the sexual instinct was delineated as a distinct biological and psychological drive; a thorough examination was conducted on various deviations it could undergo; it was categorised either as a norm or a pathology in relation to behaviour; and ultimately, efforts were made to devise corrective measures for these deviations (105). The concept continued to develop across the following centuries and therefore became part of Woolf and Hall's society. As a matter of fact, Foucault's analysis helps us read Woolf and Hall by providing a historical and theoretical framework for understanding how their works engage with contemporary ideas of sexuality. Woolf's *Orlando* and Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* reflect and respond to the evolving discourse on sexual norms and deviations that Foucault describes. In addition, Foucault's insights reveal how these authors challenge and critique the social and scientific attempts to categorise and control sexuality, offering a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural context in which they wrote.

The genres of literature of *Orlando* and *The Well*, growing from 19th century on, moulded an innovative discourse on homosexuality, where queerness started to become a frequent narrative subject. Foucault explains that it began "to demand that its legitimacy or "naturality" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by

which it was medically disqualified. There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it." (101). Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall indeed fall into the category that Michel Foucault describes. Both authors contributed and at the same time were "victims" of the evolving discourse on homosexuality in the early 20th century, a period marked by shifting attitudes and increasing visibility of queer identities. Woolf's narration uses narrative techniques and themes that blur gender boundaries and depict same-sex desire, indeed her *Orlando* engages with and subverts traditional categories of gender and sexuality, while Hall, by portraying a lesbian protagonist in a sympathetic and humanising light, and using contemporary medical and psychological understandings of sexuality, seeks to affirm the legitimacy of homosexual identities within the framework of the dominant discourse.

Foucault argues that there is no single dominant discourse of power and a separate, oppositional discourse. Instead, the discourse on homosexuality began to use the same categories that were used to disqualify it to seek acknowledgment and legitimacy (100). Both Woolf and Hall's works exemplify this process. Therefore, the authors did not create just a narration of a story with blameworthy elements of sodomy, but it became a movement, a voice that needed to be heard, that helped shape the morality of society concerning sex. Indeed, the narrative representation of feelings and relationships started from a form of repressed heterosexual sexual intercourse, connected to the Victorian age and only limited to its reproductive function, to a slow loosening of the struggle with sexuality, in order to favour a more open approach. Nevertheless, 1928, year of the publication of the two novels, finds itself at the beginning of this change, when the rules where still severely strict. The result of 1928 effect is reflected in the novels, which despite their revolutionary cores, present in varying degrees Victorian elements rooted within the narrative.

The concept of queerness in 1928 evolved in alignment with the scientific and historical currents that characterised the early 20th century. Initially, there was a delineation of the

prevailing understanding of sexual orientation during that era, followed by the theories on sexuality introduced by Freud in 1905, subsequently followed by Ellis, Weininger, and Carpenter. However, by examining Foucault's 1976 seminal work on the history of sexuality in the last two centuries, it is possible to delve into the portrayal of homosexuality and gender inversion in literature. In fact, Foucault's concept that sexuality and gender are socially constructed rather than natural categories aligns with Woolf's depiction of Orlando's fluid gender identity. On the other hand, Hall's portrayal of Stephen Gordon as an invert reflects the medical and psychological discourse of the time, which sought to pathologize homosexuality. Foucault's analysis of how such medical discourses have historically been used to control and marginalise non-normative sexualities helps the public to see how Hall's novel engages with these discourses to demand recognition and legitimacy, but also how, due to the same medical discourses are penalising the narrations. This narration of the context of queerness at the beginning of the century is essential in order to understand how the books *The Well of Loneliness* and *Orlando: A Biography* were innovative and influential for their time.

1.2. Crossdressing, Inversion, and Transsexualism

Both Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall were engaged in the homosexual theories circulating during their time. Besides the notions on sexuality emerging between the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, the homosexual discourse included crossdressing and transvestitism as well. These two notions started much earlier than modernism, especially in the field of theatre. As a matter of fact, during the English Renaissance, theatres were an important means of cultural transformation. The theatre was a stage where the change of gender definitions could be displayed (Rackin 29). With the advent of the 20th century, crossdressing and transvestitism left the stage and slowly established in society and literary culture. As a consequence, new queer notions, such as transsexualism, gained recognition, especially among members of the avant-guard movement.

Woolf and Hall are part of the writers who explored themes related to gender identity and expression in their works. Woolf, in various letters, refers to the fashion of her time, to which many of her friends were adhering, to crossdress and take on the appearance of the inverted gender "when I go to what we call a Buggery Poke party, I feel as if I had strayed into the male urinal; a wet, smelly, trivial kind of place. I fought with Eddy Sackville over this; I often fight with my friends. How silly, how pretty you sodomites are, I said; whereat he flared up and accused me of having a rednosed grandfather" (*The Letters* 200). The statement reveals Woolf's complex and somewhat contradictory views on homosexuality and her critique of social spaces dominated by "sodomites". Her discomfort and critical tone suggest a disdain for what she perceives as the frivolity and triviality of such gatherings, contrasting sharply with her more empathetic and nuanced portrayals of gender and sexuality in her literary works. Similarly, Radclyffe Hall, in *The Well*, confronted taboos surrounding homosexuality and gender nonconformity, presenting a protagonist who grapples with her own sense of self amidst a society that seeks to suppress her identity. This section discusses the crossdressing fashion of 1920s and how it influenced Hall and Woolf's writing.

As underlined by Helt, during the interwar period, individuals aspiring to follow the avant-garde movement, distinguished themselves by openly discussing the latest sexual theories in mixed social settings and by creating literary and artistic works that actively participated in these discussions. During that time, Woolf became part of a literary group, the Bloomsbury Group, which promoted sexual freedom. The concepts of bisexuality and androgynity were central points of debate within Bloomsbury's discussions on sexuality, heavily influenced by sexual scientists from Weininger to Freud. While its significance in the epistemological history of sexuality may not be immediately apparent today, bisexuality played a pivotal role in theories of sexology regarding sexuality and sexual identity (Helt 133-4).

The Bloomsbury group, given their research focus, examined the 1920s trends concerning homosexuality. For instance, Woolf herself criticised the homosexual and bisexual stance men were taking in cities like London, Cambridge, and Oxford: "have you any views on loving one's own sex? All the young men are so inclined, and I can't help finding it mildly foolish; though I have no particular reason. For one thing, all the young men tend to the pretty and ladylike, for some reason, at the moment" (*The Letters 3,* 155). She also compares her days in Cambridge to her present time and reveals a dislike for the fashion of her time. It was believed that the homosexual relationships they were entertaining were a response to a trend observed among young men in the academic world, who favoured sexual relationships with other men due to the belief that such connections were intellectually stimulating, and consequently, more sexually fulfilling. Woolf, therefore, criticises a performance of homosexuality of these individuals, since in most cases it represented a façade, and not an actual sexual preference "Woolf did not endorse the logic implied by the cliquish fashions of inversion that retrospectively appear as evolving sexual identities" (Helt 137). These figures adopted the character of the effeminate sodomite appeared to embrace sexological theories of inversion, which were largely rejected by the initial members of the Bloomsbury group in favour of socialist, feminist, and egalitarian principles and actions.

Later, however, this mode was followed by members of the Bloomsbury group as well, embodying the mannish lesbian. For example, Vita Sackville-West, the figure who inspired *Orlando: A Biography*. Although the mannish lesbian did not suggest sexual deviance to the wider public until after the 1928 obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, it was recognisable to groups of experts before the trial. In contrast to her colleague Hall, her lover Sackville-West, and certain younger male companions, Woolf held differing views regarding sexual desire, rejecting notions based on gender stereotypes, presentations of gender dysphoria, and the concept of inherent sexual identities. While Woolf appreciated the creativity

and enjoyment inherent in crossdressing and gender experimentation, as depicted in *Orlando*, she did not embrace the merging of gender and desire as substantial foundations for identity formation. Nor did she support the emerging theories that integrated sexuality into an aesthetic framework of identity (138). In a way, Woolf embraces the bisexual trend and her concept of the androgynous mind, especially with her depiction of Orlando, but distances herself from the figure of the sexual invert. Indeed, Orlando is always an in-between, embodying the third way of androgynity, but they are never a representation of the inverted sex.

Similarly to the trend of masculine homosexuality and inversion happening in the major university cities, the trend of lesbianism linked it with feminism and career-oriented women, a connection highlighted during the Hall trial. It played a role in the tendency to label any woman advocating for equal opportunities and rights as a masculine lesbian. The image of the mannish lesbian became central in discussions about female homosexuality for two main reasons. First, because it was believed that women did not naturally have sexual desire, lesbians were seen as having a trapped male soul, which gave them active lust. Second, gender reversal became a powerful symbol for feminist goals, praised by female modernists but criticised by males, regardless of their beliefs (Newton 566).

Nevertheless, Woolf refused to associate the characters of her stories to a prototype of professional women and feminism. On the contrary, Woolf strengthens the notion that she suggests has been widely recognised by women, albeit seldom acknowledged in written form: women's affection for other women is a deeply valuable and empowering emotional energy shared by many, rather than being an exclusive trait of a minority sexual orientation (Helt 142). Woolf's theory is especially outlined in *Orlando*, where the narrator suggests that "often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness" (Woolf 132). In *Orlando* matters the performativity of gender, a concept that was not created yet during Woolf's time. The theory on the performativity of gender was introduced by Judith Butler in 1990. By "performative," Butler

means that gender is something that we do rather than something that we are. In other words, gender is not an inherent attribute but rather a repeated and ritualised set of actions that create the illusion of an essential identity (187). As a result, *Orlando*'s narrative illustrates that gender is "socially constructed", even performative as per Butler's theory, and that desire is inherently diverse and often bisexual when freed from societal constraints (Helt 149). Orlando is the forerunner symbol embodying this theory.

The shifts did not just involve crossdressing and inversion; they also gave rise to the transexual movement, emerging from modernist aesthetics. Literature has demonstrated to have a powerful influence on the notions of gender and identity, being part of a reshaping at the beginning of the 20th century. Taking *Orlando* as an example, Caughie affirms that it functions as a pioneering example of the transgenre, adjusting concepts of gender, time, identity, history, and the essence of writing and reading within life narrative contexts. She explains the word "“Transgenre,” then, when used in French, foregrounds linguistic differences and distinctions in works about gender […] for narratives treating transgender lives that transfigure conventions of narrative diegesis" (2013, 503). Nonetheless, the element of transsexualism in the novel is the narrative organising principle, not the subject. As other scholars have observed, life writing by transsexual individuals challenges conventional narrative structures by undermining pronoun consistency, temporal coherence, and linear progression. This calls for a new genre: a transnarrative. Woolf arrived at this realisation while crafting Orlando (2013, 502-3).

In words like transvestite, transsexual, and transgender, the prefix "trans" implies a sense of movement. While these concepts are commonly interpreted as transitions from one identity category to another, this movement also serves to challenge rigid categorisations. "Trans" encapsulates the fluidity of identity and "the social, cultural, and psychological processes by which a subject comes to understand his or her identity in relation to others" (2013, 508). Together with a transformation of identity, the transnarrative also includes the dealing

with a past self, and the difficulties of narration. Therefore, the question "how can an autodiegetic "I" refer to two differently sexed beings?" is posed. The solutions comprehend "the importance of the imagination and of narrative form to transsexual life writing" (2013, 509). Woolf masterfully works with transsexual life writing with a character that "remained precisely as he had been" (Woolf 98).

Orlando contains clear references to contemporary theories of sexual identity, a heightened focus on pronoun usage, and contemplations on memory and its transformation over time. Despite these common elements with other transexual narrations of the time, such as *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex* (1933), the biography-memoir of Einar Wegener, *Orlando* deviates from modernist transgender stories in several ways. One significant distinction lies in its portrayal of the sex change. Unlike in any other transnarrative, in *Orlando*, the transition occurs suddenly, unexpectedly, and without the character's desire for it. In addition, the narrator's straightforward narrative style and Orlando's nonchalant reaction to the change portray the event as something that, while not necessarily ordinary, is at least not uncommon. (Caughie 2013, 513)

Twenty years after the publication of *The Well* and *Orlando*, Simone de Beauvoir publishes *The Second Sex* (1949), manifesto of the second-wave feminism. Beauvoir rejects the theories of Freud and affirms that gender is constructed. She explores how women are socialised into their gender roles and how this process shapes their identity and experiences. As a matter of fact, she declares that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (de Beauvoir 273). This theory perfectly applies to Woolf's protagonist, precursor of these theories. Although Woolf uses the word "sex" to describe both Orlando's physical characteristics and gender, she appears to be acutely aware of the distinction

between the two and, to some extent, the fact that they are not naturally linked, before Beauvoir's theories. This connection positions Woolf's work as a precursor to second-wave feminism and underscores its significance in advancing feminist discourse on gender identity and socialisation.

Woolf and Hall, besides examining the theoretical aspects of sexuality, also immersed themselves in the contemporary trends of their times, incorporating certain aspects of these trends into their personal lives. Woolf consistently explores the fascination with clothing and its impact on consciousness, particularly in relation to the interplay between clothing and character. Rather than using frocks to directly symbolise character traits, she employs them as a lens through which to grapple with the modernist challenge of representing character. Her focus on clothing stems from her aim to individualise female subjectivity and her broader fascination with portraying the connections between external appearances and internal experiences (Cohen 150). Hall, in her turn, is the archetype of the mannish lesbian, not only in her writings, but also in her personal life. When her protagonist learns the truth about her real nature, she starts to dress accordingly, assuming masculine looks and behaviours.

Hence, gender historians and modernist scholars have acknowledged that the modernist era experienced significant transformations in understandings of sexual and gender identity. The modern girl shortened her hair, wore pants, publicly smoked, and used the subway, like Stephen Gordon. The feminine man, on the other hand, adorned himself, enacted behaviours and appearances typically associated with women, similarly to Orlando. Because of the nuanced exploration of gender identity and expression in Woolf's narration compared to the elements presented by Hall, it becomes already possible to see that her work surpasses others in the modernist era.

1.3. The Influence of Religion on the Representation of Queerness

The biblical nature of *The Well of Loneliness* and Woolf's religious undertones in *Orlando* significantly shaped the narratives of these two novels and the way they represent gender identity and sexuality. While both books incorporate elements stemming from religion, they do so in distinct ways, similarly to the different ways in which they deal with queerness. On one hand, Woolf articulates her aesthetic beliefs and spiritual insights, while on the other, Hall is credited with having created the bible of lesbian literature. This section aims to highlight the contrasting religious perspectives of Woolf and Hall as portrayed in their works and assess whether these differences contributed on their homosexual narrative, and therefore to the success of one novel and the banning of the other.

After the First World War, religion in England experienced a change which culminated in 1927. The historian A. J. P. Taylor, in this regard, explains that since before the war, the Church of England was working on the revision of the Prayer Book. The goal was to allow more flexibility for the Anglo-Catholic practices and doctrines, which were increasingly favoured by most ordained members of the Anglican Church. When the book was submitted to the parliament to obtain approval, the House of Lords accepted it; however, the House of Commons rejected it twice. From that moment on, began the era of decline for British religion. As a matter of fact, England slowly ceased to be a Christian nation (Taylor 259).

Following this decline, Woolf's relationship with religion at the time of the publication of her book was peculiar. She declared that to her, the more dogmatic and intolerant sides of religion were repugnant, but at the same time, she understood the mesmerising charm they had. She is a controversial figure when analysed from a religious point of view. As a child, she was not christened; her father actively attacked society for having a faith, and she never showed an interest in the church. For that reason, she had an unusual upbringing for her time, being raised with no religion. Nevertheless, in engaging with writing, she looked for new models of "sacred

community and experience that could potentially accommodate the "process[es] of change typical of modernity" (Lewis 142-3).

Scholars of Woolf, like Mark Hussey, have recognised that in all her novels, there is a sense of yearning, which tends towards the numinous and has the "contours of a theology" (137). Nonetheless, Woolf's religiosity and her interest in religious experiences were never actually explored. In fact, most of Woolf's works, and especially *Orlando*, have been judged by critics as atheist works. This conception of atheism, however, changes. Some critics believed that her *Orlando* was a post-God narration, that means that "God's death leads to the death of the subject" (Lackey 346), and Virginia Woolf is considered as one of the first writers articulating the consequences of atheism and subjectivities. Other scholars, instead, followed the feminist movement, regarding Woolf's narration as a renunciation of patriarchal God (Lewis 143).

By furthering the understanding on the concept of post-God narration, Lackey explains that in the opening of *Orlando* there are two binary oppositions: the story starts with a young Christian protagonist, and he plays the male, Christian role expected by his family. This Christianity is reflected by some objects appearing throughout the narration, such as chapels, church bells, and the prayer book of Mary Queen of Scots; even the mind of Orlando is described as a cathedral. Nevertheless, towards the end of the novel, after the change of sex, Orlando is not tied to the church anymore, and the narrator describes a plurality of selves in the protagonist. Hence, a post-God age has begun, and a discussion on the nature of reality was not of use to the story anymore, since the main character questioned binary oppositions represented by the religious institution (346-8).

Similarly to other modernists, Woolf expresses her lack of understanding of religion common for her time, but she also navigates for new expressions of the sacred that can embrace the diversity of contemporary existence. Despite her dislike of religion, "Woolf in her fiction

continually addresses herself to the challenge of understanding those whose religious views seem alien to hers" (Lewis 144). She was open-minded about mystical experiences and sought a new form of spirituality, which was independent from the concept of God and the Christian church, through her literary work. Thus, Virginia Woolf's treatment of religiosity in *Orlando* reflects a nuanced and complex relationship with the sacred, one that transcends traditional Christian frameworks. Woolf's narrative does not merely reject religion but rather reconfigures it, exploring spirituality in a way that resonates with modernist sensibilities. Through Orlando's journey, Woolf dismantles binary oppositions and conventional religious symbols, suggesting a plurality of selves and a fluid, multifaceted identity.

After delving into Woolf's contentious stance on religion, it is pertinent to examine Hall's religious convictions. In contrast to Woolf, Hall's beliefs were notably different. Jane Rule, in her book *Lesbian Images*, emphasises Hall's reverence for the Church, declaring that she "worshipped the very institutions which oppressed her, the Church and the patriarchy, which have thought women that there are only two choices, inferiority or perversion" (61). The author further explains that Hall was indeed a devoted Christian, who followed the doctrines of the Church. Her faith was, however, extremely controversial, due to her sinful sexuality, which was condemned by the religion. It is because of her strong faith that she constructed the character of Stephen Gordon in the way she did, since she needed to prove "the innocence of her nature" and provide insight into the experiences of an invert to the public (Rule 51).

Critics often overlook the significance of Hall's incorporation of biblical narratives, particularly her allusions to the Christ story found in the gospels. According to Madden, this aspect of her writing is often dismissed as merely contributing to the author's sentimentality and melodrama (164). Alternatively, it is rightfully criticised as reinforcing the modernist era's stereotypes of lesbianism, portraying it as a tragic, biologically determined, masculine identity. Consequently, Hall's heroine becomes to the reader a Christ-like figure, invoking the public's

pity (Madden 164). This thesis, nonetheless, contends that religion is at the core of Hall's portrayal of lesbianism, positioning her narrative within a deeply spiritual framework that underscores her exploration of identity and societal condemnation.

Stephen's sexual orientation in itself is a sign given by God. The revelatory moment in which Stephen discovers her sexuality, looking through her father's locked away sexological texts, is marked by a question, which the protagonist asks God using the Bible. The protagonist demands a sign and opens the text. The page that comes up is on the mark of Cain. Thus, Hall uses the biblical reference to connect Stephen's sexual orientation to the stigmata of the abnormal. Continuing with the narration, the writer introduces a metonymical connection between Stephen and the crucified Christ, creating an equation between Cain, Christ, and the inverted. This is just one of the many elements portrayed in the narration that stems from biblical references (Madden 168-9).

Apart from Stephen, there are many other characters used by Hall to express her religious belief. As an example, Puddle, who in an ambiguous way reveals a sexual preference for women as well, emerges as an embodiment of the stereotypical version of lesbian identity, as if she incarnated the Old Testament version of lesbianism "the unmarried woman, trapped in jobs such as governess or maidservant or tutor, but expecting a better future for women like herself – a future Puddle clearly envisions in the writing of Stephen" (170). Puddle's character, as depicted by Stephen's writing, encapsulates the hope and aspiration for liberation from societal constraints, but remains suffocated by her true identity. Moreover, Hall's reference to Old Testament promises of deliverance and freedom underscores the intersectionality of race, sex, and gender in shaping the characters' experiences and aspirations. This narrative layer deepens the exploration of identity and agency, drawing parallels between biblical themes and the struggles for autonomy and equality in the characters' lives (Madden 170).

Critics like Michael Baker have pointed out that *The Well* is a book of high moral purposes. “Stephen is not apparently a church-goer, but her empathy for the natural world, her search for the hidden meaning to her unhappy existence, and her final anguished plea to God, all suggest that she is a woman of religious instincts.” (214). There are numerous signs of the embodiment of Christ in Stephen: her being born on Christmas Eve, her martyr behaviour she perpetuates at the end of the book, her prayers, and sacrifices. However, some of the scenes portrayed in the book come directly from Radclyffe Hall’s life, leading the public to believe that the religious connection she shows in her protagonist is also part of her own life.

Stephen's journey through her literary career is portrayed as a profound spiritual odyssey as well, where her trials and triumphs are paralleled with the crucifixion and ascension into a realm of divine grace. This metaphorical narrative also suggests an underlying theme of evangelism or apologetics, as Stephen’s passion for her craft mirrors the fervour of Christ’s disciples spreading the gospel. Indeed, the novel’s self-reflexive nature underscores its thematic exploration of inspiration and faith. Notably, the protagonist’s name, Stephen, bears striking resemblance to the first Christian evangelistic martyr in the Book of Acts, imbuing her character with layers of symbolic significance that echo throughout her literary journey. Through this lens, Stephen’s narrative becomes a testament to the transformative power of storytelling and the quest for spiritual fulfilment (Madden 173).

The religious background of *The Well of Loneliness* is, according to this research, one of the main reasons why the novel underwent trial. Indeed, many critics of the time criticised the presence of God in the book. They delved into a contentious debate over the rightful employment of religious language, particularly the word “God,” in discussions concerning lesbianism. People mainly saw discussions about homosexuality as either sinful or as a mental disorder. This leads to debates about how to talk about sexuality, morality, and society’s rules. From the trial records, it is shown that if Stephen had expressed feelings of guilt instead of

virtue, or if the novel had been a medical document instead of a work of fiction for the public, or if it had not merged the languages of sin and sexology, it would not have been perceived as having the potential to "corrupt" the reader, as the judges believed (178).

As a consequence, the element of religion analysed in this section diversifies the two writers. Woolf as an author does not have religious belief but tries to delve into her spirituality. Therefore, religion is not a defining element of the representation of Orlando's sexual identity. Her book reflects this side of her, only including religion in the first part of the narration, and then eliminating this element after Orlando's change of sex. Hall, on the other side, is a devoted Christian. The presence of God in her life is transmitted into *The Well*, transforming her protagonist in the symbol of Christ and martyrdom. Due to her protagonist being an absolute invert, however, religiosity connected with homosexuality – a sign given by God – is one of the causes it was trialled and why it became a taboo. The absence of religion in Woolf's work and the heavy presence of faith in Hall's story prove to be decisive elements on the two different outcomes of the books and the way the authors depicted queerness.

1.4. Linguistic Choices and Narrative Perspectives

The two authors considered in this research have two contrasting ways of narrating their stories. *Orlando* is defined as a biographical novel, and the title itself, *Orlando: A Biography*, gives a clear sign about the way the story is narrated. Woolf, a feminist, has declared that the story is inspired by the life of her lover, Vita Sackville-West, a bisexual, who under many aspects resembles the protagonist, an androgyne (Caughie 1989, 41). At times, the narrative adopts a traditional third-person omniscient perspective, providing insights into Orlando's thoughts, feelings, and surroundings. This perspective allows the reader to delve deep into Orlando's psyche and understand his inner conflicts and desires. However, Woolf also employs a more playful and experimental approach to narration, inserting a peculiar narrator and

biographer to the story. She breaks the fourth wall, addressing the reader directly and incorporating metafictional elements into the story.

The Well's narration, on the other hand, is more traditional. Hall's skilful handling of different narrative and psychological frameworks, inherited from the Victorian and Edwardian eras, is particularly evident in her portrayal of Stephen Gordon's identity. She constructs Stephen's character by drawing from a diverse range of sources, including sexological texts, Biblical references, literary influences, and elements of epistolary writing (Green 280). Since the two types of narration are so different, this section tries to outline the narrative perspectives the authors chose, to clarify how these elements were influential for the reception of the books and the influence they had during their historical period.

Considering first the narration and language used in *Orlando*, Pamela Caughie declares that "the text of *Orlando* is as unstable as the sex of Orlando" (1989, 42). As a matter of fact, the masterpiece begins with "He – for there could be no doubt of his sex ..." (Woolf 11). The reader, as a consequence, immediately doubts the emphasised statement. From the start, the novel is contradictory; it presents many qualifications, paradoxes, contradictions, and sexual and textual indeterminacy. All these elements influence the language of the book. Orlando, with their androgynous nature, raises the issue of sexual identity, but at the same time, the intrusive narrator similarly emphasises the textual language by intruding in the story (Caughie 1989, 42).

The androgynous nature of the protagonist impacts the language, as language inherently assumes a specific sexual identity. Woolf highlights the arbitrariness of identity and language by portraying Orlando's fluid transition between genders. Accordingly, the language of the novel is modified based on Orlando's identity swings: at first, while describing Orlando as a boy, the narration is conventional, but after the transformation, it becomes eccentric. The language within the text transitions from conventional clichés, characterised by transparency, to the original and enigmatic cipher language shared between Orlando and her lover,

Shelmerdine. Having expressed that, it is a consequence that identity is variable as much as language, in the same way that language is vulnerable like identity, and this is portrayed in the book (Caughie 1989, 43).

In *Orlando*, clothing, identity, and rhetoric point towards something different. According to Caughie, what holds significance is not what these elements conceal or indicate, but rather, what they empower the protagonist or the writer to achieve. In other words, what is important is not the essence of the sign, such as the transsexual, but rather its placement and role within a specific discourse. As Orlando undergoes a sex change and embodies characteristics of both genders, the biographer ends up resorting to stereotypical comments. This happens because the biographer can only make such distinctions about sexuality by relying on conventional assumptions about sexual differences (1989, 46-7).

Orlando persists in writing the poem she initiated as a young man throughout the novel, completing it in her newfound identity as a modern woman. She embraces desire and expresses a hope for the emergence of even more diverse and unconventional forms of desire. Indeed, Orlando, newly transformed into a female, continues to love women out of habit at first: “and as all Orlando’s loves had been women, now, through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved” (Woolf 115). Eventually, societal norms and the influence of Victorian conventions pressure her to pursue a romantic relationship with a man, despite his own ambiguous gender identity mirroring Orlando’s. However, even this compliance is depicted not only as an act of performing femininity but also as a rebellious one, essential for her writing endeavours (Caughie 2013, 514).

Woolf plays with the different types of narration in her masterpiece. As a matter of fact, Orlando themself writes a three-centuries long book, and while they are writing, the biographer of the story starts to talk about the writing process, expressing metaphorical concern about the

challenges of narrating a writer's life, particularly when the primary activity, that is sitting still and thinking, appears to lack action entirely. The action is completely suspended when Orlando writes, and the biographer cannot continue the story (Briggs 197-8).

Woolf is aware that any language she employs is inevitably influenced by conventional assumptions about gender and identity. Her approach involves shifting metaphors regarding sexual identity, not so much to escape from a gendered reality, but to break free from fixed references. This liberation is achieved through a transformation in our understanding of language. The focus here is on a language that presents diverse relationships rather than rigid opposing alternatives. An androgynous novel like this emerges when different linguistic functions are explored rather than simply accepted (Caughie 1989, 47).

Hall, once again, diverges from the innovations of her time and from the figure of Woolf. *The Well of Loneliness* was not, compared to other works printed in the 1920s, innovative under the narrative and linguistic point of view. Critics and scholars of the time, together with Woolf herself, agreed that the book did not follow the modernist aestheticism. Indeed, immediately after Hall's work was published, it received numerous comments. It was praised the excellence of the execution of the book at first, but the public judgment was divided from the beginning. In fact, some other critics remarked upon the lack of originality and vitality in Hall's apparently conventional style (Roche 102). Consequently, if Woolf uses the language to break the rules on gender identity, Hall stays true to tradition to make the public accept her inverted character.

The difference between Woolf and Hall has been interpreted as a delineation of the boundary between modernist aesthetics and the conventions of Victorian and Edwardian realism, from which modernism sets itself apart. Indeed, Hall's somewhat ambivalent attitude towards her literary surroundings, including the high modernist aesthetic and the Freudian intellectual landscape, appears to be the exact contrary of Woolf's aestheticism. Describing neither one thing nor another fittingly characterises *The Well*'s position between a Victorian

focus on societal and material environments and a modernist emphasis on internal consciousness (Green 277-8).

The beginning of *The Well* shows immediately the traditionality of the book: "Not very far from Upton-on-Severn – between it, in fact, and the Malvern Hills – stands the country seat of the Gordons of Bramley" (Hall 18). However, Stephen Gordon's journey guides her beyond the environment initially outlined, towards a future marked by exile, outside the *locus amoenus* she did not want to leave. Green suggests that while the novel's plot relies heavily on heterosexual romance conventions, its culmination, where Stephen orchestrates her own romantic rejection and embraces authorship as a solitary yet empowering form of ownership, underscores Hall's statement that she and her protagonist were crafting an alternative, if not entirely original, narrative path (278). Hall's connection to both the geographical and emotional landscapes of the traditional novel, though frequently tinged with nostalgia, also reflects a distinct awareness of their present inadequacy and the imperative for their eventual obsolescence (Green 278-9).

As a consequence, Hall's approach to psychological discourses might not be as reactionary as some assume. While it is accurate that during a period when Woolf was promoting modernist theories about sexuality and identity, which often depict sexual orientations as psychologically rooted and behaviours as learned, Hall instead leaned towards the sexological tradition. This tradition views sexual orientation as innate, possibly hereditary, and influenced by physical rather than mental factors. This approach influenced the construction of Hall's protagonist, who becomes the symbol of the "mannish lesbian" (Green 279).

Hall's negotiation of a range of narrative and psychological frameworks is demonstrated in her literary portrayal of Stephen Gordon's identity using intertextual elements. In *The Well of Loneliness*, Hall presents a pattern of identity typical in both Victorian and modern

developmental novels. This pattern entails identities not simply being depicted but fundamentally shaped by literary narratives, as seen through the protagonists' intertextual associations "Hall's negotiation of a variety of narrative and psychological schemata available to her as an heir to Victorian and Edwardian discourse is most visible in her literary construction of Stephen Gordon's identity from intertextual materials – sexological, Biblical, literary, and epistolary text" (Green 280). Thus, identity is essentially a constructed notion, a projection of the self. Bildungsromane capture this illusory aspect of identity by making their main characters' identities part of a complicated network of fictional connections "Hall's vacillations among models for, and rhetorical representations of, the identity of the "invert" – has perhaps helped to make Stephen available as an object for identification to successive […] generations of readers and critics" (280). Characters' pursuits to grasp their own authenticity inevitably lead them deeper into a loop of narrative; predominantly, every portrayal or inscription of identity is found to rely on an association with another portrayal or inscription. *The Well*, which ends with its protagonist metaphorically giving birth to a novel that essentially mirrors the plot she has just experienced, illustrates this pattern (280).

If Woolf has created a new androgynous language and used an innovative type of narration for an equally innovative book, Hall sticks to tradition and decides to depict the sexuality of her protagonist as an innate characteristic, that follows the character in the construction of the Bildungsroman. These distinct narrative approaches profoundly influenced the reception of their respective works, prompting the authors to engage in mutual commentary on each other's literary creations.

2. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*

Orlando is the first book analysed in this thesis. Through her imaginative narrative and the journey of her protagonist, who lives for 350 years and undergoes a change in gender along the way, Woolf explores the evolving circumstances of the author and examines how gender influences their experience. *Orlando* employs a subversion of conventional gender norms and mocks societal expectations without direct confrontation. As a matter of fact, Woolf's whimsical and layered narrative evaded censorship by cloaking its radical themes in wit and historical parody, contrarily to Hall's text. Woolf's narration invites readers to unravel its playful ambiguity and critique of gender binaries. Through these distinct approaches, both novels challenge the era's gender and sexual norms but require different reading strategies to fully appreciate their subversive potential. The aim of this chapter is to provide the context in which the biography was written: the turmoil caused by Hall's trial, how the inspiration came to the author, and the role of Vita Sackville West. Successively, there is a focus on the text of *Orlando*, analysing Woolf's innovative use of pronouns for her androgynous character and the passages in the text relevant to the discourse of sexuality and gender identity.

Orlando was dedicated to Virginia Woolf's lover, Vita Sackville-West. Woolf described the novel as "an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books leading whose form is always so closely considered" intending it to be characterised by "satire and wildness" (Woolf, *Diary*, 112). She aimed for a tone that was "half laughing, half serious; with great splashes of exaggeration" (126). The story follows Orlando, the perpetual heir to Knole, Sackville-West's ancestral home. Initially a young nobleman and aspiring poet in the Elizabethan era, Orlando undergoes several centuries of literary, romantic, and heroic adventures, ultimately transforming into a successful female poet who is married. Her poem, *The Oak Tree*, which takes hundreds of years to complete, eventually wins a literary prize and garners critical acclaim. Thus, *Orlando* serves not only as a mock biography but also as a satirical

Künstlerroman, delving into the gender politics of poetics and artistic identity across different historical periods (Goldman 2006, 65).

Woolf unravels the tensions in biographical theory by contrasting questions of essential selfhood with their social construction. In *Orlando*, she not only mocks the assumed centrality of great "men" by portraying a man who becomes a woman, but also explores the complex relationship between social determinism and individual influence present in Victorian biographical theories. While Woolf was acutely aware of living in a "psycho-analytic age," she also seemed drawn to a more essentialist notion of identity, possibly influenced by her father's ideas. *Orlando* enabled her to navigate and depict the tension between these two conflicting beliefs (Burns 345).

In writing the biographical narrative, Woolf explores questions about her own sexuality and subjectivity, as well as those of women in general – how these aspects are shaped by context or predisposition. This exploration is deeply connected to her identification with the biography of Vita, whose name means "life" in Latin, signifying vitality and biography. This close relationship between the self and biography, which constructs identity through language, underscores how *Orlando*'s central question – "Who is Orlando?" – and Woolf's use of parodic biography are closely intertwined. Woolf's notions of the self are intricately connected to writing, and the essence of a word, much like the essence of a person, is wrapped in social conventions and filled with ambiguity (Burns 357).

In the middle of *Orlando*, the protagonist undergoes a sex change during a tour as Charles II's ambassador to Constantinople. The novel further subverts gender norms as Orlando, originally a man, occasionally masquerades as a woman, and vice versa. This mock biography also takes playful jabs at other Bloomsbury group biographers like Lytton Strachey and Vita Sackville-West's husband, Harold Nicolson. The novel is structured in six chapters

and features a preface, illustrations (including elaborately staged photographs), and an index, adding to its satirical tone (Goldman 2006, 65).

This chapter delves into a detailed analysis of the text of *Orlando*, highlighting the intricate creation of the character, who was inspired by Woolf's lover, Vita Sackville-West. It thoroughly examines the textual evidence within the novel, exploring how the biography of Orlando is shaped by and reflects contemporary currents of thought on religion, queerness, and sexual identity that Woolf was well-acquainted with. By situating *Orlando* within these intellectual frameworks, the chapter reveals how Woolf weaves personal and cultural influences into the narrative, offering a rich, multidimensional portrait of identity that challenges and transcends conventional boundaries. Due to this nuanced portrayal, Woolf, despite not fully conforming to the trends of queerness in 1928, emerges as more innovative than Radclyffe Hall's radical depiction of the mannish lesbian in *The Well of Loneliness*. Woolf's subtle and sophisticated exploration of gender fluidity and identity in *Orlando* offers a progressive and expansive view that transcends the more rigid and conventional representations of queerness of her time.

2.1. The Influence of Vita Sackville-West on Orlando's Identity

The protagonist of *Orland*o, inspired by Vita Sackville-West's life, represents some of the characteristics of homosexuality, bisexuality and hermaphroditism described by Freud, Ellis, Carpenter, Riviere and Weininger. The connection between Orlando and Vita is extremely relevant to the discourse of sexual orientation in 1928, especially after the banning of *The Well of Loneliness* few months prior the publication of *Orlando*. As it happens, Vita Sackville-West was part, similarly to Radclyffe Hall, and to Virginia Woolf's dislike, of the mid-twenties category defined by Helt as "the invert, the third sex, the intermediate type, the effeminate sodomite, the androgynous genius" (140). It is unlikely that Sackville-West saw herself in these terms, however, she embodied the theories of sexuality of her time, and despite Woolf's

disfavour of this category, it inspired the author in the creation of her protagonist. Therefore, this section addresses the features of the book that are pertinent to the discourse of sexuality and gender identity influenced by the real-life Orlando.

The book was dedicated to Vita Sackville-West, but not only, Orlando has transformed into Vita. The construction of similar character was lived by Vita as a new form of narcissism. Vita fell in love with Orlando, but Orlando was actually Vita herself, allowing Woolf's lover to consider another side of her character and loving it (Hussey 36). When Woolf started to give form to her work, she immediately decided that "Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman" (Woolf, *Diary*, 120). She stated that it should be "a biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing to the present day, called *Orlando*: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another" (123). On the 9th of October 1927, Woolf asks Sackville-West: "But listen; suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and its all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind. [...] Shall you mind? Say yes, or No" (Woolf, *The Letters 3*, 428-9). Naturally, Sackville-West accepted. In fact, Orlando has Norman heritage, similar to the Sackville family's ancestor Herbrand de Sackville, who arrived in England with William the Conqueror. Their family trees follow similar paths. In addition, Orlando's estate resembles Miss Sackville-West's account of Knole, the Sackville-West's residence (Baldanza 275-6). This background immediately situates *Orlando* in an ancient and noble context establishing a deep historical lineage that parallels Vita Sackville-West's own heritage. Through this ingenious blend of history, personal connection, and imaginative narrative, Woolf creates a work that is both a tribute to her lover and a sophisticated commentary on the fluidity of identity and the construction of self across time.

According to Smith, Woolf's writing occupies the realm of neither strictly fiction nor reality. Within these gaps, she weaves the narrative of a woman, exploring it from literal, metaphorical, biographical, and autobiographical angles. This focus on womanhood is not

solely due to Orlando's gender transformation or its association with Vita Sackville-West. Rather, it is due to the novel's fantastical elements intertwined with the inherent uncertainty and impossibility of defining the protagonist. The novel's central question on what Orlando is, reflects the broader challenge of representing womanhood and its complexities. The text's struggle with representation mirrors the difficulty of capturing womanhood itself. This doubling effect profoundly impacts the text: Woolf revitalises the biographical form, offering Sackville-West and herself the opportunity to see their own reflections within it. Ultimately, Woolf suggests that embracing this duality between sexes is necessary to fully understand and represent the self as a woman (Smith 58). It is through this ambiguity that Woolf's text manages to survive and remain relevant across generations. By presenting Orlando as an androgynous character who exists in the liminal space between male and female, Woolf allows the text to adapt to various interpretations, reflecting the evolving understanding of gender and selfhood and escaping censorship.

Woolf portrays Vita Sackville-West as a symbol of mature femininity and capability, contrasting her own perceived lack thereof. Woolf's identification with Sackville-West is crucial, especially considering that she writes Sackville-West's story in the book. The similarities between how Woolf describes Sackville-West in her diary and how she portrays Orlando in the novel are striking. There is a fluidity between the real Sackville-West and the representation of her in the character of Orlando. This creates a layered character who is simultaneously a representation of Sackville-West and an embodiment of Woolf's own inner world. This interchange blurs the lines between reality and representation, admiration of Orlando, and reflection on Sackville-West, creating a sense of doubleness and self-consciousness between the two characters in the narrative, connecting real life and narrative. Ultimately, Woolf's portrayal of Sackville-West serves as a reflection of her own desires and aspirations (Smith 57-8). This doubleness enriches the narrative by adding depth and

complexity, allowing Woolf to engage with themes of identity, gender, and the fluidity of self. Through *Orlando*, Woolf not only pays homage to Sackville-West but also reflects on her own life and ambitions, making the novel a profound exploration of both personal and universal human experiences.

Furthermore, the author believed that with her novel she could change the concept of literary genre: "it sprung upon me how I could revolutionise biography in a night" (Woolf, *The Letters 3*, 429). Woolf envisioned *Orlando* as a pioneering form of biography, a fusion of truth and artistic expression. This innovative approach allows the fictionalised portrayal of Vita to unveil essential truths about her character that a strictly factual biography might miss. Woolf expresses her intention to present her ideas in a clear and understandable manner, yet with a touch of playful irony. However, she emphasises the importance of maintaining a delicate balance between truth and fantasy. This balance ensures that readers are neither completely detached from historical realities nor overly burdened by them, "be maintained so as not to let the reader off the hooks of history and the real or to hang those she mentions too painfully upon them" (Smith 59).

Consequently, Smith claims that *Orlando* was conceived to be a new kind of the biographic genre, "a fusion of the substance of truth and the artistry of fiction" (59). Considering that, I argue that the genre of *Orlando* is defined a "third thing" because the gender of Orlando is reflected in it, being considered the "third way." By weaving elements of biography, fiction, and fantasy, Woolf creates a hybrid genre that mirrors the protagonist's androgynous nature. This "third thing" genre allows for a more nuanced exploration of identity, one that acknowledges the complexities and fluidities inherent in human experience. Just as Orlando navigates between male and female, the novel itself navigates between fact and fiction, creating a space where multiple truths coexist. In essence, the "third thing" genre of Orlando reflects the novel's exploration of gender as a spectrum rather than a binary, celebrating the

fluidity of identity and the power of storytelling to capture the complexities of the human condition. Through this masterful balance, Woolf offers a visionary perspective on both literary form and the nature of selfhood.

Woolf and Sackville-West lived their sexuality in opposite ways: Vita Sackville-West attributed her bisexuality to her dual-gendered or androgynous nature, basing her belief of "sexuality, gender deviance, and intellectual superiority" on Weininger's theory (Helt 138). Nonetheless, for early socialist feminists like Woolf, this theory posed a challenge as it reinforced the historical link between intellectual prowess and maleness. Consequently, it undermined the recognition of intellectual capabilities in women, portraying these capabilities as uncommon and deviating from gender norms (137-8). Woolf's belief on bisexuality and her differences with Sackville-West consequently influenced the portrayal of Orlando, presenting him as a dual-gendered figure.

According to Helt, in her works from the 1920s, Woolf explores the eroticism within the traditionally positive depictions of women's close friendships. These intimate relationships, which often are not defined by masculinity and do not exclude similar connections with men, are presented as more desirable than those viewed through the strictly binary sexual perspectives that emerged in response to Hall's novel (141). However, Woolf managed to avoid crossing the fictional line of her personal consideration on queerness and transvestitism in her work and her protagonist, which were more moderate compared to part of the participants of the Bloomsbury Group, who were using, like Vita Sackville-West, sexological theories to support their cause. Woolf was undoubtedly aware of these theories, yet she frequently critiqued them and maintained a deliberate distance from their rigid frameworks. The theories, which often sought to categorise and define human sexuality and gender within strict binaries, were at odds with Woolf's more fluid and nuanced understanding of identity. Rather than accepting

these scientific and medical models that tended to pathologize deviations from normative sexual and gender behaviours, Woolf's works often subvert and question their underlying assumptions.

Woolf was also fascinated by the notion that individuals are composed of multiple selves that take precedence at different times. In her diary, she declares that "yes, I'm 20 people" (Woolf, *Diary*, 44). Even so, she believed that in moments of profound ecstasy and unity, these selves could merge under the guidance of a single stable self. Indeed, in the conclusion of *Orlando*, Woolf implies that the protagonist is made up of 2,052 individuals. However, she highlights that the conscious self, which governs desires, aspires to be unified as a singular entity. The multiplicity of various selves within an individual stems from a sequence of life experiences, a concept Woolf views as intricate (Baldanza 274). Moreover, individuals like Vita are keenly aware of their involvement in broader historical and literary narratives. Baldanza declares that Sackville-West feels a sense of continuity of time in her life experiences: "in this case through her own illustrious forebears, in all of English history and literature, especially as this participation left its traces at Knole" (274). Woolf intricately weaves elements of Sackville-West's personal history into Orlando's story, creating a character who, like Vita, is deeply rooted in England's cultural heritage. Additionally, Orlando's encounters with historical figures and literary luminaries throughout the centuries further emphasise the novel's engagement with broader historical and literary contexts. This fusion allows Vita to see reflections of herself in Orlando's story, fostering a sense of continuity and connection between her own life and the broader historical and literary narratives explored in the novel.

For example, after venturing to London for shopping, Orlando finds herself overwhelmed by memories that disrupt her sense of self in the present moment. As she gets into her car, Orlando, feeling somewhat disconnected from the present, becomes susceptible to a loss of identity due to her inability to harmonise the different temporal rhythms within herself "the process of motoring fast out of London so much resembles the chopping up small of

identity which precedes unconsciousness and perhaps death itself that it is an open question in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment" (Woolf 212). According to Hussey, the passage implies that having a coherent identity requires a connection to the present moment, and spatial coordinates also play a role in shaping identity. Speeding away from London, these temporal and spatial coordinates become fragmented, leading to a fragmentation of identity akin to the state preceding unconsciousness or even death. Consequently, there arises a question about the existence of the person: if identity is fragmented, where does the person reside? (Hussey 36-7).

The answer, following Hussey's theory, is that identity and consciousness are interconnected but not identical. Consciousness can exist separately from a stable sense of identity. Orlando's temporary loss of identity, triggered by her thoughts and her earlier physical transformation, highlights how identity can be fluid and fragmented, especially when disconnected from the present moment and place. The relevance of these issues lies in the exploration of how identity is constructed and maintained. Woolf's portrayal of Orlando suggests that identity is not fixed but is instead a dynamic and sometimes fragile construct, influenced by time, place, and physical changes. This challenges traditional notions of a stable, unified self and opens up a discussion about the nature of existence and consciousness.

The writer does not fail to criticise the person who inspired Orlando as well. She unveils her flaws, most notably her perceived lack of genius in literature. The biography acknowledges several other imperfections she possesses, such as being "greedy," "luxurious," "vicious," "spoilt," and "clumsy" (Woolf 214). Smith states that for Woolf, *Orlando* serves as a way to cope with the loss of Sackville-West as a lover, allowing her to preserve a "fixed" version of Sackville-West, a woman who remains loyal and embodies an idealised version of Woolf herself. This idealised Sackville-West can write, have children, be sexual, be aristocratic, and engage in affairs – achieving things Woolf felt she could not accomplish. At the same time,

Woolf can critique Sackville-West's writing for lacking something essential, which allows her to project and critique her own fears about the inadequacy of her writing. In this manner, Woolf both idolises and evaluates herself through the figure of Sackville-West (67). On a larger, more public scale, Woolf establishes Sackville-West's image within the cultural consciousness, "turning the British cultural refusal ("loss") of overt homosexuality into a public gain" (67). Hence, the novel was for Woolf a way to cope with her relationship with Sackville-West, partly worshipping her and partly criticising her. At the same time, the novel achieves success through its humour, entertainment value, and widespread public interest.

After the first reading of *Orlando*, Sackville-West writes to Woolf:

> My darling,
>
> I am in no fit state to write to you – and as for cold and considered opinions, (as you said on the telephone) such things do not exist in such a connection. At least, not yet. Perhaps they will come later. For the moment, I can't say anything except that I am completely dazzled, bewitched, enchanted, under a spell. It seems to me the loveliest, wisest, richest book that I have ever read. […] Also, you have invented a new form of Narcissism, – I confess, – I am in love with Orlando – this is a complication I had not foreseen. (Woolf, *The Letters 3*, 574-5)

The way Woolf depicts Sackville-West, despite the flaws the writer included, is beneficial for Sackville-West's ego, but not only. As Sackville-West finds a more idealised reflection of herself in Orlando, Woolf similarly idealises Sackville-West, portraying her as a more steadfast and loyal partner rather than the carefree adventurer she was (Smith 65). With *Orlando*, Woolf was able to narrate a story with the presence of homosexual behaviours that were accepted by society, contrarily to *The Well*. Simultaneously, she writes a bittersweet tribute to her lover, what Sackville-West's son, Nigel Nicolson, described as "the longest and most charming love letter in literature."

2.2. An Analysis of *Orlando: A Biography*: Pronouns

Having considered the concepts of queerness, sexuality, gender identity, religion, and narration, popular during the beginning of the 20th century, this section analyses the elements in the text of *Orlando: A Biography* and how they are represented. The analysis of *Orlando*'s text serves to highlight and give evidence of Woolf's impact on her time, but also to better understand her beliefs and how, compared to Radclyffe Hall, she survived censorship in dealing with queer literature. In addition, Woolf's uses of pronouns to refer to her protagonist reflect the fluidity of the protagonist's gender identity. This deliberate pronoun shift underscores the novel's exploration of gender as a spectrum rather than a binary, which this section highlights.

First of all, the focal point of the book is examined: the sex change. Orlando falls asleep and wakes up as a woman, which surprises and upsets her at first. The biographer enthusiastically describes Orlando's beautiful androgynous face. However, the biographer selectively focuses on specific parts of the body, deliberately avoiding any mention of genitalia. This omission is particularly noticeable immediately after Orlando's transformation into a woman: "the sound of the trumpets died away and Orlando stood stark naked. No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace" (Woolf 98).

Right after, the biographer states that "Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (98). With this statement, Woolf is stressing that Orlando remains man and woman at the same time. She realises that even though she has changed gender, she is still the same person inside (Kaivola 235). The language Woolf uses in this passage is an alternation of "they" and "he", until the biographer points out that "his memory – but in future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her' for 'his,' and 'she' for 'he' – her memory then" (98). The changing use of pronouns alternates

even in the same line: the narrator first highlights "Orlando looked himself up and down" and goes to "his bath", but right after the words "their faces" and "their portraits" are used (98). The retained oscillation of pronouns in *Orlando* underscores the fluidity and complexity of gender identity, emphasising that it is not a fixed or binary concept.

Woolf's deliberate use of alternating pronouns highlights the coexistence of both masculine and feminine aspects within Orlando, suggesting that gender is multifaceted and can encompass multiple identities simultaneously. This linguistic choice reinforces the idea that while Orlando's outward gender changes, their core identity remains intact. In terms of my argument, this oscillation reflects Woolf's broader exploration of the difficulty of representation, particularly in capturing the essence of a person's identity. By refusing to settle on a single pronoun, Woolf mirrors the text's overall theme of the instability and fluidity of identity, both in terms of gender and personal essence. This narrative technique not only questions the adequacy of language in representing the "thing itself" but also emphasises the performative nature of gender, illustrating that identity is a dynamic and evolving construct rather than a static one. Thus, the oscillation of pronouns in *Orlando* is a crucial device that supports Woolf's critique of traditional gender norms and her exploration of the complexities of self-representation.

In the opening sentence of the biography, the subject, referred to as "he," is initially presented in a manner that suggests clarity and authority. However, this presentation is immediately disrupted by parenthetical remarks about the subject's sex, creating an unexpected interruption in the narrative flow. Rather than clarifying the subject's identity, these remarks raise doubts and problematise the portrayal of the subject's reality through sexual identity. Despite the initial labelling of the subject as "he," the introduction of doubt challenges the stability of his identity and undermines the biographer's authority. By doing so, Woolf destabilises traditional perceptions of gender identity. By the end of the sentence, "he" emerges

as a hybrid construction, existing within the intersection of multiple linguistic and conceptual frameworks, thereby complicating our understanding of his identity (Benzel 173). By interjecting the narrative with parenthetical comments on the subject's sex, Woolf challenges the reader's preconceived notions and highlights the fluidity and complexity of gender. This technique forces readers to question rigid gender binaries and consider a broader, more ambiguous spectrum of identity.

According to Kaivola, writing prior to the alignment of gender with culture and sex with physiology, Woolf depicts a blending that blurs distinctions among sex, gender, and sexuality. "For Woolf, "sex" refers both to the body and to what late twentieth-century readers would consider "gender"" (235). This indicates that according to the scholar, Woolf did not strictly separate the biological aspects of being male or female from the social and cultural roles associated with being masculine or feminine. Nevertheless, the blur Woolf depicts in Orlando is identified by this thesis as androgyny. In fact, in the protagonist, the fluctuation of sex suggests not only a spontaneous shift in biological sex and a variation in gender identity but also, perhaps more subtly and ambiguously, a change in sexual desires or preferences. Orlando's identity, being androgynous, is not static but rather dynamic and ever-changing. Right after the transformation she declares "she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman" (Woolf 113). Rather than presenting a seamless integration of opposites, Orlando's gender and desires exhibit a more chaotic, fluid intermingling akin to hermaphroditic qualities (Kaivola 235). As a consequence, the ambiguity, together with the magical background of the novel, introduce a moderate change in the context of sexuality and gender identity in the mid-twenties, resulting more tolerable for the conservative readers and therefore avoiding censorship.

After the sex change, Orlando hides with the gypsies to escape an insurrection in Turkey. Several months later, she discards the androgynous Turkish pants she had worn during her

escape and begins to wear traditional English women's clothing. This marks the moment she must confront her new sex. Up until now, "she had scarcely given her sex a thought," but when she starts buying and wearing "such clothes as women then wore," she suddenly finds herself vulnerable and subject to chivalrous condescension. It is not until she feels the skirts around her legs and the Captain politely offers to have an awning spread for her on deck that she realises, with a start, the penalties and privileges of her new position (Woolf 108). Orlando has to give up using foul language, realises she can no longer swim or stride with ease, and feels the anxiety of managing the Captain's fragile ego. Hence, she is now affected by social constructs of her time. Woolf suggests in this way that one's sense of self is not only influenced by internal factors but also by external forces, such as cultural norms and societal expectations. By depicting Orlando's experiences navigating these societal constructs, Woolf invites readers to contemplate the ways in which gender identity is both personally constructed and socially imposed.

While Orlando's body changes with the sex change, her gender transformation only begins when clothing – those external social trappings – forces her to conform to societal expectations of gendered behaviour:

> So she stood mournfully at the drawing-room window (Bartholomew had so christened the library) dragged down by the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted. It was heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements. No longer could she stride through the garden with her dogs, or run lightly to the high mound and fling herself beneath the oak tree. Her skirts collected damp leaves and straw. The plumed hat tossed on the breeze. The thin shoes were quickly soaked and mud-caked. Her muscles had lost their pliancy. She became nervous lest there should be robbers behind the wainscot and afraid, for the first time in her life, of ghosts in the corridors. (Woolf 168)

This passage poignantly captures Orlando’s struggle to reconcile her inner sense of self with the external expectations and limitations imposed by societal norms. The expectations function like an external force that infiltrates her identity, with clothing drawing in and activating these norms (Burns 351). It is as though Orlando might have remained a man if she continued to dress as one. Consequently, Orlando becomes convinced that “often only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness” (Woolf 133).

The difficulty in perceiving Orlando as a man or a woman, due to her being both, is also reflected in the characters welcoming her after returning home as well. They refer to her as “Milord! Milady! Milady! Milord!” (Woolf 120), without, however, failing to recognise her after the transformation: “No one showed an instant’s suspicion that Orlando was not the Orlando they had known” (120). In terms of the argument, the scenes illustrate Woolf’s critique of rigid gender binaries and her exploration of androgyny. By showing that Orlando is recognised and accepted without question regardless of presenting as male or female, Woolf highlights the possibility of a “third way”. This suggests a vision of identity that transcends conventional gender distinctions, promoting a more fluid and inclusive understanding of human nature. Back to her life, Orlando keeps writing the poem she initiated as a young man throughout the narrative, completing it as a contemporary woman. She expresses a welcoming attitude towards desire and feels hope for its manifestation in varied and more unconventional forms (Caughie 2013, 514). This perception reinforces the idea that Orlando’s essence or identity remains constant regardless of outward gender appearance. It implies that the core of a person is not defined by their gender but by their intrinsic self, which remains unchanged despite external transformations.

The transformation seems to slowly influence the protagonist’s sexuality, manifesting a more nuanced preference after the change of sex. Nonetheless, already at the beginning of the book, Orlando shows sexual attraction towards both women and men. Indeed, right after the

first time he meets Sasha, his great love, she is described as "a figure, which, whether boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity" (Woolf 26). Conforming to Burns, in Woolf's novel, characters discover their sexual identities through love rather than predetermined notions. Before the 20th century, following traditional gender roles was crucial in relationships. As the narrative progresses into modern times, Woolf critiques the rigidity of gender norms and subtly embraces homosexual love (Burns 352). As a matter of fact, after the change Orlando is still attracted by women: "And as all Orlando's loves had been women, now, through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved" (Woolf 115).

Subsequently, Orlando transitions and starts to feel sexual attraction towards both men and women, and her androgyny is allowed by her crossdressing as well: "for the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally" (153). While Orlando can engage in the evolving reconstructions and expressions of her gender through her attire, clothing can also occasionally dictate her behaviour in conflicting ways (Burns 353). With the advent of the Victorian age, Orlando faces a crisis, rejecting marriage since she believed to value love more than the obligations of matrimony "but the spirit of the nineteenth century was antipathetic to her in the extreme, and thus it took her and broke her, and she was aware of her defeat at its hands as she had never been before" (Woolf 168). Ultimately, the influence of bodily mimesis and the constraints of Victorian societal norms drive Orlando to fall in love with and marry a man, albeit one whose gender is similarly ambiguous to Orlando's (Caughie 2013, 514).

Orlando's last love story is therefore the epitome of a Victorian relationship. Before meeting her partner, Orlando reflects on her condition: "all these things inclined her, step by step, to submit to the new discovery, whether Queen Victoria's or another's, that each man and

each woman has another allotted to it for life, whom it supports, by whom it is supported, till death them do part" (Woolf 168). In a final attempt to resist social transformation, Orlando rushes onto the heath, but trips and breaks her ankle. In a parody of classic novels ending in marriage, a young man, Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, comes to her rescue. Despite her initial declaration of being dead, Orlando is quickly revived and becomes engaged to Shelmerdine "'Madam,' the man cried, leaping to the ground, 'you're hurt!' 'I'm dead, sir!' she replied. A few minutes later, they became engaged" (Woolf 174). This sudden capitulation to Victorian ideals is portrayed as extreme and tinged with a sense of horror, marking a shocking moment from a feminist perspective. However, Orlando's conformity is not absolute, and her capitulation is not complete, suggesting a more complex narrative arc (Burns 354). Once again, Woolf reveals to be a non-excessive revolutionary, but at the same time she ridicules Victorian societal values.

Orlando's marriage is consequently unconventional. In fact, the androgyny of the character is reflected in the relationship and acknowledged by the two. Orlando exclaims, "You're a woman, Shel!" while Shelmerdine responds, "You're a man, Orlando!" (Woolf 174-5). After a scene of protest and discussion, they ultimately return to conforming to traditional gender roles. In addition, Orlando realises that her love story has oddly given her freedom, "She was married, true; but if one's husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts" (182). This relationship takes its cue from Vita's open marriage and her freedom in living her own love stories, which was extremely unconventional at the beginning of the 20th century.

As a result, Orlando's romance is in sharp contrast with the idea of traditional Victorian marriage and, as is evident throughout most of *Orlando*, it is not biological sex that is pivotal

in relationships, but rather gender identity. The text's exploration of androgyny and the unconventional marriage between Orlando and Shelmerdine subverts traditional Victorian notions of gender and relationships. However, whether this criticism directly contributed to Woolf escaping censorship is more complex and multifaceted. As a matter of fact, Woolf's critique is embedded within a fantastical and historical narrative, often wrapped in layers of irony and wit. This stylistic approach may have masked the more subversive elements from censors.

2.3. Sexual/Textual Indeterminacy

Caughie asserts that "sexual and textual indeterminacy links language and identity" (1989, 42). In fact, together with the androgynity of Orlando reflected in the language, especially in the pronouns, the novel is rich with qualifications, paradoxes, and contradictions, highlighting its complexity and fluidity. For instance, statements like "change was incessant, and change perhaps would never cease" (Woolf 124) suggest that nothing is absolute, emphasising the continuous and uncertain nature of change. Paradoxes such as "we leave a great blank here, which must be taken to indicate that the space is filled to repletion" (176) reveal deeper truths, illustrating how even the briefest moments are packed with content. The concept of the androgyne embodies contradictions by blending male and female characteristics, challenging traditional gender binaries and encouraging readers to reconsider rigid distinctions. Together, these elements underscore the novel's themes of fluid identity and the interconnectedness of experience.

Orlando's exploration of sexual identity is paralleled by the narrator's intrusive commentary on the nature of storytelling itself. The narrator interrupts the narrative to discuss his own writing style, mock his own techniques, and even characterise the readers. Throughout the novel, Orlando is closely associated with the act of writing: compared to being read like a book, recognising herself as a work in progress, and engaging in poetic creation across centuries

while questioning the very concept of literary epochs (Caughie 1989, 42). In turn, Orlando is a narrative voice, even when the inspiration abandons her "her words formed themselves, her hands clasped themselves, involuntarily, just as her pen handwritten of its own accord" (Woolf 169).

Furthermore, in *Orlando*, the dynamic between writer and reader mirrors the characterisation of the protagonist. Both the biographer and readers struggle to define and understand Orlando "the biographer must not stop either, but must fly as fast as he can and so keep pace with the unthinking passionate foolish actions and sudden extravagant words in which, it is impossible to deny, Orlando at this time of his life indulged" (Woolf 32). Benzel claims that "the writer, the narrator-biographer, and reader must work to overcome the constraints of narrative conventions in order to construct a "real self," a self that creates a reality in and of the text" (169). This collaborative process challenges narrative conventions and aims to construct the character within the narrative. Through this relationship, a Woolfian aesthetic emerges, characterised by collaboration, contextuality, and compelling storytelling. In essence, like Orlando's manuscript *The Oak Tree*, the text itself yearns to be read and understood "it wanted to be read. It must be read. It would die in her bosom if it were not read" (Woolf 190), embodying the essence of Woolf's literary vision, "an aesthetic that is collaborative, contextual, and compelling" (Benzel 169).

The portrayal of the biographer's task as a journey toward meaning is delivered with a tone that undercuts its seriousness "up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; […] and write finis on the tombstone above our heads" (Woolf 47). The rhythm of the description evokes a sombre procession, similar to a funeral march, as the biographer methodically advances toward their subject's ultimate destination – be it a literal grave or the

conclusion of the biography itself. This march, while seemingly conclusive, carries an ironic ambiguity, hinting at both the subject's physical demise and the figurative death of their story within the biography's conclusion. Similarly, the biographer's assertion that objectivity requires a dead approach to the subject is subtly mocked by the comparison to a funeral march. The portrayal of biography as a solemn procession towards an inevitable end parodies the notion of truth-seeking objectivity, casting it in a light that suggests a rigid and formulaic approach to storytelling (Benzel 175). The passage critiques the traditional approach to biography, emphasising how Virginia Woolf uses irony to subvert the seriousness typically associated with the biographer's task. This irony is essential to understanding Woolf's broader critique of biographical conventions, and to understand her revolution in biography. Woolf, according to Benzel, shows that biography, when treated as a rigid march towards an ultimate truth, loses its capacity to capture the subject's full complexity. Instead, it becomes a mechanical exercise that overlooks the living, breathing essence of the individual.

The concept is addressed by the biographer in the following passage:

> For though these are not matters on which a biographer can profitably enlarge it is plain enough to those who have done a reader's part in making up from bare hints dropped here and there the whole boundary and circumference of a living person; can hear in what we only whisper a living voice; can see, often when we say nothing about it, exactly what he looked like; know without a word to guide them precisely what he thought — and it is for readers such as these that we write. (Woolf 52)

Following the narrating voice's suggestion, the public is therefore invited to use imagination and, in a way, play *Orlando*'s game. Due to the unreal aspects of the novel the reader is aware of the fictional nature of the story; however, they are invited to follow it as if it was real. The addressing of the biographer to the public, to encourage people to comply the fictitious aspects

of the book, is another narrative technique that helped Woolf escaping the banning of her book but allowed her to deal with the theme of homosexuality in *Orlando*.

As specified by Caughie, in its rhetorical transports, Woolf's novel contests the reference theory of meaning, specifically challenging the idea that words and categories possess inherent essences, and that words and statements can be interpreted in isolation from their contextual use. By highlighting marginal cases, such as the experiences of androgynous individuals, the novel aims to uncover the pivotal decisions involved in applying a term or assuming a gender identity. This theme is most evident in the well-known passage on clothing philosophy in Chapter 4 of *Orlando*, often cited as Woolf's theory of androgyny (1991, 79).

The biographer expresses his problems and doubts: "the biographer is now faced with a difficulty which is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over" and "our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may" (Woolf 47). In fact, the narrating voice is frequently faced with the difficulty of treating themes of transvestism, crossdressing, and sexuality. English underlines that at times, they assert that clothing profoundly shapes both our perception of the world and the world's perception of us, suggesting that attire influences our minds "it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking" (Woolf 132). Yet, at other moments, the biographer dismisses this notion as merely the perspective of certain philosophers "the difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath" (Woolf 132). It is argued instead that clothing merely symbolises deeper realities hidden beneath the surface, such as inherently predetermined gender identities (English 121).

Agreeing with English's perspective on clothing as a symbol of deeper realities, it is essential to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of gender identity. While attire undoubtedly influences our perception of ourselves and how others perceive us, it serves as a tangible

expression of underlying gender constructs and societal expectations. Clothing, in this context, acts as a conduit through which individuals navigate and communicate their sense of self, reflecting not only personal choices but also cultural and historical contexts. However, beneath the surface of clothing lies a complex interplay of social norms, personal experiences, and intrinsic identities that shape the individual's understanding of gender. Thus, while clothing may signify certain gendered expressions, it also reflects broader societal constructions of gender that extend beyond mere outward appearances. In essence, clothing serves as a visual manifestation of the intricate interplay between individual agency and societal expectations, highlighting the profound depth of gender identity as a multifaceted and nuanced phenomenon.

Finally, the biographer suggests a further option on the discourse of identity and the influence clothes have on it.

> Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. Of the complications and confusions which thus result everyone has had experience; but here we leave the general question and note only the odd effect it had in the particular case of Orlando herself. (Woolf 132-3)

The biographer now hints that either individuals possess the transformative ability to alter their biological sex, or more plausibly, that our inherent selves retain the liberty to fluctuate between these two gendered states as desired, akin to Orlando's experience. It is implied that the clothes people wear may not necessarily align with the innate selves at any given moment, but this discrepancy does not fundamentally define us, despite Orlando's experiences as a Victorian woman suggesting otherwise (English 121). In considering these diversified theories, it is possible to recognise the reflection of a changing society, overrun by different philosophies, but

also Woolf's avant-guard spirit, demonstrating her knowledge on sexuality and gender speculations of her time.

First, Orlando's biographer declares the intention to leave discussions of sex and sexuality to other writers, which leads the reader to believe they are referring to experts in the field, such as biologists and psychologists. However, the text is frustratingly abundant with a variety of contradictory ideological stances. Woolf declared in a letter she disliked "the correct thing in clothes" (*Collected Essays*, 199), yet Orlando rarely deviates from attire considered appropriate "there are no vested interests patrolling that borderline in Woolf's fantasy" (Garber 134). The presence of contradictory ideological stances within the text reflects the complexity of gender identity and the multiplicity of perspectives on the subject. Orlando's choice of clothing aligns with the gender they wish to embody, typically presenting as distinctly male or female, leaving little room for ambiguity (English 121-2). In highlighting this aspect, Woolf reaffirms her stance, setting her apart from more radical figures in the queer field, like Radclyffe Hall. Contrarily to her contemporaries, Woolf explores androgyny through Orlando's transformation from male to female, and the character embodies both male and female characteristics throughout the narrative, therefore she uses clothing to align with conventional gender norms rather than to challenge them outright. However, while her philosophy may not be among the most progressive within the group of homosexual literature writers of the late twenties, her feminist theories, together with her prose and narrative style, make up for it.

The biographer also elucidates the discord between the literal and the literary, exemplified through the teenage writer's struggle to capture the essence of nature in words. Describing Orlando's attempt to depict a shade of green, the biographer highlights the act "he was describing, as all young poets are for ever describing, nature, and in order to match the shade of green precisely he looked (and here he showed more audacity than most) at the thing itself, which happened to be a laurel bush growing beneath the window. After that, of course,

he could write no more" (Woolf 13). However, this encounter proves to be an obstacle rather than advantage, as Orlando finds himself unable to continue writing. This anecdote underscores the inherent conflict between nature and language, with the biographer suggesting a natural antipathy between the two (Meese 100). Indeed, Orlando, in writing *The Oak Tree*, becomes a narrating voice themself, but an antagonist to the biographer of their story.

Through the lens of Orlando's transformative journey, Woolf explores the fluidity and complexity of gender, inviting readers to reconsider rigid distinctions and embrace the multifaceted nature of identity. The novel's interplay of contradictory ideological stances, symbolic representations, and narrative techniques reflects Woolf's avant-garde spirit and her deep understanding of the societal and philosophical debates of her time. From the portrayal of clothing as a symbol of deeper realities to the exploration of the dynamic between writer and reader, Woolf crafts a narrative that transcends traditional boundaries and encourages a collaborative engagement with the text. Ultimately, *Orlando* emerges as a testament to Woolf's revolutionary approach to literature, challenging readers to confront and question established norms while celebrating the complexities of human experience and expression.

2.4. Other elements

My focus is on how Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* uses elements connected with religion, gender, and historical context to explore the instability of identity. Moving from the introduction of Orlando's gender and actions to broader themes of religious and scientific upheaval, the text examines the interplay between personal and societal transformations. The second sentence of the first chapter, after declaring that there was no doubt on Orlando's sex, is that he "was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters" (Woolf 11). Rather than emphasising his religion, the narrator hints at his gender being unmistakable. In a society where fixed identities matter, Orlando can easily fit into the expected role of a male Christian, given his family background (Lackey 347-8). The historical setting of Orlando constitutes evidence

to the challenge to the concept of God, which occurred during King James's reign. Galileo's discovery that the earth is not the centre of the universe shook up traditional beliefs, leading to uncertainty about humanity's place in the cosmos. To maintain control, the church asserted its authority more forcefully to prevent societal upheaval stemming from the realisation of an indifferent universe (Lackey 348).

The process of Orlando's belief is intrinsic with the transformation of his identity; however, it is present only on the edge of the plot, and it is not one of the main elements as in *The Well*. While Orlando's transformation challenges gender norms, it does not directly confront religious doctrines, instead highlighting how these broader societal shifts impact individual identity. Woolf sets herself apart from more radical contemporaries by focusing on the fluidity of gender through personal transformation rather than direct confrontation with religious or societal norms. This approach allows her to explore complex themes of identity, gender, and belief without overtly challenging the dominant structures of her time. Thus, Orlando's journey reflects the nuanced interplay between personal identity and societal expectations, set against a backdrop of historical and religious change.

It is not a coincidence if Orlando encounters Sasha during King James's reign, a period marked by philosophical contemplation about the blurred boundaries between opposites. In a conversation with Sasha, Orlando reflects on the thin line separating apparent contradictions "For the philosopher is right who says that nothing thicker than a knife's blade separates happiness from melancholy" (Woolf 31). Without a clear basis for making categorical distinctions, philosophers advocate seeking refuge in the Church as the only safe haven amidst the uncertainty of a world where distinctions blur. The narrator describes Orlando's mindset during this age of belief, characterised by tumultuous oscillations between life and death, with no middle ground "'All ends in death,' Orlando would say, sitting upright, his face clouded with gloom" (32).

As the narrative unfolds, and ominous clouds swiftly gather behind the dome of St. Paul's "as the strokes sounded, the cloud increased, and she saw it darken and spread with extraordinary speed" (Woolf 156), signalling the transition from an age of belief to one of doubt, a significant transformation occurs within Orlando. The singular core self dissipates, giving way to a multitude of selves, eventually leading to a confusion of genders. While scholars acknowledge the radical implications of Woolf's dismantling of the subject in *Orlando*, they have yet to elucidate the connection between the death of God and the emergence of Orlando's diverse identities (Lackey 348).

At the beginning of the novel, Orlando's identity is depicted as singular and stable, defined by his male gender and Christian faith. However, as the story progresses and Orlando undergoes an ambiguous sex change and distances himself from the church, the narrative shifts towards the idea of multiple selves rather than a singular identity. This transformation reflects a departure from the initial portrayal of Orlando as a single, defined individual, towards a more complex and multifaceted understanding of identity "for everybody can multiply from his own experience the different terms which his different selves have made with him" (Woolf 213). In an era where the concept of God no longer serves as a stabilising force or a foundation for fixed identities and clear-cut distinctions, debates about the nature of reality become obsolete (Lackey 349). Woolf seems to take issue with the rigid and singular notions of identity that were traditionally upheld by religion and societal norms. By portraying Orlando's transformation and the fluidity of identity, she challenges the idea that one's self must be fixed and unchanging. Instead, Woolf embraces the multiplicity and complexity of identity, suggesting that individuals contain many selves that can evolve over time.

The novel, which initially establishes binary oppositions like male/female and Pagan/Christian, concludes by proposing a more fluid understanding of reality. It suggests that everything contains elements of something else, gaining a dynamic quality from this blending

of identities "everything was partly something else, as if her mind had become a forest with glades branching here and there" (Woolf 224). Following the logic of the story, which implies that the church reinforces and validates these conceptual distinctions, then the only way to embrace such fluidity is to remove the institutions that anchor differences, such as God and the church. In other words, Woolf implies that the death of God is necessary to develop a mode of thinking that transcends binary oppositions (Lackey 349). This nuanced approach to identity and gender might explain why Woolf had success and was not censored. Unlike more radical contemporaries, Woolf's exploration of these themes is subtle and layered, avoiding direct confrontation with religious or societal institutions. By embedding her critique within a fantastical and historical narrative, Woolf navigates controversial topics in a manner that is intellectually provocative yet less likely to provoke outright censorship. Her success can be attributed to her ability to engage with complex ideas in a way that invites reflection rather than outright rebellion, appealing to a broader audience and avoiding the ire of censors who might have targeted more overtly radical works.

Thanks to the textual analysis, it is therefore possible to state that in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, the interplay between nature and language, religion, and the evolution of identity culminates in a profound exploration of fluidity and multiplicity. Through Orlando's journey, Woolf navigates the dissolution of fixed categories and the emergence of a more nuanced understanding of existence. As the narrative progresses, Orlando's transformation from a singular, stable identity to a multifaceted, gender-fluid being mirrors broader cultural shifts away from rigid binaries towards a more fluid conception of selfhood. It is the uniqueness of the book and its story that allowed Woolf to survive a possible ban and spread her innovative ideas.

3. Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*

The Well of Loneliness is the second novel analysed in this research. This chapter focuses on how the author addresses themes of sexuality and gender identity. The analysis reveals that Radclyffe Hall's direct and realistic portrayal of a lesbian relationship in *The Well* starkly contrasted with the more ambiguous and fluid depiction of gender in Woolf's *Orlando*. The book marked Radclyffe Hall's fourth novel, published in 1928 when she was in her late forties. Notably, it stands as her sole work centring on lesbianism. The combination of a Bildungsroman, which is connected to the traditional literature of the Victorian era, and a lesbian relationship, did not work in favour of the author, leading to the banning of her book. This chapter outlines the thematic differences between these two seminal works of queer literature, examining why *The Well of Loneliness* faced suppression while *Orlando* was celebrated. Through this comparison, the chapter aims to highlight how the authors' differing approaches to gender and sexuality influenced the novels' reception and legacy.

The research analyses the relationship between Hall's direct approach to gender identity and social protest in *The Well of Loneliness* and Woolf's more subversive and playful exploration of gender identity in *Orlando*. Readings of Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, that claim that the novel is innovative, even radical, are questioned by this thesis. Indeed, this chapter argues that *The Well of Loneliness* ultimately relies on the same restrictive definitions of gender and sexuality it aimed to challenge. In addition, it focuses on the religious connotation the author's gave to the text, which this thesis believes is one of the main reasons why the text was later banned.

At the heart of Radclyffe Hall's decision to address the theme of lesbianism in her novel was a profound recognition of the potential risks involved. In *The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall* (1961), Lady Una Troubridge, Radclyffe Hall's partner, recounts that the decision to address the theme of lesbianism had been contemplated for some time by the author. Radclyffe

Hall sought consultation on the matter, recognising that despite her established literary reputation, a book advocating for tolerance towards homosexuality carried the potential for public condemnation "and that although the publication of such a book might mean the shipwreck of her whole career, she was fully prepared to make any sacrifice except – the sacrifice of my peace of mind" (82). The reply given by Troubridge motivates Hall's writing: "I told her to write what was in her heart, that so far as any effect upon myself was concerned, I was sick to death of ambiguities, and only wished to be known for what I was and to dwell with her in the palace of truth" (82). Hall was therefore aware of the risks she was taking. As a matter of fact, despite the potential for public condemnation and the threat of jeopardising her literary career, Hall remained resolute in her commitment to authenticity and truth. This internal struggle between the desire for self-expression and the fear of societal backlash highlights the profound personal and professional stakes involved. Hall's willingness to navigate these risks speaks to her unwavering dedication to portraying the realities of lesbian existence and advocating for tolerance and understanding, even in the face of obstacles.

Considering Hall's thoughts before starting to write her book, it is possible to state that it was created to open the eyes of the heterosexual public, but the question is if she managed to. In this context, it is crucial to consider the portrayal of the author of lesbianism and lesbian identity. Hall drew upon the studies of sexologists, notably those conducted by Havelock Ellis, to construct a fictional depiction of the pathology of lesbianism (O'Rourke 2-3). A significant aspect of the novel's intrigue lies in how long Stephen remains unaware of her sexual preference. The theme of naming is influential in the narrative, particularly concerning the harm inflicted upon Stephen due to her inability to acknowledge herself or her identity. This loss of certainty and trust is further compounded by the reluctance of others, notably her father and Puddle, to confront the truth. As a protagonist, however, there exists a tension surrounding Stephen's identity, similarly to Orlando's (4). Her primary struggle revolves around her

womanhood, a conflict the novel juxtaposes against her lesbianism, following the beliefs of her time.

The connection between Stephen and Orlando lies in their fluid – but different – identities and the societal pressures they face. In both narratives, the protagonists grapple with understanding and naming their identities within a rigid social framework that does not easily accommodate their experiences. Stephen's struggle with her womanhood is particularly poignant as it is intricately tied to her lesbianism, reflecting the societal norms and prejudices of her era. While Orlando's transformation is more fantastical and spans centuries, Stephen's journey is rooted in the realistic depiction of the constraints and challenges faced by lesbians in early 20th-century society. The reluctance of those around Stephen to acknowledge her true self exacerbates her internal conflict, mirroring the broader societal reluctance to accept non-normative identities. This exploration of identity and the struggle for self-recognition and acceptance is central to both characters' narratives.

Hall's lesbianism influenced her advocacy for public tolerance, yet *The Well* should not be seen as autobiographical. The most notable deviation from reality is that Hall found recognition and fulfilment in her sexuality through multiple female partners, a far cry from the tormented self-denial depicted in Stephen Gordon's character, which starkly contrasts with Hall's own experiences: "Radclyffe Hall's life offers a much more positive and optimistic account of lesbian existence than does her fiction. This was, I suspect, deliberate" (O'Rourke 2). The fact that the book was subjected to obscenity laws serves as a compelling testament to the necessity of the tolerance and understanding it champions. Hall's bravery as a persecuted author is equated with that of Stephen Gordon's character, both standing defiantly against a hostile and incomprehensible world. Rule, in fact, declares that the book was a way "to justify Radclyffe Hall's own life" (51). However, it must be acknowledged that Hall's reality differed from Gordon's isolation depicted in the novel; she had support from both a partner and the

public (Rule 52). Therefore, if Vita Sackville-West's life was inspirational for *Orlando*'s writing, Radclyffe Hall uses part of her own experience to create her main character. This parallel emphasises how both authors use their personal lives to explore themes of identity and societal constraints. At the same time, it also shows how two figures extremely similar to each other result in two very different characters, representing sexuality in different ways. Sackville-West and Hall, indeed, have many characteristics in common, and present similar stances towards the trend of crossdressing and inversion spreading during the mid-twenties. Nevertheless, if the two of them are so similar, and if the characters of Stephen and Orlando were based on them, it is necessary to inquire on the elements that led to their differences in the texts and the consequent prohibition of *The Well* to the public.

First of all, Stephen Gordon was born into privilege, but she experienced loneliness as a child. From an early age, her father, Sir Philip, assumed the role typically held by the mother. The child was encouraged to participate in activities traditionally associated with boys, such as riding. Stephen grows up and the disconnection from femininity becomes increasingly noticeable, causing her significant distress. This is exacerbated by the conflict it creates between her parents. Stephen Gordon embodies the epitome of a hero: noble, accomplished, wealthy, self-sacrificing, and honourable. Yet, she possesses a single flaw – her gender. In societal norms, women are not regarded as heroes. The primary requirement to be a heroine is to be a woman, a straightforward condition that proves complex for Stephen Gordon (1-2). Nonetheless, Hall's heroine needs to have a masculine nature in order to fulfil her role in society, following the author's plot, she cannot be a shining example and feminine at the same time.

From the beginning, Stephen is portrayed as a doomed and tragic character. The tragedy of her lesbianism is epitomised by the loss of Morton, the ancestral home. Morton serves as the benchmark against which all her experiences are measured: it is what she is willing to sacrifice for Angela, the cause of profound anguish when she cannot share it with Mary, and the location

from which she is exiled during the pivotal confrontation with Lady Anna. Stephen's connection to Morton extends beyond everything and is similar to Vita's – and therefore Orlando's – connection with Knole. Nevertheless, what Morton symbolises for Stephen goes beyond, because it has shaped her identity; it is ingrained in her being. The social isolation and estrangement resulting from her commitment to authenticity are manifested through a loss of belonging (4-5). The issue of class and aristocracy, particularly the theme of a declining aristocracy, is evident in Stephen's story. Her sense of identity and self-worth is closely tied to Morton, reflecting the significance of heritage and social status in her life. The loss of Morton symbolises a broader decline in her social standing and a severance from her roots and traditional values. This decline is intricately linked to her lesbianism, which exacerbates her sense of alienation and loss. Both *Orlando* and *The Well* explore the themes of aristocratic decline and the significance of ancestral homes. While Orlando's story reflects a broader societal transformation over centuries, with the home symbolising continuity and adaptability, Stephen's narrative focuses more on the immediate and personal consequences of losing her aristocratic heritage due to societal prejudice. Thus, while both novels address the decline of the aristocracy, they do so in different ways, reflecting the struggles and experiences of their protagonists.

3.1. Stephen's Gender Variance

In *The Well of Loneliness*, similarly to *Orlando*, clothing plays a critical role in signifying and interpreting Stephen's identity and sexuality. By examining how clothing functions as a marker of sexuality, it is possible to better understand the nuances of Stephens struggle with identity and societal acceptance. Indeed, from the outset, Stephen Gordon's choice of clothing sets her apart from traditional gender norms. Garber believes that in *The Well* it is present "the most famous and paradigmatic-primal scene of reading" where the physical and particularly the clothing indicators of inversion are prominently displayed and interpreted –

illustrating how clothing can serve as a significant marker of sexuality (135). In addition, in Hall's narrative, the invert Stephen Gordon encounters a copy of Krafft-Ebing's work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1892) in her deceased father's study "Krafft-Ebing – she had never heard of that author before. All the same she opened the battered old book, then she looked more closely, for there on its margins were notes in her father's small, scholarly hand and she saw that her own name appeared in those notes" (Hall 172). The text provides limited instances of female case studies, with the majority focusing on individuals categorised as criminally insane. The basing of Stephen's character on science, given by Ellis' preface to the book and the discovery of Krafft-Ebing's volume within the narration, is a detail absent from *Orlando*, which underlines that homosexuality, in Stephen's reality, is not a sin, but something with a scientific foundation.

Stephen's masculine attire becomes a focal point for societal judgment and prejudice. Her clothing choices are read as a sign of her lesbianism, which leads to her social ostracization and personal turmoil. The novel uses these outward markers to highlight the internal and external conflicts faced by individuals who do not conform to societal norms. Stephen's clothing thus becomes a battleground for her identity, reflecting both her defiance and the societal pressure to conform. In *Orlando*, on the other hand, the transformations are celebrated as part of a fantastical narrative, while Stephen's sartorial choices in *The Well* lead to real-world consequences, underscoring the harsh realities faced by those who defy gender norms.

Krafft-Ebing talks about hermaphroditism referring to the case of a woman, exceptionally similar to Stephen's story "among many foolish things that her father encouraged in her was the fact that he brought her up as a boy, called her Sandor, allowed her to ride, drive and hunt, admiring her muscular energy" (541). In a letter, Sandor reveals her faith in God, declaring "if he created me so, and not otherwise, am I then guilty; or is it the eternal, incomprehensible way of fate? I relied on God, that one day my emancipation would come; for

my thought was only love itself, which is the foundation, the guiding principle, of His teaching and His kingdom" (546). This excerpt highlights the historical context and attitudes towards gender and sexuality, particularly in the case of individuals who do not conform to traditional binary categories. The comparison drawn between the case discussed by Krafft-Ebing and Stephen Gordon underscores the complexities of gender identity and the diverse experiences of individuals who navigate societal expectations and norms. The reference to Sandor's upbringing as a boy and her reflection on faith and destiny encapsulates the profound internal struggles faced by individuals grappling with their gender identity and societal acceptance. Therefore, the Krafft-Ebing's mannish lesbian, defined as hermaphrodite by him, is the sole extensively documented female case sharing many parallels with Stephen Gordon.

The explanation for Stephen's gender variance is somewhat ambiguous. The emphasis on her physical masculinity suggests a genetic predisposition, especially considering her father's early recognition of her difference, "but his consequent indulgence of her proclivities, and the stress laid on both parents' desire for a male child, hint at belief in prenatal as well as childhood conditioning" (Foster 281). In this way, Hall seems intent on absolving Stephen of any responsibility for her behaviour and sexual preference, and she emphasises the importance of empathy and understanding in navigating issues of gender and sexuality, urging readers to move beyond binary perspectives and embrace the complexity of human diversity.

Stephen's visit to Sir Philip's study is prompted by her mother's horrified discovery of Stephen's romantic involvement with another woman, leading to Stephen's expulsion from the idyllic estate of Morton where she was born and raised. Seeking solace, she turns to a higher authority, shifting her focus from Krafft-Ebing's book to her father's Bible, which opens to the passage describing the mark of Cain without fail (Garber 136). The factor of the Bible is extremely relevant combined with Krafft-Ebing's work and her deceased father, because with these elements Stephen constructs her own narrative of identity. Indeed, according to Green,

Hall's fluctuation between various models and rhetorical portrayals of the invert identity has likely contributed to making Stephen accessible as a figure for identification to successive generations of readers and critics, each approaching and identifying with these representations selectively, based on their own perspectives and circumstances. Conversely, the novel's evident challenge in establishing a clear identity for its protagonist, along with the uncertainty stemming from the diverse array of influences, prompts whether identities can ever be portrayed as anything other than constructed and ambiguous (Green 280). The concept of ambiguous identities in the main character is an element in common between *Orlando* and *The Well*.

However, Hall and Woolf approach this concept in different ways, reflecting their perspectives and the specific contexts of their narratives. Hall writes within a more rigid societal structure, where homosexuality is viewed as deviant and sinful. Stephen's struggle is deeply personal and painful, reflecting the societal rejection and isolation she faces. Consequently, her identity is constructed through a combination of scientific, religious, and familial influences. Hall's narrative is one of seeking acceptance and understanding in a world that largely rejects her protagonist. Unlike Stephen's more troubled journey, Orlando's transformations are often celebrated and often portrayed positively, emphasising adaptability and resilience in the face of changing societal norms. Both Radclyffe Hall and Virginia Woolf respond to the cultural climate of their times by challenging the idea that identity is singular and fixed. Through their protagonists, they explore the constructed and multifaceted nature of identity. However, while Hall's narrative focuses on the painful ambiguity and struggle for acceptance, Woolf's *Orlando* celebrates the fluidity and multiplicity of identity, reflecting their differing perspectives and the unique contexts of their works.

Stephen, despite being a girl, is therefore fulfilling the male role Sir Philip wishes for her, but that she will never have. This desire for a son is rooted in societal expectations and the need for a male heir, particularly when there is land to inherit. Womanhood, patrimony,

authority, and power are all strictly connected to each other. Although initially seen as a positive way of forming gender identity through cultural influence rather than inherent nature, Sir Philip's actions eventually lead to feelings of guilt and doubt. However, he is absolved of responsibility because Stephen willingly embraces the male-oriented upbringing. The underlying assumption is that a "proper" girl would have resisted and asserted her innate femininity (O'Rourke 5). This assumption reflects the deeply entrenched societal belief in the naturalness of gender roles. By implying that a "proper" girl would resist a male-oriented upbringing, the narrative suggests that gender identity is inherently linked to biological sex. Stephen's inability to conform to traditional femininity is thereby pathologized, reinforcing the idea that her identity as an invert is a deviation from the norm rather than a legitimate expression of her true self. Stephen's acceptance of her male-oriented upbringing creates a profound internal conflict. On one hand, she finds comfort and a sense of authenticity in aligning with masculine traits and behaviours. On the other hand, society's expectations and her mother's rejection force her to grapple with feelings of guilt and inadequacy. This tension highlights the broader societal pressures to conform to gender norms and the psychological toll such pressures can exert on individuals who do not fit neatly into these categories.

As a consequence, patriarchy plays an influential role in the developing of the story, despite the revolutionary main character. Stephen indeed demonstrates that she is a product of Victorian society as well, just like Orlando at the end of the novel. Hence, this chapter would like to demonstrate that even though *The Well* was created to change the view of homosexuality of the heterosexual public, compared to *Orlando*, the novel proves to be extremely conservative under numerous aspects, that represent the reasons why it also went to trial.

3.2. Analysis of *The Well of Loneliness*: Stephen Between Science and Religion

The text and narration of Hall's novel make the difference when comparing it to Woolf's. As a matter of fact, right from the beginning, the language used to depict Stephen

emphasises her sense of alienation and difference. She is labelled as “queer,” “awkward,” “strange,” and “not like other children,” highlighting her loneliness and isolation. The narrative demands a sense of uniqueness from Stephen Gordon, showcasing the detrimental effects of isolation, which the text ultimately challenges. Despite this, Stephen is never truly as alone as she appears. Even though her social connections, duties, and obligations underscore her spiritual loneliness, there are instances where her own stubbornness seems to obscure genuine and meaningful connections with other women (O’Rourke 8).

Particularly when observing certain moments from Stephen’s childhood, where vague hints and intuitions are distributed amidst descriptions of her reluctance to conform to feminine attire and her preference for activities typically associated with boys. Stephen’s mother appears perplexed by her child’s differences, recognising that Stephen does not conform to societal norms. In contrast, Sir Philip not only acknowledges Stephen’s uniqueness but also possesses knowledge, represented by his study and the books within it, that validates his suspicions “‘Do you think that I could be a man, supposing I thought very hard – or prayed, Father?’” (Hall 29). His actions serve to isolate Stephen within the family and profoundly disrupt her sense of self-identity, yet they also allude to broader implications. If there are writings produced before Stephen’s birth, preceding her upbringing, then she emerges into a historical context, part of a lineage, one among many (O’Rourke 10). In this way, Hall proves her point on defending homosexuality. Furthermore, Stephen shows sign of her sexual preference for women early in her childhood, confirming that sexual orientation is innate in human beings “at that moment she knew nothing but beauty and Collins, and the two were as one, and the one was Stephen? and yet not Stephen either, but something more vast, that the mind of seven years found no name for” (Hall 24).

Stephen’s fascination with Collins sparks various forms of creative expression; in a way, Collins serves as Stephen’s initial significant audience. One response involves role-playing:

Stephen dresses as the young Admiral Nelson, receiving Collins' entertained attention as a reward. However, when Collins becomes involved with her affair with the Gordons' new footman, Stephen loses interest in these escapades, as her preferred audience appears indifferent. Another avenue for creative expression, or a method of symbolically organising her emotions, is through fantasy. Before falling asleep, Stephen envisions scenarios where she and Collins share a cosy cottage and a supportive, nurturing friendship: "this last was a very intimate picture, full of detail, even to the red china dogs that stood one at each end of the high mantelpiece, and the grandfather clock that ticked loudly" (Hall 28). Yet, even in these fantasies, Stephen grapples with her inability to articulate her emotions clearly, searching for metaphors that can convey the depth of her love (Franks 128). This struggle underscores the challenges faced by individuals navigating societal norms and expectations regarding their emotions and desires. Through Stephen's emotional journey, Radclyffe Hall invites readers to empathise with her longing for connection and understanding.

In her adolescent contemplations, Stephen expresses a sense of existential emptiness, stating, "I'm nothing - yes, I am, I'm Stephen - but that's being nothing" (Hall 65). The labels her neighbours apply to her as she matures – "queer," "freak," "unnatural" – only serve to highlight her exclusion from discourse, rather than integrating her into it "she disliked the girl; she had always disliked her; what she called Stephen's 'queerness' aroused her suspicion – she was never quite clear as to what she suspected, but felt sure it must be something outlandish" (82). Stephen is biologically female, and societal norms expect her gender expression to align with traditional femininity, while her sexual desires are anticipated to be directed towards males. However, her divergent appearance and preferences seem to exist beyond the established narrative of sex and gender, thus rendering her existence seemingly non-existent within this framework (Green 282).

As Stephen gets older, she feels increasingly unable to make sense of herself, struggling to create a different story about who she is "'But what was she?' Her thoughts slipping back to her childhood, would find many things in her past that perplexed her. She had never been quite like the other small children, she had always been lonely and discontented, she had always been trying to be someone else" (Hall 88). Her father and Puddle, who will always be part of her life, are the only characters who start to understand the protagonist's real nature. At a later point, Stephen will find clues about her identity in the notes written in her father's books, yet Sir Philip, described as a coward due to his compassion, decides to withhold this information from her (Green 283). Once her father dies, she has the final revelation of her identity.

Stephen stays unaware of herself for a prolonged time. This insistence on her innocence likely serves to downplay any suggestion of maliciousness or depravity (O'Rourke 10). After Stephen realisation and partial acceptance of her preferences, she has her first unconsummated affair with Angela Crossby. Her lover, nevertheless, is married and in a discussion, she explicitly refers to Stephen's sexuality "can I help it if you're – what you obviously are?" (Hall 125). Lady Anna as well fails to name Stephen's identity when she discovers her illicit relationship "it is you who are unnatural, not I. And this thing that you are is a sin against creation" (169). Following Green's discourse "to be neither one thing nor the other in gender terms is to be both obviously wrong and utterly invisible" (283). Therefore, Stephen's identity is called into question by the people around her.

Due to her slow realisation of her lesbianism and how people around her deal with her identity, Stephen has relational issues growing up, leading to paranoia. Paranoia carries a cost, shaping the backdrop of all her relationships and serving as a prominent theme in the novel: persecution. For Stephen, this heightened sensitivity represents both a logical and illogical reaction (O'Rourke 11). At the beginning of the story, Stephen mentions: "Her old suspicion, the suspicion that had haunted her ever since childhood – she would fancy that people were

laughing at her. So sensitive was she, that a half-heard sentence, a word, a glance, made her inwardly crumble" (Hall 70). This feeling will always follow her throughout the narration "but now when she sat alone at their table, lighting one cigarette after another, uncomfortably conscious of the interest she aroused by reason of her clothes and her isolation" (338).

From her earliest days, Stephen instinctively grasps the significance of language, seeing it not just as a tool for conveying information but also as a vehicle for shaping fresh understanding. Her initial encounter with love prompts her first, albeit imperfect, endeavour to articulate her emotions, striving to encapsulate beauty in some tangible symbol (Franks 127). To Stephen "writing, it was like a heavenly balm, it was like the flowing out of deep waters, it was like the lifting of a load from the spirit; it brought with it a sense of relief, of assuagement" (Hall 65). It is in her mid-teens that Stephen discovers her writing talent. Apart from her psychosexual characteristics, she embodies almost a cliché of the sensitive, budding artist: lonely, apart from the crowd, often angry, and deeply attuned to natural beauty. In need of a form of self-expression, she turns to writing (Franks 127).

However, for Stephen, authorship is not merely about spontaneous and creative self-expression; it also serves as a way to compensate for her initial feelings of alienation and to gain mastery over aspects of her personality that remain elusive and unassimilated (Franks 130). Miss Puddleton is one of the figures encouraging Stephen's activity, suggesting taking advantage of her inversion to produce "why, just because you are what you are, you may actually find that you've got an advantage. You may write with a curious double insight – write both men and women from a personal knowledge" (Hall 173). If for Orlando writing sometimes fail to render the images of their reality and they are often unable to pursue their writing, for Stephen it is an outlet and a way to fully describe her world. Stephen's approach to writing is deeply intertwined with her quest for identity and acceptance. Growing up feeling alienated due to her sexual orientation and non-conforming gender identity, she uses writing as a means to

articulate her experiences and gain control over her narrative. Through authorship, Stephen can process her internal conflicts and societal rejection, transforming them into a structured and comprehensible form. This act of writing allows her to explore and integrate the elusive and unassimilated aspects of her personality, providing a sense of mastery and coherence in her life.

Miss Puddleton's encouragement to write, based on Stephen's unique perspective as an invert, highlights the potential advantages of her dual insight into both male and female experiences. This "curious double insight" positions Stephen to write with a depth and authenticity that others might lack. Just as Stephen gains depth and authenticity through her experience as an invert, Orlando's dual experiences as both a man and a woman provide a unique perspective as well that enriches the narrative. By embracing her inversion, Stephen can leverage her distinct viewpoint to create richer, more nuanced characters and narratives.

Writing becomes a way for her to turn her marginalised position into a source of strength and creativity. Nonetheless, Puddle's language merely hints at Stephen's identity without directly articulating it. However, "you are what you are" (with its resonance of the biblical Jehovah's "I am that I am") presents its self-evident truth not as absence or ambiguity, but as a doubling – a surplus that, like Stephen herself, transcends the confines of gender binaries (Green 287). Green's critical position asserts that Stephen's identity is not defined by a singular gender, but rather by a multiplicity that defies categorisation. In the context of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, the concepts of multiplicity and ambiguity both play roles in how gender is portrayed. However, when considering the argument about Stephen's identity and the idea of doubling or surplus, multiplicity is a more precise term. This term suggests that Stephen embodies a range of gender traits, both masculine and feminine, rather than existing in a state of confusion or lack of clarity. This notion of doubling suggests that Stephen embodies characteristics of both genders, creating a surplus of identity that cannot be neatly classified.

This surplus is not an absence or lack of identity, but rather an abundance that enriches Stephen's character and challenges the binary understanding of gender.

Because Stephen's emotional state is deeply connected to her creativity, the urge to write and the actual act of writing seldom come effortlessly. During moments of intense sorrow or immense happiness, she often finds herself unable to write. In times of grief, her inner resources feel depleted, leaving her imagination barren. And when experiencing fleeting contentment in the external world, she lacks the inclination to seek solace in writing. For instance, following her father's passing, she experiences her initial period of artistic and spiritual drought "she longed for the comforting outlet of words, but now the words would always evade her" (Hall 105). The words do not return initially in a form which leads to objective achievement, but rather as a resurgence of metaphorical thought and a heightened awareness and admiration for the natural world (Green 287).

The catalyst for her revival is her encounter with Angela Crossby. In the peak of Stephen's fascination with Angela, there is no pressing urge to write because simply experiencing life feels fulfilling. Orlando's writing as well is often interrupted and sometimes fails to fully encapsulate her experiences, emphasising the challenge of expressing a continually changing identity. For Orlando, writing is a pursuit that ebbs and flows with life experiences. At times, Orlando is deeply immersed in writing, but often the protagonist struggles to translate the richness of the lived experiences into words. This struggle reflects a broader commentary on the limitations of language and literature to fully capture the essence of a fluid and evolving identity.

The fundamental elements that fuel a writer's imagination are fully engaged, yet there is no inner drive to articulate these emotions; no necessity, so to speak, to offset any discordance with the world (Franks 132). The element is reflected in the text through Stephen's words: first Angela is "like some queer flower that had grown up in darkness, like some rare, pale flower

without blemish or stain" (Hall 111), then the protagonist's feeling for her increases, being portrayed with her words "Stephen was thinking that Angela Crossby resembled such flowers – very fragrant and pale she was, so Stephen said to her gently: 'You seem to belong to Morton'" (121).

When Angela reveals Stephen's homosexuality to her husband, leading to Anna banishing Stephen from Morton, Puddle attempts to rescue her protegee by instilling a sense of purpose or calling in her writing "for the sake of all the others who are like you, but less strong and less gifted perhaps, many of them, it's up to you to have the courage to make good" (Hall 173). Consequently, Stephen and Puddle secure a modest flat in London, marking the beginning of Stephen's earnest pursuit of her career. Her writing becomes more of a "narcotic" than a source of joy, a laborious endeavour demanding significant willpower. She views writing as a possible remedy for her diminished self-esteem, as it is the one endeavour through which she can strive to validate herself. Additionally, writing serves as her sole connection to Morton, fostering her most inspired work (Franks 132). Hence, Stephen's writing is deeply connected to her identity and her moods, also influencing the success of her books. This is not the case for Orlando, who keeps writing *The Oak Tree* for three centuries, but the book is somehow separated from the protagonist's sexual identity.

Stephen's friend Brockett grasps her predicament instinctively and suggests she seek a change in Paris. Following his advice, Stephen purchases a charming house on Rue Jacob, but her opportunity to gauge the city's impact on her work is cut short by the outbreak of war. Joining a women's ambulance corps, Stephen finds a drastically different outlet for her pent-up energy instead of writing. However, her wartime experiences prove pivotal for her creative endeavours as she meets Mary Llewellyn, a lovely young Welsh woman, in the corps, and the two fall in love. Just as Stephen became deeply attuned to natural beauty during her relationship with Angela, she now undergoes a similar process with Mary. After the war, they vacation

together in Orotava, where the ambiance, though exotic, evokes memories of Morton (Franks 133). Surrounded by paradise, Stephen finds no need for words, and upon returning to Paris with Mary, she entirely neglects her writing "was it likely that Stephen could finish her book – she who had Paris in springtime with Mary? Was it likely that Mary could urge her to do so – she who had Paris in springtime with Stephen?" (Hall 262). This passage can be seen as an early indication of Stephen's sacrificing spirit. Stephen finds herself neglecting her writing, which suggests her willingness to prioritise her relationship and emotional connection over her personal ambitions. The rhetorical questions posed in the text highlight the overwhelming influence of her love for Mary, indicating that Stephen is inclined to sacrifice her creative pursuits to fully embrace their shared happiness.

Mary possesses a gentle disposition, yet lacks intellectual depth, leading Stephen to frequently regard her as more of an impediment than a helpful companion, akin to a child offering assistance. Consequently, Mary experiences growing feelings of loneliness and inadequacy, while Stephen grapples with overwhelming guilt: "and now there were times when, serving two masters, her passion for this girl and her will to protect her, Stephen would be torn by conflicting desires, by opposing mental and physical emotions. She would want to save herself for her work; she would want to give herself wholly to Mary" (Hall 275). The phrase "serving two masters" namely illustrates the intensity of her struggle, as Stephen's passion for Mary and her protective instincts clash with her dedication to her creative work. This conflict embodies the broader theme of sacrifice and the balancing act between personal ambition and emotional fulfilment. Believing that dedication to her creative pursuits could swiftly enact societal change and offer sanctuary for her partner, Stephen has allowed her art to become subordinate to other objectives. While her relatively selfless intentions may garner admiration, her perspectives ultimately reveal a sense of naivety. Despite gaining recognition as a novelist, she still faces scorn from the majority beyond her homosexual circle (Franks 134).

Stephen's approach to love changes with Mary. Her feelings are indeed deep, but due to her past relationships, she does not manifest them. Green declares that "the insistence on compulsion gives to affect and desire in the novel a Racinian fatality. Hall's characters do not simply experience emotion; they are overborne" (290). Therefore, the characters are overwhelmed by feelings. This emphasis on the irresistible nature of desire seems aimed at absolving the characters of accountability for yielding to it, yet it implies a compulsory framework of tragic convention that contradicts Hall's implicit assertion of narrative agency. Green argues that by portraying emotions and desires as overpowering and inescapable, Hall absolves her characters of responsibility for their actions. The characters are depicted as being driven by forces beyond their control, which aligns with traditional tragic conventions where fate dictates the characters' outcomes. This narrative approach suggests that the characters, particularly Stephen, cannot be held accountable for their actions because their desires are irresistible and predestined.

"Mary gazed round her wide-eyed with pleasure; but after a while her eyes must turn, as they always did now, to rest upon Stephen; while Stephen's uncertain and melancholy eyes must look back with great love in their depths for Mary" (Hall 250). In its resolution, the novel remains in a liminal state, caught between the pragmatism of classification and the embodiment of fiction, between compulsion and choice (Green 290). Stephen does not have a happy ending with the woman she loves, instead, she already expects that Mary finds someone else, a man, who will take her place and compensate for something she cannot give to Mary. I interpret Hall's narrative as attempting to balance the compulsion of desire with the characters' agency. On one hand, the overwhelming nature of Stephen's emotions can be seen as a way to evoke empathy and understanding from the reader, highlighting the intensity and legitimacy of her feelings. On the other hand, the novel's exploration of identity and self-acceptance underscores

the importance of personal agency and the struggle to assert one's identity in the face of societal oppression.

The Well grapples with both internal and external pressures pushing for conformity, and Mary's departure with Martin illustrates this: "he, the lover, could not hide his betraying eyes from her eyes that were also those of a lover" (Hall 342). However, this result should not necessarily be interpreted as a total victory for traditional fictional norms. As a matter of fact, the conclusion of the novel features a wedding, but it is Mary, Stephen's lover, who gets married. The wedding, nonetheless, does not signify a triumph of norms because it disrupts the central lesbian relationship in the novel. Instead of celebrating a conventional heterosexual union, the narrative ends with a sense of loss and unresolved tension.

Mary's marriage to Martin does not symbolise a resolution or acceptance of societal norms; rather, it highlights the tragedy of forced conformity and the suppression of authentic love. Furthermore, the subversion suggests that the normative ending is imposed rather than a true resolution, inviting readers to question the validity and morality of such societal expectations. This event leaves one lesbian character steadfastly committed to her nonconformity. Recognising that the heterosexual storyline and its ideological impacts could be contested from within the framework of the lesbian novel (Abraham 13).

When Mary departs, Stephen has already established herself as a successful author, and Hall emphasises that catering to the younger woman's need for attention and protection would have hindered Stephen's crucial task of crafting a new narrative that would render herself and others like her understandable. Hall suggests that fiction can navigate between the obscure and pathologizing language of patriarchal medical and theological texts on one side, and the widely circulated negativity of feminine gossip on the other (Green 292). Similar to many male protagonists in the genre, Stephen discovers her victory by turning away from, rather than

conforming to, the domestic narrative. She transitions from the conclusion of romance to the conclusion of the novel of artistic development (Green 292).

The possible literary parallel between Stephen and male protagonists highlights her journey of self-realisation and artistic success. Just as male characters often reject domestic confines to pursue their personal and creative ambitions, Stephen prioritises her writing over societal expectations of femininity. This narrative choice can be seen as a challenge to conventional gender roles, suggesting that women, like men, can find fulfilment and identity outside the domestic sphere. However, this thesis believes that it has the opposite effect, that is the stereotypical portrayal of a protagonist, who manages to obtain success due to her masculine nature.

The religious factor is extremely influential in Hall's narration. It is the Bible that classifies Stephen once she learns the truth about herself. The revelation, at first, does not have a scientific categorisation, but a celestial association instead "'And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, upon Cain...' she was rocking now in rhythm to those words, 'And the Lord set a mark upon Cain – upon Cain – upon Cain. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain...' (Hall 173). Inversion becomes, in this way, a biological condemnation, like God's mark. In the Bible, Cain is marked by God after he kills his brother Abel, becoming a symbol of transgression and alienation. Cain's mark signifies both his condemnation and his protection, setting him apart from others. This Biblical reference positions Stephen's identity as similarly marked by society's moral and religious condemnation of her sexuality. Sandor, on the other hand, refers to a character or case study from Krafft-Ebing's work, symbolising the scientific and medical view of inversion as a biological and psychological aberration. However, the moment of being dispossessed also signifies a moment of creation. It is not just a rebirth, but a dual birth for Stephen, who can now define her own identity based on textual connections – Sandor if considering Krafft-Ebing and Cain if considering the Bible (Green 287). Indeed, For Stephen, the concept of a dual birth

signifies the simultaneous experience of condemnation and the opportunity for self-definition. From Krafft-Ebing's scientific perspective, Stephen's inversion is pathologized, while the Biblical perspective casts her as morally and spiritually condemned. However, both perspectives also inadvertently provide a framework through which Stephen can understand and articulate her own identity.

In the narrative, Stephen reimagines her sexual orientation as the mark of Cain, an image that resurfaces in references to the "stigmata of the abnormal" and her facial scars from her service in World War I "Stephen's face was struck by a splinter of shell, and her right cheek cut open rather badly. […] 'Mademoiselle will carry an honourable scar as a mark of her courage,'" (Hall 239). Hall metaphorically links Stephen's wartime experiences and the mark of Cain. This equation, particularly the merging of Cain and Christ in Stephen's persona, implies a foundational mythos and a liberating theology within Hall's narrative. It suggests that the lesbian author, simultaneously outcast and saviour, is inextricably linked to both (Madden 169).

The reference to the "stigmata of the abnormal" and Stephen's facial scars signifies more than mere victimisation; it is a reclamation of identity. The scars from her service, described as "honourable," juxtapose the negative connotations of the mark of Cain with valour and heroism. This duality transforms Stephen from an outcast into a figure of both suffering and strength, paralleling the merging of Cain's condemnation with Christ's redemptive suffering. This merging implies a foundational mythos wherein the lesbian author, cast out by societal norms, becomes a saviour in her own right. By bearing the marks of both an outcast (Cain) and a redeemer (Christ), Stephen embodies a new form of liberation theology. This perspective is crucial because it offers an alternative narrative that transcends traditional binary oppositions of good and evil, normal and abnormal. It suggests that those who are marginalised due to their sexual orientation possess an inherent potential for resilience and transformation. By connecting Stephen to the saviour, Hall is offering a new view on homosexuality for her

public, however, this approach is not welcomed by the audience, being too radical in her ideals but too traditional in her narration, consequently banishing the novel.

Stephen Gordon's relationship with God stands out as one of the most enduring connections. While it is fraught with challenges, it remains indispensable. Even during moments when Stephen experiences a crisis of faith, distancing herself from God, the religious framework remains a constant presence in the text "Yet Stephen, these days, was not given to prayer, God had grown so unreal, so hard to believe in" (Hall 69). As Stephen repeatedly addresses God throughout the novel, she is also speaking to the divine within herself. *The Well* is deeply moral, with Stephen Gordon serving as its moral compass. The morality of the book revolves around Stephen: how she is treated and how she behaves. Throughout the narrative, it is evident that Stephen's moral code is rooted in her relationship with God. However, the novel's boldness in discussing homosexuality in the context of God's will was later seen as immoral by some (O'Rourke 13).

Stephen's birth coincides with Christmas, as there is a strong and evident sense of connection with Christ throughout the narrative, culminating in the novel's concluding pages. Here, Stephen's visionary experiences are depicted similarly to a crucifixion, with the agony she endures representing the collective suffering of homosexuals worldwide. By embracing the suffering of others as her own, Stephen ultimately manages to convey the central message that the entire book has been building towards, in various forms: "'God,' she gasped, we believe; we have told You we believe… We have not denied You, then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!'" (Hall 355).

The novel's strong connection to religious themes can be partly attributed to Radclyffe Hall's own life experiences. Hall converted to Catholicism, a decision influenced by her relationship with Ladye (Mabel Batten), one of the significant lesbian relationships in her life.

It is plausible to infer that for Hall, Catholicism became intertwined with her lesbian identity. Despite the Catholic Church's conservative stance on homosexuality, Hall remained steadfast in her belief that lesbianism was part of God's plan. *The Well of Loneliness* extensively explores the various facets of lesbian identity, engaging in prolonged discussions about what it means to be a lesbian rather than questioning the validity of being one (O'Rourke 13-14).

Hall consistently relies on religious vocabulary and empathy to advocate for lesbian identity, yet this stance is fundamentally rooted in her conceptualisation of lesbianism as a biological trait. However, according to Madden there are two possibilities to interpret her stance: overlook it as a form of otherworldly politics or appreciate Hall's endeavour to anchor social liberation in religious affirmation (166). As a consequence, it is possible to affirm that Hall attempted to reconceptualise her gender and sexual identity within the confines of the Bible, the church, and the patriarchal structure. Jane Rule comments that "The 'bible' she offered is really no better for women than the Bible she would not reject" (61). The novel's attempt to reconcile lesbian identity with religious affirmation, as well as its critique of the patriarchal structure, was perceived as a threat to the established order. Jane Rule's comment highlights that Hall's efforts to use religious vocabulary to advocate for lesbian identity did not necessarily offer a liberating alternative for women but rather presented another form of doctrinal constraint. This thesis recognises in the powerful presence of religion as one of the main causes of the banning of *The Well*.

Radclyffe Hall adamantly refuses to entertain the notion that lesbianism is abnormal or demonic, instead presenting a strong argument for the divine nature of her condition. This stance directly challenges the prevailing moral and religious beliefs that viewed homosexuality as sinful and unnatural. Therefore, it served as a solid foundation for advocating social tolerance. The argument, rooted in conservative Christianity, was radical and provocative at the time, as it sought to align a stigmatised identity with sacredness and natural order. She contrasts

the case for tolerance with accusations of decadence levelled against lesbianism, which she vehemently opposes.

Hall leans heavily on conservative Christianity throughout the book to counter decadence, extending her sense of the sacred beyond spiritual matters to encompass the land and social relationships embodied in Morton. This stems partly from deeply ingrained traditional social conservatism and serves as a means to underscore the vast difference between her world and the decadent lives society predicts if lesbians are denied their social destiny. By framing lesbianism as part of nature and God's plan, she argues that to deny its existence is to defy God (O'Rourke 14). Hall's argument that lesbianism is part of God's plan was a direct challenge to the religious and moral norms of the time, which viewed homosexuality as sinful and against natural order. This radical reconceptualisation was provocative and unacceptable to conservative societal standards.

Due to Stephen's unwavering commitment to what she perceives as ethical action, she remains unable to realise her destiny as an artist within Radclyffe Hall's fictional realm "'Being what you are, I suppose you can't – you were made for a martyr!" (Hall 352). This statement highlights the inherent tension between Stephen's sense of ethical duty and her personal aspirations, particularly her destiny as an artist. This line encapsulates the idea that Stephen's commitment to ethical action, shaped by her identity and circumstances, forces her into a sacrificial role that ultimately hinders her ability to fully realise her potential as an artist. The notion that Stephen is "made for a martyr" suggests that her life is marked by suffering and self-sacrifice. Her ethical stance often places her in situations where she must prioritise the well-being and acceptance of others over her own desires and ambitions. This martyrdom is linked to the broader themes of duty and selflessness that permeate her character's journey.

Stephen's sacrifices, while noble, come at the expense of her own fulfilment and artistic expression. Her artistic disposition is not a result of her homosexuality; it is as innate as her

sexual orientation and were it not for her deeply ingrained moral conscience, there would be no inherent conflict between her love for women and her creative impulse. *The Well of Loneliness*, therefore, transcends being merely an outdated exploration of the lesbian psyche; it also chronicles the journey of an artist who, due to her vulnerabilities, humanity, adherence to societal norms, and perception of herself in relation to her surroundings, finds herself incapable of achieving lasting fulfilment in either her art or her life (Franks 136). Stephen's adherence to societal norms exacerbates her internal conflict. Despite her progressive identity, she remains tethered to the expectations and judgments of a conservative society. This tension highlights the restrictive nature of societal conventions, which often stifle individual expression and happiness. Stephen's struggle is emblematic of the broader human experience of reconciling personal identity with external pressures.

Through an analysis of *The Well of Loneliness*, it becomes evident how Radclyffe Hall approached the portrayal of sexuality and gender identity in her novel. Despite her aspirations to revolutionise homosexual literature and introduce a new perspective to heterosexual audiences, Hall was keenly aware of the potential challenges she might face. However, the narrative style she employed ultimately contributed to the novel's banning. Hall's radical depiction of lesbianism as a divine trait, influenced by the individual's upbringing and environment, did not achieve the level of success she had hoped for, especially when compared to Virginia Woolf's seemingly more "conservative" approach in *Orlando*. Woolf's novel, with its subtler exploration of gender and identity, found greater acceptance among readers. In *The Well of Loneliness*, Hall intricately weaves religious, scientific, and biblical elements to justify Stephen's homosexuality, depicting it as an inherent aspect of her being. However, this bold portrayal sparked outrage among the public in 1928. The novel's call for social tolerance and its critique of societal attitudes that contribute to immorality were perceived as a threat to the established social order. The use of religious arguments to support lesbianism was particularly

provocative, as it sought to legitimise a marginalised identity within the framework of conservative values.

The banning of *The Well of Loneliness* was therefore driven by its controversial depiction of lesbianism and the way it challenged the dominant moral, religious, and social norms of the time. Hall's framing of lesbianism as natural and divine, her advocacy for social tolerance, and her critique of societal attitudes were provocative, leading to significant backlash. The novel's alignment with conservative Christian values to support a marginalised identity was particularly unsettling for a society steeped in traditional beliefs about sexuality and morality. Thus, while the novel was a powerful argument for tolerance and understanding, it was seen as too radical and subversive for the era, leading to its banning. The inclusion of such controversial themes, combined with Hall's unapologetic narrative style, ultimately led to the novel's censorship and condemnation.

3.3. Prosecution and Woolf's Response

The examination of Hall's literary genre, the implications of her writing style, and the manner in which she crafted her narratives have not received comparable levels of scrutiny if juxtaposed with the figure of the author herself. While much attention has been directed towards the controversial themes and content of her work, the specific techniques and approaches she employed in her storytelling have often been overlooked. Furthermore, the genre in which Hall worked – often classified as lesbian literature or LGBTQ+ fiction – presents its own set of implications. The exploration of gender, sexuality, and identity in her novels goes beyond mere storytelling; it serves as a reflection of societal attitudes and norms, challenging readers to reconsider conventional understandings of these concepts. Thus, while the content of Hall's work has sparked controversy and debate, a comprehensive analysis of what led to censorship, and if it was useful for the spreading of the notions on homosexuality, is essential for a more nuanced understanding of her contributions to literature and gender studies. In addition, this

section investigates on Woolf's opinion about the novel, her participation to Hall's trial and the differences about the two authors.

The Well of Loneliness, subjected to an extensively publicised obscenity trial in November 1928, was ultimately condemned for its perceived endorsement of "unnatural offenses between women" (Roche 101) and its perceived capacity to corrupt. Critics were simultaneously unsettled by the radicalism of its sexual politics and the seeming conservatism of its prose style. Sir Chartres Biron, the Chief Magistrate responsible for ordering the destruction of *The Well*, viewed the literary quality of Hall's work as exacerbating its harmful influence, because according to him, the better an obscene book was written, the greater the public to whom the book was likely to appeal. When Hall contested Biron's decision a month later, Sir Archibald Bodkin, the Director of Public Prosecutions, declined to furnish magistrates with copies of the novel. Instead, as Hall recounted, the entire story of the book was relayed to the bench. Thus, the focus shifted from the style of *The Well* to its plot, and the fate of the novel was determined not only by a man who believed its readability amplified its harmful content but also by those who had not read it (Roche 101-2). This approach suggests a prejudiced and superficial evaluation, driven by a premeditated intent to censor rather than a fair consideration of the novel's literary and social merits. In addition, the fear of the book reflects the power the book had to influence and challenge societal norms, underscoring the authorities' anxiety about its impact. Roche's analysis reveals how the readability and narrative power of Hall's work were seen as amplifying its threat to societal norms, ultimately leading to its banning.

Simon Baker in a 2005 article declares that "British government censors in the 1930s feared suppressing certain books might lead to women "getting to know" about practices like lesbianism and so "defeat the object" of banning literature, it has been revealed" (S. Baker). Information released by the National Archives also reveals that officials in Whitehall were keen to avoid a recurrence of the publicity generated by the banning of *The Well of Loneliness*, during

the 1920s. Indeed, in the week following James Douglas's call for the withdrawal of the novel from publication in the Sunday Express, there was a flurry of commentary from both supporters and detractors regarding the exceptional execution of *The Well*. Various voices weighed in on the literary merits of the novel amidst the contentious debate surrounding its publication (Roche 102).

Others observed the lack of originality and vitality in Hall's seemingly formulaic writing style. Virginia Woolf, whose imaginative and boundary-pushing narrative of gender fluidity, *Orlando*, received positive reviews and faced no legal challenges when published in the same year as *The Well*, famously critiqued Hall's novel for providing minimal satisfaction to its readers "Cambridge is over, but the Well of Loneliness is in full swing. I have to appear in favour of it, and have already wasted hours reading it and talking about it, but I hope to be free on Thursday. The dulness of the book is such that any indecency may lurk there-one simply can't keep one's eyes on the page" (*The Letters 3,* 556). This pointed criticism highlights Woolf's preference for more imaginative and innovative narrative styles, like those in her own work. Woolf's dismissal of Hall's novel as unsatisfying and tedious underscores a broader literary divide, reflecting her belief that the novel's conservative and earnest approach failed to captivate or challenge readers effectively.

In the two years preceding the release of *The Well*, Hall gained widespread recognition for both her literary prowess and her distinctive fashion sense. As stated in the January 4, 1928 edition of the Daily News, Hall emerged as a prominent figure in London's literary scene and was credited as one of the pioneers in popularising the dinner jacket style for women (Roche 103). In contrast, Virginia Woolf maintained a publicly reserved demeanour in both her attire and discussions related to her same-sex interests. Unlike Hall, Woolf, described as "shabby," had harboured a longstanding insecurity about her clothing choices, often referred to as a "clothes complex" or "frock consciousness." According to biographer Hermione Lee, Woolf

was aware that she would never be considered fashionable (462). In this context, at the beginning of 1928, before the publishing of both narrations, the public opinion was acclaiming Hall and considering Woolf particularly moderate, both as an author and as a public figure.

After the publication of the novel, it was believed that Hall incited legal action from British authorities by espousing an unacceptable sexual ideology in a sincere manner that aimed to preclude both laughter and moral condemnation. To promote sympathy and acceptance for lesbians, Hall ensured that her lesbian protagonist was portrayed as beyond reproach. The connection between obscenity and literature prompted Virginia Woolf to reflect on the matter in her diary "what is obscenity? What is literature? What is the difference between the subject and the treatment?" (*Diary 3*, 207). In a way, the turmoil on Hall's book gave Woolf the chance to think about the notions she would narrate in *Orlando*. Indeed, the proximity in publication dates between *The Well* in July and *Orlando* in October of the same year invites speculation about potential influences between the two works and Virginia Woolf's reflections on obscenity and literature. The controversy surrounding Hall's novel, particularly its legal challenges and debates about obscenity, likely contributed to Woolf's contemplation of similar issues. The months between the publication of *The Well* and the completion of *Orlando* could have provided Woolf with an opportunity to engage more deeply with questions about the boundaries of literature and the representation of sexuality, that led to the survival of her book.

Woolf attended Bow Street on November 9, the trial's inaugural day. She arrived at the trial ready to testify against the charges of obscenity. However, her dedication to Radclyffe Hall's cause was not as strong as some critics have implied. Like many in her Bloomsbury circle, Woolf harboured doubts about Hall's artistic credentials, considering her work excessively polemical (Parkes 435). During the preparation of the trial, Woolf discusses in her letters *The Well* and its author:

> Radclyffe […] says that she wont have any letter written about her book unless it mentions the fact that it is a work of artistic merit – even genius. And no one has read her book; or can read it […]. So our ardour in the cause of freedom of speech gradually cools, and instead of offering to reprint the masterpiece, we are already beginning to wish it unwritten. (*The Letters 3,* 520)

Numerous members of the Bloomsbury group shared Woolf's opinion, and eight days before the trial she explains that "Most of our friends are trying to evade the witness box; for reasons you may guess. But they generally put it down to the weak heart of a father, or a cousin who is about to have twins" (555). Woolf felt a sense of relief when she was spared the responsibility of defending Hall's novel in court. This came about due to the magistrate's ruling that only he, and not the defence's assortment of "expert witnesses," had the authority to determine whether *The Well* was obscene or not (Parkes 435).

Woolf ultimately decided against attending "the bloody womans trial" (*The Letters 3*, 563). Woolf's reservations about *The Well* extended beyond mere aesthetic concerns; they also underscored significant disparities between women regarding sexual politics – issues intricately intertwined with aesthetics. Woolf appeared hesitant to openly support the portrayal of the "mannish lesbian" image, a stereotype that, in part due to Hall's influence, became prevalent in Britain during the late 1920s (Parkes 435-6). Indeed, she declares that "it is a dreadful pity. I think that such a book should have been published. I do not mean for the ordinary reasons. What I mean is there are many unmarried women living alone. And now it is very hard on them that such a book should have been written" (*The Letters 3*, 525). Woolf's reservations about attending the trial and her hesitation to openly support certain portrayals of lesbian identity suggest that she was aware of the societal impact of Hall's novel and the stereotypes it perpetuated. The prevalence of this image of lesbianism may have influenced Woolf's perceptions and contributed to her reluctance to fully endorse certain aspects of Hall's portrayal

of lesbian identity. However, Woolf's complex views on sexuality and gender were shaped by a variety of factors, including her own experiences, relationships, and intellectual engagement with feminist and queer theories.

The sincerity attributed to *The Well* by both its supporters and detractors played a crucial role in the courtroom's mode of reading. By prosecuting the publisher, Jonathan Cape, and Leonard Hill of Pegasus Press instead of the author, the trial treated Hall's novel as an independent text, implying that authorial intent was irrelevant once the work was published. This notion was emphasised on the second day of the trial (16 November 1928) when Hall exclaimed, "I protest, I emphatically protest." Hall had no legal standing in the matter; her presence in the courtroom did not grant her any interpretative authority over her own work. Because her novel was deemed "sincere," the trial did not require further input from the author to identify its "voice." Any disturbance in the courtroom would merely distract the appropriate readers from their task.

The novel was viewed primarily as a vehicle for conveying a perceived harmful message, rather than as an expression of Radclyffe Hall's authorial intent. The prosecution of the publisher rather than the author underscores the notion that once a work is published, authorial intent becomes irrelevant, and the text is judged on its own merits or perceived demerits. Hall's protestation in the courtroom further highlights her lack of interpretative authority over her own work within the legal proceedings, emphasising that the novel was judged based on its perceived sincerity rather than the intentions of its creator. This thesis believes that Hall's text is neither harmful as sustained by the court, and neither dull, as Woolf sustains. Instead, this research affirms that *The Well* indeed contributed to LGBTQ+ literature and social advocacy, despite the stereotypical portrayal of lesbianism in the novel, but it also recognises its limitations as a work of fiction.

The same point was reinforced when Hall's appeal at the County of London Sessions on the 14th of December was unsuccessful. The Attorney General, Sir Thomas Inskip, condemned her book as more demoralising and corruptive than anything that was ever written, emphasising that obscenity must be judged by the law, and the author's intention does not matter. When the court upheld Biron's original ruling, Chief Magistrate Sir Robert Wallace made it clear in his concluding speech that the court had intentionally applied "certain laws of literary interpretation" in reaching their verdict (Parkes 438-9). To analyse Hall's writing critically, one would need to delve into the specific stylistic elements of her prose, such as her use of language, narrative structure, character development, and thematic exploration. Assessing the effectiveness of Hall's writing involves considering how well it achieves its intended goals, such as conveying the experiences of lesbian individuals, advocating for social tolerance, or engaging readers on an emotional or intellectual level. Additionally, situating Hall's writing within the broader context of her literary influences, social milieu, and historical significance can provide valuable insights into its strengths and limitations.

Despite the revolutionary nature of Radclyffe Hall's novel, her beliefs regarding gender were not necessarily aligned with the progressive theories circulating during the late 1920s. While Hall's work contributed to the visibility and advocacy for lesbian identity, her portrayal often adhered to more traditional and conservative notions of gender roles and femininity. This is particularly evident in her portrayal of the mannish lesbian stereotype, which, while challenging heterosexual norms, also reinforces binary gender categories. In contrast, Virginia Woolf's feminist ideals, while potentially appearing more traditionalist in her discussions of gender inversion, were decidedly avant-garde in their rejection of essentialist notions of gender. Through works like *Orlando*, Woolf explored gender fluidity within a more conventional narrative framework, yet her writings consistently challenged societal norms and questioned the limitations placed on women's autonomy and expression. Thus, while both Hall and Woolf

made significant contributions to feminist discourse, their views on gender differed in their alignment with contemporary theories and their approaches to challenging traditional norms.

By presenting her advocacy novel in the guise of an "over-sentimental" Victorian romance, Hall is believed to symbolically integrate her lesbian protagonist into the traditionally heterosexual domain. By adopting the tropes and conventions of Victorian romance, such as themes of love, sacrifice, and societal expectations, Hall could have subtly challenged and subverted the heteronormative narratives that dominated literature during that period (Roche 105). Nevertheless, examining literary genres through the lens of traditional gender associations proves valuable in this case. The classification of "Victorian romance," inherently linked with femininity, middlebrow culture, and domesticity, starkly contrasts with the content of Hall's novel. *The Well* revolves around the life of Stephen Gordon, unequivocally depicted as a masculine "congenital invert," making the alignment with traditional feminine genres seem out of place (Roche 106). Thus, Hall's decision to frame her advocacy novel within the guise of an over-sentimental Victorian romance may inadvertently reinforce rather than challenge traditional gender associations and stereotypes, particularly regarding lesbian identity.

Paradoxically, Hall's explicit intentions in her novel aligned closely with the overt grounds on which the trial was conducted. An interview published shortly before *The Well of Loneliness* indicates that Hall personally shared many assumptions about gender roles with the men who condemned her novel. She affirmed her belief that "generally speaking, woman's place is the home," and lamented that "one of the most deplorable of post-war conditions is, to my mind, the forcing of the wife and mother type of woman into a business or professional career." Hall argued that this condition was exacerbated "by the vast amount of nonsense that is written and talked about women's right to work." She stated, "To be a good wife and mother is the finest work a woman can do; it is the work for which Nature intended [her]" (Irons 4). These antifeminist pronouncements may seem at odds with the plea issued in *The Well*, yet they

are closely related. Hall based her plea for tolerance on the premise that female inverts were freaks of nature, unwittingly trapped in the wrong body, in the wrong place and time (Parkes 441). Woolf, known for her progressive views on gender and feminism, most certainly found Hall's espousal of traditional gender norms contradictory or regressive, particularly considering the societal context of the time. Nonetheless, while Hall's personal beliefs may have influenced perceptions of her work, it is unlikely that the novel was banned solely because she expressed conservative opinions. The trial and subsequent ban were more likely a result of the perceived obscenity and immorality of the novel's content, particularly its explicit portrayal of lesbian relationships and themes.

While *The Well* portrays lesbianism as a topic for intellectual discussion, *Orlando* transports its readers into the realm of imagination, seemingly detached from reality. However, *Orlando* is not merely an aesthete's escape from harsh realities. Rather, Woolf reshapes reality and history into a stage of seemingly boundless, ever-changing potential, prompting further inquiry of what defines gender, what defines sexuality, and what distinguishes normality from deviance. Hall also pondered these questions, but her main objective was to establish the "truth" and convince others to recognise lesbianism as a factual reality. Interestingly, this emphasis on adherence to fact was based on a discourse of "sincerity" that was inherent in both the discussions of the 1928 trial and the critical analyses of some subsequent readers attempting to construct a history of the lesbian novel (Parkes 436).

In *Orlando*, as aforementioned in this thesis, Woolf anticipates Butler's critique by examining and transforming the discursive practices that shaped the concept of lesbianism in Hall's novel and the 1928 trial. While Hall focuses on facts, Woolf leverages the performative aspects of sexual identity to create a world of performance, casting doubt on the rhetoric of sincerity. This nuanced exploration underscores a critical difference in approach between the two authors. While Hall's sincerity in portraying lesbian identity was not appreciated by the

judges, Woolf's examination of performative aspects suggests a more complex understanding of sexual identity and its construction within societal discourse. Woolf's ability to conceive sincerity within the realm of performance highlights her astute grasp of the intricacies of identity formation and societal expectations. *Orlando* suggests that portraying lesbianism will always make it appear secondary; instead, theatricality could serve as a means to resist the censorious effects of public discourse. By revisiting these issues, Woolf destabilises the foundations upon which both Hall's book and the trial were built (Parkes 436-7).

Woolf's exploration of theatricality in *Orlando* implies that the act of portraying lesbianism itself can inadvertently reinforce its marginalisation and secondary status within public discourse. Instead, she proposes that embracing theatricality and performance could serve as a more potent form of resistance against the censorious effects of societal norms and expectations. By highlighting the fluidity and constructed nature of identity, Woolf challenges the fixed and essentialist notions of gender and sexuality perpetuated by Hall's novel and the societal attitudes reflected in the trial. This demonstrates Woolf's ability to engage with complex social and cultural issues through her literary work, providing a nuanced and thought-provoking perspective on the representation of lesbian identity in literature.

Consequently, it is possible to state that Woolf did not consider Hall's work to meet the expectations of their time. Even so, Woolf was willing to defend the author from censorship in court. Analysing the concepts of gender inversion and lesbianism portrayed in the story of *The Well* together with Hall's beliefs, it is understandable to consider them innovative, since they were portrayed for the first time as something intrinsic of human nature, following sexological and psychological theories. Nevertheless, Hall's view on gender equality and women's rights results to be still extremely conservative. In the present case, this research considers Woolf's *Orlando*, that narrates a gender inversion and sexuality in moderate terms compared to *The Well*, more contemporary and effective in the discourse of queerness, primarily because it

avoided the banning and was therefore accessible to the public, but also for the author's skills in dealing with such a delicate subject for the timeframe in which it was published.

4. A Butlerian Feminist Reading of the Novels

Feminist readings of Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall offer a profound exploration of the ways in which both authors challenged and redefined the literary landscape of their time. Woolf, with her introspective and experimental narrative techniques, and Hall, with her bold depiction of lesbian identity in *The Well of Loneliness*, each confronted the patriarchal norms and conventions that dominated early 20th century literature. By examining their works through a feminist lens, this last chapter uncovers how they not only critiqued social expectations but also carved out spaces for female and queer voices, but in different ways. This analysis reveals the intersection of gender, sexuality, and literary form, highlighting the enduring impact of Woolf and Hall on feminist literary history and the ongoing struggle for representation and equality in literature, but also highlights who was the most successful in this portrayal. As a matter of fact, their contribution in the topics highlights how Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall remain influential pioneers in feminist literature, but in different ways. Their work continues to shape the movement for representation and equality, advocating for diverse voices to be heard and accepted.

Judith Butler remarks that "any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences" (vii-viii). Based on this assumption, this thesis frames the two novels' feminist ideals, affirming how Virginia Woolf excels in portraying them compared to Hall's narration of feminism. Woolf's exploration of gender roles, her incorporation of intersectional perspectives, and her innovative narrative techniques distinguish her portrayal of feminist ideals. In contrast, while Hall also addresses feminist themes, her narrative does not fully encompass the complexity and inclusivity advocated by Butler's critique. By examining the novels through this lens, the thesis aims to highlight Woolf's adeptness in capturing the multifaceted nature of feminist ideals, thus contributing to a deeper

understanding of their respective contributions to feminist literature. As a matter of fact, Butler affirms that "feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion" (viii) and this is precisely what Virginia Woolf does in her *Orlando*, and what Radclyffe Hall fulfils only in part.

Avoiding being stereotypical is one of the aims of Woolf in *Orlando*. Indeed, she refers to the fashion in literature – especially of her books *Orlando*, *Waves*, and *Flush* – and declaring in her diary entry on the 29th of October 1933, that "I will go on adventuring, changing, opening my mind and my eyes, refusing to be stamped and stereotyped" (Woolf, *Diary*, 216). Woolf's protagonist, in fact, despite noticing differences in how society behaves towards her after her sex change, is able to live her life in an unconventional way, only partly adhering to the norms of Victorian society. Radclyffe Hall, for her part, establishes the hierarchy and exclusion that Judith Butler would analyse sixty years later. Hall's depiction of Stephen as the lesbian intellectual relies heavily on stereotypical masculinity, suggesting that Stephen's achievements are possible only because she embodies masculine traits. Contemporary readers might question whether Stephen, as the protagonist, could have achieved the same literary accomplishments if she had embodied femininity instead of masculinity. This raises important considerations about the intersection of gender identity and social expectations, challenging the notion that strength and intellect are inherently tied to masculinity.

As a matter of fact, Butler subsequently declares that "whereas many feminists in the 1980s assumed that lesbianism meets feminism in lesbian-feminism, *Gender Trouble* sought to refuse the notion that lesbian practice instantiates feminist theory, and set up a more troubled relation between the two terms" (x). This thesis posits that merely portraying a lesbian character as a protagonist and martyr falls short of fulfilling feminist values. To truly align with Butler's feminist principles, a narrative must go beyond representation to challenge and deconstruct the

societal norms and power structures that marginalise and oppress women and LGBTQ+ individuals.

The Butlerian feminist reading of Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall illustrate the nuanced ways in which each author navigated and challenged the literary and societal norms of their time. Woolf's innovative narrative techniques and her subversive portrayal of gender in *Orlando* exemplify a form of feminism that transcends traditional gender binaries and stereotypes. Hall, through *The Well of Loneliness*, boldly brought lesbian identity to the forefront, though her depiction of Stephen's achievements as inherently tied to masculinity reflects some of the limitations identified by Judith Butler. Butler's theories on gender performativity and subversive repetition provide a valuable framework for understanding the strengths and shortcomings of both authors' approaches. In fact, Butler's concept of gender performativity helps readers recognise how Woolf's characters actively construct their gender identities through repeated actions and behaviours, rather than simply conforming to predetermined norms. Meanwhile, Hall's contributions, while groundbreaking in its own right, underscores the ongoing struggle within feminist discourse to avoid establishing new hierarchies and exclusions. Ultimately, both Woolf and Hall have made significant impacts on feminist literary history, yet Woolf's work more effectively embodies inclusivity that contemporary feminism aspires to achieve.

4.1. *Orlando* as a Feminist Text

According to Burns, Virginia Woolf made a groundbreaking contribution to feminist literary history. A feminist reading of *Orlando* reveals the novel's innovative exploration of gender fluidity and the social constructs surrounding gender identity (343). Through the protagonist, Woolf critiques the rigid gender binaries and societal expectations imposed on individuals. *Orlando* not only subverts traditional narratives by blending historical fiction with a fantastical biography but also challenges the patriarchal norms by presenting a character

whose essence transcends gender. This novel illuminates Woolf's sophisticated understanding of gender as a spectrum and her advocacy for a more inclusive, flexible conception of identity. Nevertheless, it should also be underlined that Woolf is "hardly so obliging," and "that contemporary feminist debates do violence to Woolf's texts whenever they try to create her as icon of their cause," as they seek to confine her identity to just one definition (Burns 343).

In 1928, the year Woolf published *Orlando*, she delivered a series of talks later compiled in *A Room*. In these talks, she urged women to write and find their voices, yet she remained preoccupied with the challenge of forming an identity in a world shaped by economic constraints and distorted representations of women. Woolf implicitly questioned how women, who had been excluded from the male literary tradition, could both engage with and resist that tradition and its expectations of their unworthiness (Burns 346-7). To illustrate the impact of social pressures, Woolf presents a hypothetical "Judith" Shakespeare, William's sister, who is equally talented but fails due to the "twisted and deformed" mindset that arises from society's restrictions on women's genius (85). Woolf explains, "all the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain" (86). She argues that this creative mindset is essential for artistic creation and can only be achieved in a peaceful, socially permitted environment. Orlando prematurely embodies this creative and androgynous mind.

Orlando and *A Room of One's Own* are prime examples where Woolf blends fact and fiction, seriousness and whimsy, to challenge conventional gender roles and expectations. This productive tension within her writing allows for a richer and more inclusive exploration of feminist thought, accommodating diverse experiences and perspectives. Judith Butler's theories on performativity and gender fluidity, as well as Toril Moi's analysis of Woolf's deconstructive approach to writing, provide a framework for understanding how Woolf's style itself is a form of feminist practice. Woolf's ambivalence and complexity are deliberate strategies that enrich

feminist discourse. Her writing not only reflects the multifaceted nature of truth and identity but also challenges readers to engage deeply with feminist ideas, promoting a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of gender and experience. Woolf's style, therefore, serves as a powerful tool for expanding the boundaries of feminist theory and practice.

De Gay points out that in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf encouraged her audience of female students at Cambridge University to rewrite history by uncovering and highlighting figures overlooked by traditional patriarchal histories in order to trace a female tradition (62). In *Orlando*, she vividly illustrates the constraints imposed on the protagonist after transitioning from male to female. One striking example occurs when Orlando, once a woman, instinctively hides her manuscript upon someone's entrance (Woolf 125). This act echoes an anecdote from the life of Jane Austen, which Woolf cited in *A Room of One's Own*, where Austen would conceal her writing when interrupted. The parallel underscores the persistent pressures faced by women writers to downplay or disguise their intellectual endeavours in a patriarchal society (98-9). By encouraging women to rewrite history and celebrate overlooked female figures, Woolf promoted intellectual empowerment and the legitimacy of women's voices. Her exploration of gender dynamics and the intersections of gender, creativity, and societal expectations continues to inspire and inform contemporary feminist thought, therefore contributing to the advancement of feminist theory.

Indeed, Orlando's shift in gender brings an acute awareness of societal taboos. She realises that describing "sullen and foreign-looking" girls (Woolf 183) is now considered inappropriate, a detail that was acceptable when she was a man. This newfound restriction highlights the double standards and increased scrutiny women face in their expressions and descriptions, reflecting broader themes of censorship and self-censorship imposed on women. Through these narrative choices, Woolf exposes the arbitrary and oppressive nature of gender

norms, inviting readers to question and critique the societal structures that restrict female agency and creativity (De Gay 65).

In addition, agreeing with Burns, this thesis believes that Woolf's feminism is also reflected in the fact that although clothes play an important role as Orlando adjusts to womanhood, the protagonist remains aware that she is the one choosing the clothes. Throughout the novel, Orlando frequently engages in crossdressing. As a woman, she occasionally wears a man's breeches and cloak to roam the countryside with the same freedom a man enjoys during his nightly adventures (Woolf 153). In this way, she meets Nell, a friendly streetwalker, who first mistakes her for a male lover and then, upon realising she is a woman, befriends and confides in her (Woolf 151). Through these encounters, Orlando experiences her identity shifting in response to gender expectations influenced by crossdressing. Clothing also impacts class perception. As a man, Orlando uses clothing to disguise herself as lower class (Woolf 89), allowing her to escape the constraints of the upper class and mingle with the women of local pubs and byways (Burns 351-2). Burns' analysis helps uncover this feminist practice, showing how Woolf's deliberate use of clothing in *Orlando* serves as a powerful tool for exploring and subverting traditional gender and class identities. In this way, Woolf gives to her character freedom and criticise the gender roles of her society at the same time.

On one hand, Woolf's feminism – encompassing her explicit feminist politics, her interest in gender identities, and her focus on women's lives, histories, and fictions – deeply influenced her writing. On the other hand, feminist criticism and theory from the latter half of the twentieth century have significantly reshaped the perception and reception of Woolf. Both these perspectives are supported by Marcus in "Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf" (142). In Anglo-American contexts, she had largely fallen out of favour by the 1950s and 1960s, with the immediate post-war generation viewing her as representative of a pre-war sensibility. However, in subsequent decades, women critics and academics developing new feminist

approaches found Woolf's work resonating strongly with their concerns. This connection was particularly evident in the first-person narrative (with a diffuse and multiple 'I') of *A Room of One's Own*, and in the voices emerging from Woolf's newly accessible essays, letters, diaries, and memoirs (Marcus 142). I agree that the revival of interest in Woolf's work by later feminist critics underscores her lasting impact and the continuing relevance of her exploration of gender, identity, and the female experience. In fact, her personal writings offer an intimate look at her thoughts and experiences, providing rich material for feminist analysis and reaffirming her significance in feminist literary canon.

Laura Rado, in her article "Would the Real Virginia Woolf Please Stand Up? Feminist Criticism, the Androgyny Debates, and Orlando" suggests that Woolf appropriated the controversial yet potentially powerful trope of androgyny to generate the creative inspiration and artistic authority she felt she lacked. Rado's position can be seen as both a response to and a divergence from Marcus's interpretation. While Marcus focuses on the broader feminist implications and the direct influence of feminist politics on Woolf's work, Rado zooms in on a specific literary strategy – Woolf's use of androgyny – as a tool for creative and artistic liberation. Rado acknowledges Woolf's engagement with gender, but she frames it more as a tactical appropriation rather than an overt political stance. The scholar's insights are valuable for a more comprehensive understanding of Woolf's approach to gender and creativity. By mentioning Rado, it is possible to appreciate the complexity of Woolf's literary strategies and her navigation of gender dynamics. The scholar's argument that androgyny served as a means for Woolf to claim creative authority complements Marcus's view by adding another layer of interpretation – suggesting that Woolf's feminist engagement was not only ideological but also deeply personal and practical.

As already mentioned, in Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*, she discusses the notion of the androgynous mind, proposing that great minds are inherently a mix of both masculine

and feminine qualities. However, this ideal has been critiqued for potentially downplaying the significance of the female experience and body in the pursuit of a more universally acceptable literary identity. Rado asserts that by attempting to forge an often troubled union between herself and her vision of a "third sexed" imagination, Woolf seeks to escape the perceived vulnerability of the female subject position. However, the irony in Woolf's strategy is that it succeeds in its aim: the empowerment it seeks to produce is predicated on the repression of her own female identity and female body (Rado 150). Scholars like Elaine Showalter and Toril Moi have explored the tension in Woolf's work between her feminist ambitions and the strategies she employs, such as androgyny, which might obscure her female identity. They argue that such strategies can be seen as a form of internalised repression due to the pressures of conforming to a predominantly male literary canon.

Elaine Showalter argues that for Virginia Woolf, the concept of androgyny – defined as a "full balance and command of an emotional range that includes both male and female elements" (263) – served as a myth that allowed her to avoid confronting her own painful experience of being female. This myth enabled Woolf to suppress her anger and ambition. Showalter criticises Woolf for attempting to transcend feminist conflict even as she expressed it. According to Showalter, Woolf's desire for experience was essentially a desire to forget it. Woolf's emphasis on the androgynous nature of great writers, Showalter suggests, reflects a retreat from a "troubled feminism."

The scholar further contends that Woolf's use of literary techniques such as repetition, exaggeration, parody, whimsy, and multiple viewpoints in *A Room of One's Own* merely creates an impression of "strenuous charm," distracting from the core feminist message of the essay (Showalter 264-282). Showalter's critique that Woolf's literary techniques detract from her feminist message warrants a nuanced exploration. Techniques like repetition can be understood not merely as ornamental but as integral to Woolf's method of subverting traditional narrative

structures. These techniques can be seen as tools Woolf uses to disrupt linear, patriarchal modes of storytelling, thereby offering a more fragmented and inclusive representation of reality. Rather than distracting from her message, these techniques might be seen as enhancing it by embodying the very fluidity and multiplicity that Woolf advocates for.

Moi declares that Virginia Woolf's writing embodies what it might now be described as a "deconstructive" approach, one that interrogates and reveals the inherent contradictions within discourse. Woolf's textual practice highlights how language resists being fixed to any singular, essential meaning. By consciously playing with the fluid and sensual nature of language, Woolf rejects the metaphysical essentialism that underpins patriarchal ideology, which venerates God, the Father, or the phallus as ultimate, transcendent symbols (Moi 9). Building on Moi's argument, this thesis affirms how Woolf's deconstructive writing style challenges and subverts patriarchal constructs, contrarily to what stated by Showalter. Woolf's manipulation of language not only exposes the instability of meaning but also undermines the rigid binaries and hierarchies that sustain patriarchal thought. This strategy aligns with her feminist objectives, as it dismantles the authority of patriarchal symbols and opens up a space for alternative, more inclusive expressions of identity and experience. Woolf's deconstructive approach can be seen as a form of feminist empowerment. By rejecting the notion of a single, stable meaning, Woolf creates a literary space where multiple perspectives, especially those of women, can coexist and be validated.

I align with both Butler's and Moi's interpretations, which view Woolf's techniques not as distractions but as integral to her feminist project. Woolf's use of repetition, exaggeration, and multiple viewpoints can be understood as a means to destabilise fixed notions of identity and gender, aligning with Butler's idea that identity is performative and constantly in flux. Additionally, Woolf's deconstructive approach, as described by Moi, reveals the instability of language and meaning, challenging patriarchal constructs. This thesis reckons that although

Woolf's feminist beliefs are ambivalent, her androgynous trope in *Orlando* does not eventually lead to the repression of her own female identity. On the contrary, Orlando's crossdressing and understanding of how the people around them react based on their gender, bespeak Woolf's feminism which consists in indicting gender inequality.

A feminist text, drawing from insights by scholars like Elaine Showalter, Lorna Burns, Toril Moi, Jane Gallop, and Pamela Caughie, consequently can be understood as a literary work that actively challenges and subverts traditional gender norms while amplifying women's experiences and voices. Showalter's concept of the feminine literary tradition foregrounds women's stories and perspectives, expanding the canon to be more inclusive and representative, while Burns' analysis emphasises the complexity of gender identity through characters who navigate and negotiate their identities. Moi's exploration of deconstruction and gender destabilisation informs how feminist texts dismantle patriarchal structures, inviting readers to question traditional assumptions. Additionally, Gallop and Caughie highlight the importance of contextual awareness and continuous transformation, ensuring that feminist texts remain rooted in historical contexts while fostering diverse and inclusive discourses, ultimately contributing to the ongoing evolution of feminist theory and practice.

The question of Virginia Woolf's feminism has been a focal point in early critical analyses of her work. One of the first comprehensive studies of Woolf was authored by novelist and feminist critic Winifred Holtby. In her book, Holtby delves into the gendered perspectives and politics of Woolf's era, addressing the concept of androgyny, which has become central to contemporary feminist critiques of Woolf. By examining *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* together, Holtby suggested that Woolf's notion of androgyny was not a mean of sidestepping sexual identity, but rather was intricately connected to theories of bisexuality and female homosexuality (Holtby 180-3). Holtby's analysis highlights how Woolf's depiction of same-sex relationships in *Orlando*, such as the deep bond between Orlando and Sasha, touches on

themes of female homosexuality, further supporting the view that Woolf's work engages deeply with the complexities of sexual identity.

According to Lee, a prominent biographer of Virginia Woolf, the author has a deep interest in the "lives of the obscure" and in undervalued literary forms such as memoirs, letters, and journals. These forms predominantly feature the lives of women. Thus, when Woolf writes about biography, she is inherently writing about feminism "for Virginia Woolf, a revolution in biography is also a sexual revolution" (Lee 31). Woolf's method of intertwining opposing elements and refusing to be pinned down to a single perspective is reflective of her broader philosophical engagement with truth and identity. This complexity is particularly relevant in her biographical works, where she blends fact and fiction, the public and private, to create a richer, more inclusive narrative. By revolutionising the genre of biography, Woolf opened up new ways of understanding and representing the lives of women, thereby contributing to the broader feminist movement that sought to redefine and expand the roles and identities available to women.

Woolf's writing challenges readers to move beyond surface interpretations according to Burns. Her ambivalence is not a weakness but a strength, fostering a dynamic and layered reading experience. This complexity encourages the public to embrace the ambiguity and multiplicity inherent in feminist discourse (Burns 347). Critics like Pamela Caughie and Hermione Lee have highlighted how Woolf's narrative style resists simple categorisation and instead promotes a nuanced understanding of identity and experience. By delving into the nuances of Woolf's work, one can see how her deliberate interplay of contradictions generates a fertile ground for multiple feminist positions. Her narratives do not offer straightforward answers but invite ongoing questioning and reinterpretation.

Therefore, it is crucial to recognise that Woolf's style and ideas consistently intertwines opposing elements, creating a tapestry of complexity and depth. Whenever she makes a

definitive statement, she promptly follows it with a qualification or subtly introduces a contrary possibility, demonstrating her refusal to be pinned down to a single perspective. An example is her discourse on identity introduced by the biographer in *Orlando*, which highlights the different currents of thought of her time. This stylistic approach is not merely a literary technique but a profound reflection of her philosophical engagement with the multifaceted nature of truth and identity.

As evidenced by Goldman, Woolf's feminist literary criticism is not entirely unique, as evidenced by her extensive writings on her feminist predecessors and contemporaries. It would be incorrect to assume that her arguments are completely original (Goldman 2007, 67). For instance, her interests in the gender politics of literary production and consumption, and the influence of women's rise on fiction, as outlined in *A Room of One's Own*, were partially anticipated in "Men and Art," a chapter from the now largely forgotten *The Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Cultur*e (1911) by feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Nonetheless, it is Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* that has become canonised as the first modern work of feminist literary criticism (Goldman 2007, 67).

Goldman highlights that Virginia Woolf's contribution to feminist literary criticism and theory is complex and multifaceted, partly due to her vast body of work and partly because of her ambivalence toward the term feminism. While she posed many significant questions for feminist criticism, she did not always provide definitive answers. Her involvement in feminist and suffragist activities fluctuated, and her use of the term feminism was inconsistent over the years (Goldman 2007, 69). Despite her significant role in advancing feminist discourse, by the late 1930s, she expressed scepticism about the term "feminist," ultimately calling it "vicious," "corrupt," and "obsolete" in *Three Guineas* (1938):

> What more fitting than to destroy an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete? The word 'feminist' is the word indicated.

> That word, according to the dictionary, means 'one who champions the rights of women'. Since the only right, the right to earn a living, has been won, the word no longer has a meaning. And a word without a meaning is a dead word, a corrupt word. Let us therefore celebrate this occasion by cremating the corpse. Let us write that word in large black letters on a sheet of foolscap; then solemnly apply a match to the paper. Look, how it burns! (Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 227)

This passage from Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* can be seen as a provocative and ironic critique of the term "feminist" as it was understood in her time. Woolf's dramatic metaphor serves to provoke thought and debate about the state of women's rights and the language we use to discuss them, suggesting that the fight for true equality is far from over and requires constant re-evaluation and redefinition.

Virginia Woolf's feminist agenda in *Orlando*, which reaches its most complete and explicit form in her fifties, is fundamentally literary. It is deeply connected to her ambition to revolutionise biography. Woolf seeks to discover new ways to narrate women's as yet unnarrated, a pursuit she undertakes from the very beginning of her writing career. In her later published essays, Virginia Woolf masterfully develops the creative interplay between the biographer or historian and the deceased subject. Her essays are likely the envy of any biographer, as she brings the dead to life most vividly in her pieces on the "great women of their time," pouring her energy into imagining her subjects through their archival materials (Lee 32).

In Virginia Woolf's reflections on feminism and biography, as well as in her novel-writing and thoughts on autobiography, she frequently grapples with the theme of censorship. When she begins writing her memoirs in the late 1930s, she notes, "I have been thinking about Censors. How visionary figures admonish us" and "all books now seem to me surrounded by a circle of invisible censors. Hence their selfconsciousness, their restlessness" (Woolf, *Diary*,

318). She believes that all writers are aware of these admonishing figures, but women in particular are overshadowed by them and consequently feel unable to tell their stories truthfully. This preoccupation with censorship and the challenge of truthful storytelling is vividly reflected in her novel *Orlando* (Lee 34). Woolf's recognition of these constraints shapes the way she resists and transforms dominant literary and societal traditions without establishing a new alternative tradition that might become equally restrictive, repressive, and authoritative. By portraying Orlando's fluid identity and historical journey, Woolf challenges the rigid norms and expectations imposed on both writers and women, illustrating her endeavour to break free from these constraints.

Facing feminist criticism today is a challenge that Virginia Woolf grappled with in her own work as well: how to resist and transform the dominant literary and societal traditions without establishing a new alternative tradition that might become equally restrictive, repressive, and authoritative. For Woolf, and for feminist critics, the solution lies not in reconciling, balancing, or choosing between two opposing positions but in continuously enacting certain methods and approaches (Caughie 1991, xi-xii). Therefore, feminist criticism must remain dynamic and adaptable, perpetually questioning and re-evaluating its own practices and assumptions. By doing so, it can avoid becoming a rigid orthodoxy and continue to foster a diverse and inclusive discourse that reflects the complexities and multiplicities of women's experiences and identities. Woolf's legacy, thus, encourages feminist critics to embrace an ongoing process of critical engagement and transformation.

Caughie affirms that "*Orlando* works as a feminist text not because of what it says about sexual identity but because of what it manages not to say," not due to what it reveals about the relationship between the sexes, but because of what it does to that relationship; not because its protagonist is androgynous, but because its discourse is duplicitous (1989, 41). Many feminist critics risk oversimplifying and reducing the significance of the androgynous personality in

Woolf's *Orlando* by treating it as merely an alternative to or substitute for traditional character archetypes according to Caughie. This tendency can lead to the text being transformed into a new norm or stereotype, contrary to its intent of challenging norms and standards (1989, 49-50). Nevertheless, *Orlando* is surprisingly contemporary, particularly because it distinguishes between sex and gender, treating them as independent concepts. Although many contemporary queer novels centre on feminism and queerness, too few acknowledge that this is not a new development. *Orlando* stands as a prime example of such a novel.

However, the notions of sexuality and gender identity illustrated by the author need to be analysed in their setting. Indeed, Woolf's portrayal of context in the novel illustrates how detached remarks or traits can become enduring stereotypes. Gallop's notion of "normalizing moralism" highlights the danger of dividing literary standards or social values from their historical and rhetorical contexts (11). Similarly, taking Woolf's statements about androgyny out of context risks trivialising them. Instead, the concept gains its potency from the specific textual and sexual relationships within which it operates. Gallop's assertion that true possession involves the willingness to exchange something for an equivalent value underscores the importance of examining Woolf's work within its particular textual and contextual framework, rather than extrapolating universal truths about human nature or femininity (Caughie 1989, 50). By situating Woolf's concepts within their specific historical, textual, and relational contexts, we can appreciate the depth and complexity of her feminist insights without reducing them to simplistic or universal statements. This nuanced approach aligns with Gallop's and Caughie's arguments about the importance of context in literary criticism, ensuring a more accurate and meaningful interpretation of Woolf's work.

In conclusion, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* stands as a seminal work in feminist literary history, interrogating the fluidity of gender and critiquing the rigid binaries imposed by patriarchal society. Underlining that a feminist text is defined as one that interrogates patriarchal

structures, highlights the performative nature of gender, and embraces ambiguity and multiplicity, it is possible to state that Woolf's innovative narrative not only subverts traditional storytelling but also challenges the societal constraints that stifle female creativity and expression. Despite her ambivalence towards the term "feminism," her complex engagement with feminist discourse, and the different stances feminist critics took for or against her in a century, this thesis believes that Woolf's exploration of androgyny and gender dynamics in *Orlando* resonates profoundly with contemporary feminist theory. In addition, Pamela Caughie's emphasis on contextual awareness and continuous transformation complements other scholars' perspectives, providing a nuanced understanding of feminist texts. By highlighting the performative nature of gender and the impact of societal expectations on individual identity, Woolf's work continues to inspire feminist critics to embrace ambiguity and multiplicity. This nuanced approach allows for a richer, more inclusive understanding of feminist thought, one that refuses to be confined to a single perspective. Woolf's legacy, thus, lies in her ability to intertwine literary innovation with profound social critique, making her work a cornerstone of feminist literary analysis and a testament to the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

4.2. Feminism in *The Well of Loneliness*

In the nineteenth century and earlier, individual women often passed as men by dressing and acting like them for various economic, sexual, and adventure-seeking reasons. Many of these women were from the working class. Public, partial crossdressing among bourgeois women became more common in the late nineteenth century. While lesbian themes are undeniably present in the *The Well of Loneliess*, asserting the presence of feminist ideals is more complex. This section explores the feminist perspectives that Radclyffe Hall may have incorporated into her book and evaluates whether Hall, in comparison to Woolf, was able to make a significant contribution to feminist literary history. Following Newton's argument, isolated instances of partial crossdressing were sometimes linked to explicit feminism, as seen

in figures like French writer George Sand and American physician Mary Walker. Most nineteenth-century feminists, however, continued to wear traditional women's clothing. By the last years of the century, cross-dressing was increasingly associated with "sexual inversion" by the medical profession. Notably, Radclyffe Hall, a prominent figure in this context, exemplified the intersection of crossdressing and lesbian identity (Newton 558). The intersection and Hall's portrayal of the mannish lesbian inside her novel has been discussed by feminist critics, frequently underlying that the author's narration appears stereotypical.

The twenties were a decade characterised by the sex reform, and the struggle connected to it. The sex reform was a broad movement that emerged in the 1920s, primarily in Western societies, aimed at challenging and reforming prevailing attitudes towards sexuality, particularly in relation to gender roles, sexual behaviour, and reproductive rights. It influenced societal views on women in several ways. It defined women's sexuality as passive and framed sexual intercourse as a means of maintaining male domination. It also started to categorise women's passionate friendships with each other as lesbianism, thereby restricting what was considered acceptable in female friendships and giving rise to unfounded and malicious suspicion. Lesbians, like spinsters and "frigid" women, were seen as problematic by sex reformers because they did not conform to "normal" heterosexual female-male relationships. This nonconformity allowed them to gain a form of autonomy and independence outside the family sphere (Whitlock 555-6). For Radclyffe Hall, being born in the middle of the sex reform, the characterisation of lesbianism as problematic was a stereotype that she wanted to fight. In writing her masterpiece, however, she contributes on the creation of a lesbian stereotype.

Heterosexual conservatives condemn *The Well of Loneliness* for defending the lesbian's right to exist, while lesbian feminists criticise it for portraying lesbians as different from women in general. Nevertheless, *The Well* holds continuing significance for lesbians because it confronts the stigma associated with lesbianism, as most lesbians have experienced it. Unlike

Virginia Woolf, who was safely married and could dismiss patriarchal norms, most lesbians have faced being labelled or feeling like outcasts. The mannish lesbian, epitomised by Stephen Gordon, has embodied the stigma of lesbianism, resonating deeply with a broad range of lesbians. Another reason for the enduring impact of *The Well* is that Stephen Gordon articulated a gender orientation with which an important minority of lesbians still actively identify (Newton 560). While Newton emphasises the enduring impact of the novel's depiction of the mannish lesbian archetype, epitomised by the protagonist Stephen Gordon, I take issue with the characterisation of lesbianism as inherently stigmatised. Newton suggests that this portrayal resonates deeply with many lesbians who have faced societal condemnation and ostracization, thereby contributing to the novel's lasting significance.

However, my contemporary view on lesbianism challenges the notion that lesbian identity is inherently stigmatised. Instead, I recognise the diversity and complexity of lesbian experiences, acknowledging that while some lesbians may indeed face discrimination and marginalisation, others find acceptance and pride in their identities. By portraying lesbianism solely through the lens of stigma and ostracization, Hall's novel may perpetuate harmful stereotypes and contribute to the condemnation of homosexuality. My perspective seeks to move beyond this narrow portrayal, embracing a more nuanced understanding of lesbian identity that celebrates diversity and challenges societal prejudices. Therefore, while I acknowledge the impact of *The Well of Loneliness* in representing certain aspects of lesbian experience, I also critique its limited depiction of lesbian identity and advocate for more inclusive and affirming representations in literature and society. Stephen Gordon is a controversial character, as she undeniably demonstrates the congenital nature of sexual orientation, but this comes at the cost of a stifled life.

Faderman aligns with this theory. She believes that works such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond* (1799), Louisa May Alcott's *Work* (1873), Florence Converse's *Diana Victrix*

(1897), and Sarah Orne Jewett's *Martha's Lady* (1897) also depict love between women in a "completely faithful" manner, but, unlike Hall's Stephen Gordon "the women characters of those novels never consider themselves abnormal or pathetic because they love other women" (24). Therefore, *The Well of Loneliness*, being "the lesbian Bible," creates the figure of the fictional lesbian, who is characterised by the lack of acceptance of her own being and solitude. Woolf is more ambiguous with her character, but this proves to be the winning card for her biography.

Newton's analysis can be seen as engaging in dialogue with Faderman's perspective. By endowing a biological female with a masculine identity, Hall simultaneously challenges and reinforces patriarchal gender categories. If gender were truly natural, the mannish lesbian should not exist, yet Hall makes Stephen a living, suffering hero – neither a villain nor a clown. Newton's assertion that Hall simultaneously challenges and reinforces patriarchal gender categories through the character of Stephen Gordon can be interpreted as a response to Faderman's broader analysis. While Faderman highlights examples of literature where lesbian love is depicted without stigma, Newton narrows the focus to examine how *The Well* perpetuates certain negative stereotypes about lesbian identity. Stephen not only survives social condemnation but also advocates for herself. However, she sacrifices her legitimacy as both a woman and an aristocrat, facing significant interpersonal costs, including the loss of her mother and her lover, Mary.

The Well delves into the self-hatred and doubt inherent in defining oneself as a "sexual deviant" according to Newton, as this identification inherently accepts a divisive distinction from heterosexual women. Men have historically used this distinction to condemn lesbians and intimidate straight women, fostering fear and antagonism that has weakened the modern feminist movement. This is why lesbian feminists, supported by some straight feminists, strive to redefine lesbianism as "woman-identification" during the 20th century, a model that

inadvertently disadvantages heterosexual feminists. Hall's portrayal of lesbianism as both sexual difference and masculinity contrasts sharply with lesbian feminist ideology (Newton 573-4).

While Hall was likely aware of censorship, much like Woolf, she certainly made no effort to obscure or disguise the controversial subject of her novel. Instead, she adopted an open and polemical stance on female homosexuality, which alienated her from both the lesbian and heterosexual communities. Whereas Woolf sought to soften the impact of queer narratives on a heterosexual and conservative public, aiming for gradual understanding and potential acceptance, Hall was far more straightforward in her approach. In addition, Hall publicly aligned her novel with the naturist perspective, that is the theory of homosexual love associated with Havelock Ellis. The naturists argued that women do not become lesbians by choice or circumstance but are born with an inherent condition they termed "congenital inversion." Hall went so far as to invite Ellis to write a preface for the first edition of *The Well of Loneliness*. In his preface, Ellis endorsed the novel, presenting it as a representation and validation of his theories on homosexuality. This collaboration underscored Hall's commitment to advocating for the naturist view and highlighted the scientific discourse surrounding homosexuality at the time, further fuelling the novel's contentious reception (Whitlock 557).

Whitlock affirms that Hall's adoption of the sexologists' discourse and the label of "invert" provided her with strategic advantages despite its clear heterosexist implications. Medical sexology characterised the invert as a man trapped in a woman's body, inherently masculine and always attracted to women, thus portraying the lesbian as "abnormal" while still upholding the norms of the "normal" (557). At the same time, Esther Newton further explores why Stephen Gordon, the "most infamous mannish lesbian," was created not by male figures but by Hall, an openly militant, tie-wearing lesbian (559). Newton argues that the sexologists' discourse and the mannish lesbian image enabled Hall to move beyond the asexual model of

romantic friendship. Consequently, the reliance on sexologists' discourse risked perpetuating the idea that true sexual desire was inherently male, thereby undermining the potential for recognising female desire as independent and self-defined. In embracing the label of "invert," Hall navigated a complex terrain: she resisted the asexual and sin-based models of her predecessors, yet simultaneously affirmed a heterosexist view of sexuality that ultimately constrained the broader redefinition of female sexual identity. Newton's analysis helps elucidate how Hall's strategic use of sexological discourse both advanced and limited the representation of lesbian identity in her work.

This positioned Hall within the second generation of New Women, "who […] flourished from the 1890s through the First World War. They sought personal and economic independence by rejecting their mothers' domestic roles," however, these figures "turned to romantic friendships as the alternative, replicating the female world of love and commitment in the new institutional settings of colleges and settlement houses" (Newton 561). They rejected the "passionless" ideology of the first generation in favour of a more sexual and physical understanding of the female body. Through the label of "invert," lesbians could claim the passionate, physical desire that sexologists linked to masculine behaviour. Nevertheless, by admitting that passion and physical desire are predominantly pertaining to men, Hall and her contemporaries inadvertently reinforced the very gender norms they sought to challenge. In this way, from the audience there were fears that the "masculinisation" of women posed a threat to the institution of heterosexuality.

Accordingly, Vern and Bonnie Bullough observe that, indeed, after the publication of *The Well*, the stereotypes and allegations of lesbianism became more marked.

> Instead of applauding the fact that lesbianism was being brought out in the open and discussed publicly, almost to a woman they decried its publication. One woman, seemingly typical, felt that the novel caused people who before had never heard of

> lesbianism to try to classify as a lesbian every woman who wore a suit (with a skirt) and was seen more than once in the company of another woman (Bullough and Bullough 897).

This result is that instead of promoting the movement in a positive and natural way, basing her narration on scientific proofs, Hall managed to convince a part of her readers that lesbianism and sexual inversion were viruses spreading more and more frequently among women.

Therefore, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* occupies a complex and contested space in both feminist and lesbian literary histories. While her novel was groundbreaking in openly discussing lesbianism and advocating for the recognition of lesbian rights, it simultaneously entrenched stereotypes and medicalised views of same-sex attraction that many contemporary feminists and lesbians found problematic. Hall's reliance on sexologists' discourse, specifically the concept of "congenital inversion," provided a scientific veneer that legitimised lesbian identity but at the cost of framing it within heterosexist and pathological paradigms. This strategic alignment with the naturist perspective facilitated a public discussion of lesbianism yet perpetuated the notion of lesbians as fundamentally different from other women, thereby maintaining a divisive distinction that could be weaponised against both lesbians and feminists.

Comparatively, Virginia Woolf's more ambiguous approach to queer narratives, as seen in her works, allowed for a subtler subversion of patriarchal norms, offering a model of gradual understanding and potential acceptance that contrasted with Hall's polemical stance. While Woolf's ambiguity provided a broader space for exploring female sexuality and identity, Hall's forthrightness in *The Well* made her work a focal point of both condemnation and identification within the lesbian community. The critical reception of *The Well of Loneliness* reflects the broader societal tensions of the 1920s regarding sex reform and the categorisation of women's relationships. The novel's impact, marked by its banning and subsequent notoriety, highlights

the difficulties faced by early 20th century lesbians in seeking acceptance and legitimacy. Ultimately, Hall's contribution to feminist literary history is significant yet fraught with the contradictions inherent in her time. Her work underscores the necessity of nuanced and inclusive representations of female sexuality that do not merely invert patriarchal norms but seek to dismantle them entirely. Hall's legacy, complex as it is, continues to provoke discussion and reflection on the intersections of gender, sexuality, and societal norms.

Conclusion

By the conclusion of both novels, the protagonists have undergone transformative journeys that culminate in their emergence as distinctly different individuals. The same happened to me in writing this thesis. Creating a dialogue between two masterpieces such as *Orlando: A Biography* and *The Well of Loneliness* includes questioning the major scholars and opinions rooted in the years. When I embarked on this thesis, I never imagined concluding that *The Well of Loneliness*, the banned and scandalous novel, would ironically emerge as the more stereotypical and deeply entrenched in Victorian and biblical societal values compared to its counterpart. Nevertheless, this conclusion is given by Hall's depiction of a regretful acceptance of the lesbian identity imposed on Stephen, extremely far from the reality of the lesbian movement. Indeed, the portrayal of gender in the text adheres closely to conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity of its time. However, Radclyffe Hall's daring lies in depicting individuals who identify as masculine despite being assigned female at birth.

In the comparison between the two authors, Woolf occupies a space that challenges binary constructs of gender and identity, demonstrating that being "in the middle," exactly like her androgynous protagonist, becomes a metaphorical "winning weapon," allowing her to survive censorship in 1928 society. Therefore, her disregard of the rigid frameworks of the sexological theories of her time, combined with her avant-guard style, do not make her traditionalist and conservative, but instead they transform into an advantage for her narration and for the advancement of feminist ideals.

My analysis has demonstrated that Woolf engages with queerness and feminism in a manner more closely aligned with our contemporary understanding of these

concepts. Nevertheless, this research has also established that Hall's *The Well* influenced *Orlando*, contributing to its success. An interesting point for further research might be analysing the extent to which Hall was influential for Woolf, but also a broader analysis of other queer novels published in 1928 which survived censorship, such as Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women*, Elizabeth Bowen's *The Hotel*, and Djuna Barnes' *Ladies Almanack*.

Much remains to be discovered by applying contemporary queer theories and perspectives to these texts. However, I hope that with my analysis I have contributed to a deeper understanding of how *Orlando* and *The Well of Loneliness* navigate and challenge the societal norms of their time.

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