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# *The Well of Loneliness*

RADCLYFFE HALL



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

# THE WELL OF LONELINESS

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Radclyffe Hall

*Introduction and Notes by*  
ESTHER SAXEY

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

*General Adviser*  
KEITH CARABINE  
*Rutherford College*  
*University of Kent at Canterbury*

## INTRODUCTION

### I

*The Well of Loneliness* is a vibrant account of passion between women. The heroine Stephen Gordon spends her childhood as an aristocratic tomboy; as an adult, she becomes a war hero, writer and lover of other women. The novel is a work of propaganda; it tries one strategy after another to enlist reader sympathy for Stephen, and for the 'miserable army' of men and women like her. Because of this agenda, it was banned for obscenity within four months of its publication.

Marguerite Radclyffe Hall, known to friends as 'John', was born in 1880. As a child she was close to her grandmother; her father was absent, and her mother and stepfather abusive. She became independently wealthy on her father's death. By the time Hall began writing *The Well*, she was living with her second long-term lover, Una Troubridge, and was prominent in fashionable London and

Parisian society. She favoured tailored clothing, cropped her hair and smoked cigarettes. Her most recent novel, *Adam's Breed* (1926) had won two prestigious prizes. This literary success inspired her to risk a deeply personal project, motivated by her own experience and her sense of social injustice: 'a book on sexual inversion, a novel that would be accessible to the general public who did not have access to technical treatises . . . to speak on behalf of a misunderstood and misjudged minority'. (Hall's intentions as summarised in Troubridge's biography, p. 81). This crusading book was to be *The Well of Loneliness*, published in 1928.

Initial reviews of the novel were measured and mostly favourable. However, the editor of the the *Sunday Express*, James Douglas, savagely attacked *The Well*: 'I would rather give a healthy boy or girl a vial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body, but moral poison kills the soul.' In response, the publisher Jonathan Cape submitted a copy to the Home Secretary, and on his advice, withdrew the novel in the UK. However, Cape continued publishing and importing the novel from Paris – it was already on its third printing, and the scandal had increased demand. The novel was seized by customs, prosecuted for obscenity in November and banned.

*The Well* became an international bestseller, and retained its status as the 'Lesbian bible' for the length of the twentieth century. Many other novels featuring relationships between women have been popular: lesbian pulp novels were a bestselling genre in the 1950s and 60s, including Ann Bannon's series of 'Beebo Brinker' novels (published between 1957–62). In subsequent decades, novels such as Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) were influential in feminist and lesbian politics. No individual novel, however, has challenged *The Well's* pre-eminence. Its fame has been sustained by successive generations of readers; its portrayal of a dashing heroine who loves women is still rare, and its charm as a period piece has increased over time. Its fierce detractors have also kept it in the limelight.

However, *The Well* is not a 'bible'. Nor is it a template or an instruction manual for love between women, although it has been read in this way for decades. It is rather an intense examination of the meaning of gender identity, and of love between women, through the lens of one author's beliefs. Hall created Stephen at a time when gender roles and sexual identities were in flux; several explanations and perspectives, new and old, were available to her when she wrote. Sometimes Hall uses sexual science from the late nineteenth century;

she was a keen reader of the sexologists, scientific and medical writers on human sexuality. At other times she calls on biblical and Christian analogy; Hall was a Catholic convert and found great spiritual support in the faith. And *The Well* is also a social protest novel. Hall minutely describes prejudice against those outside the sexual norm, and the effects of such prejudice on her characters. The novel calls for change, and also seeks to create change, influencing the reader through its painful descriptions. Sometimes these differing approaches work harmoniously together; often they pull in opposing directions. But it is through the complexity of these multiple perspectives that Stephen comes to life. Stephen must search for identity in a world that has little understanding or acceptance of gender variation, or of love between women. Her struggle to find her place, 'unexplained as yet', has made her one of the most appealing and problematic heroines of twentieth-century fiction.

## 2

Hall set out to write what had never (to her knowledge) been written before, and to do so she needed to create a new narrative form. She drew on various established genres, including the medical case study, the romance and the *Bildungsroman* (a novel which describes the journey of the hero to adulthood and self-knowledge). From this combination came a new kind of narrative, specifically designed to depict and discuss sexual identity – an early example of a now familiar genre, the 'coming-out story'.

This form of narrative traces the childhood and adolescence of the protagonist, noting moments of significant unusual behaviour. The protagonist must interpret these clues from their own life, and eventually solve the riddle of their identity. The childhood of Stephen is one long quest to answer the question posed by her existence. The opening half of the book comes to resemble a detective story. The clues are presented: Stephen's physical characteristics, her declarations and the reactions of others. The reader races against Stephen, her father and other characters, and even against the narrator, to discover the truth of Stephen's identity.

Initially, Stephen's father takes the lead. He observes clues: Stephen dressing as Nelson, her physical masculinity, and her problematic relationship with her mother. He believes he understands what these signify, and makes a diagnosis far in advance of the other characters.

That solution, though, leads to another dilemma – whether or not to tell Stephen and her mother what he has discovered. Other characters, confused and well meaning, are far behind Sir Philip. Then the educated and experienced Puddle arrives, and also perceives Stephen's identity at once (possibly because she shares Stephen's predicament). Puddle cannot give this information to Stephen; to do so would lead to Puddle being sacked, leaving Stephen friendless. It is still Sir Philip's duty to tell Stephen, but he dies before he can do so.

The omniscient narrator, too, can be viewed as a character. The narrator either stands alongside the heroine, sympathising with her plight, or works to establish a relationship between the heroine and the reader; there are many moments where the narrator guides the reader by directly addressing her, crying out like an onlooker, in anguish – 'Oh, poor and most desolate body!' (p. 169) – or with disdain – 'Oh, yes, the whole business was rather pathetic' (p. 324). In the narrator's role as an independent commentator, he/she is the next 'character' to become certain of Stephen's identity. During Stephen's romance with a married American neighbour, Angela Crossby, the narrator confidently announces Stephen's identity: 'None knew better the terrible nerves of the invert, nerves that are always lying in wait' (p. 139). The narrator often makes explicit the thoughts of other characters, and may be speaking for Puddle in this statement. But the narrator uses a similar phrase later, unprompted: 'And now the terrible nerves of the invert, those nerves that are always lying in wait, gripped Stephen' (p. 167).

Strangely, then, three different 'characters' have independently decided what Stephen is, but her father will not tell her, and the other two cannot. The reader therefore desperately wants Stephen to seize a label for herself. But Stephen is confused and hesitant, and moves slowly to self-examination. When she sees her father prematurely ageing, she reflects: 'He *is* bearing a burden, not his own, it's someone else's – but whose?' (p. 77). Again, when a good friend, Martin Hallam, turns into an unwelcome suitor, Stephen's instinctual revulsion forces her to ask: 'But what was she?' (p. 90). She pores back over her life, trying to make meaning from events, treading where her father and the reader have already trod: 'In those days, she had wanted to be a boy – had that been the meaning of the pitiful young Nelson? And what about now?' (p. 90). She turns to her father: '“Is there anything strange about me, Father, that I should have felt as I did about Martin?”' (p. 90). But her father ducks the question. When Angela Crossby asks: '“Can I help it if you're – what you obviously

are?’ (p. 133), it brings Stephen distress but no insight. She asks herself: ‘Why am I as I am – and what am I?’ (p. 137). Finally she finds a source of information in her father’s locked bookshelf of sexology volumes, books that are hers ‘by some intolerable birthright’ (p. 212). She exclaims: ‘You knew! All the time you knew this thing . . . Oh, Father – there are so many of us – thousands of miserable, unwanted people . . .’ After gossip, lies and torment, Stephen has found an identity, of sorts.

For decades, the majority of readers have assumed that Stephen claims her identity as a lesbian. This is a problematic assumption, as the novel offers competing explanations and perspectives, which I investigate further below. But before moving on to examine the kind of identity claimed, it is worth pausing to note the impact that *The Well* had on the formulation, and the narration, of sexual identities themselves.

The categories most often used in modern Western cultures to name same-sex attraction – gay, lesbian, bisexual – have not always existed. It is not even the case that different labels existed for essentially the same people. The very concept of a different kind of woman, who desires other women exclusively, is a comparatively modern one. French philosopher Michel Foucault argues that the homosexual was ‘invented’ in the nineteenth century. Previously, he states, same-sex sex was frequently illegal, but it was seen as a crime or sin that could be attempted by any person – like adultery, or incest. It is only from the nineteenth century onwards that same-sex sex becomes not only an act, but a clue to a type of person: a homosexual: ‘The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood.’ *The Well* is a key text in popularising this idea of a ‘personage’, an individual with a significantly different childhood and a tell-tale appearance. The whole of Stephen’s childhood and adolescence is presented as a puzzle. The case studies of sexologists – doctors and scientists writing about sexuality, from the later nineteenth century onwards – performed a similar task. In case studies, a mass of biographical characteristics and events are gathered to diagnose a sexual identity. It is these sexologists whom Foucault chiefly credits for ‘inventing’ the homosexual. But the sexologists were not widely read (as one regretful character in *The Well* notes, the masses ‘will not read medical books’ [p. 354]). *The Well* took the idea of a special kind of woman-loving woman, dramatically fleshed it out, and gave it a far wider circulation. Today in Britain, the notion that lesbians exist is



not innovative. *The Well* helped to lay the foundation for this understanding of sex and desire. It also established the narrative format through which this identity would be explained and explored. Modern coming-out stories, such as Rita Mac Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), continue to follow the example of *The Well*, using incidents from childhood and adolescence to examine and prove the heroine's lesbian identity.

But here a problem arises: what *is* Stephen's secret identity? It holds so much power that Puddle could be dismissed from her job for naming it, and it drives the honourable Sir Stephen to cowardice. But the novel offers several competing explanations as to who, or what, Stephen is.

Generations of readers have thought of Stephen as a lesbian. But the clearest answer provided by the novel is that Stephen is an 'invert'. 'Inverts' are observed – or invented – by sexologists writing in the late nineteenth century; there is some disagreement between sexologists, but broadly speaking, 'inverted' women are believed to be more mentally and physically masculine than 'normal' women. Inverted women also sexually desire other women. Inversion is seen as inborn, rather than developed through experience. Sir Philip's private library contains works by sexologists, including Richard von Kraft Ebing. Kraft Ebing in his early writings argued that 'congenital inversion' was an inherited degenerative condition. Because inverts cannot help their desires, the law should not punish them. Although Kraft Ebing's attack on legal discrimination was bold, his description of 'inversion' as degenerative equated it with alcoholism and mental illness (two of the many 'signs' of degeneracy according to its original theorist, Benedict Morel). By contrast, other sexologists including Havelock Ellis thought inversion was entirely compatible with mental well-being, and argued for its place in nature and in society. Hall believed herself to be an invert, and particularly admired the work of Havelock Ellis, who wrote a preface for *The Well* (see Notes, p. 401). Before the obscenity trial, Hall asked the defence team to carefully distinguish between 'inversion' and 'perversion'. For an invert, same-sex sex was not perverse, but natural.

The narrator uses the label 'invert' with confidence, and introduces many of the Parisian characters in terms of their degree of inversion. Jamie is one of the most inverted, masculine not only in her feelings and mannerisms but also in her physical appearance. Describing other, less inverted characters, the narrator becomes almost boastful

of his/her ability to spot invert characteristics: Pat has ankles 'too strong and too thick for a female' (p. 316). Margaret would be seen as 'quite a womanly woman, unless the trained ear had been rendered suspicious by her voice . . . a boy's voice on the verge of breaking' (p. 318). (Havelock Ellis had measured the larynxes of inverts.)

In the works of sexologists, one cannot become an invert, one is born one; many of Stephen's characteristics, however, could equally be seen as acquired, or developed. Her father longs for a son, gives her a masculine name and treats her as he would a boy. In return, she loves him and emulates him. Her mother is inexplicably hostile and cold to Stephen. The attitudes of her parents are presented at times as results of Stephen's inversion; Stephen's mother tries to blame Stephen's identity for her own revulsion, in a self-serving retrospective assessment: '“I've felt a kind of physical repulsion, a desire not to touch or be touched by you – a terrible thing for a mother to feel [. . .] – but now I know that my instinct was right; it is you who are unnatural, not I”' (p. 182). But couldn't this parental behaviour equally be a causal factor in Stephen's identity, with her mother's coldness driving her to identify with her father?

The dispute concerning acquired versus innate sexual identity was being played out between two schools of thought at the time of *The Well's* publication. Freudian psychoanalysis was becoming fashionable among modernist writers. Psychoanalytic theories argued that sexual identity developed through childhood experiences, rather than being innate. Hall seems to reject psychoanalysis (see Note 130), but Stephen's close father and distant mother are a typical scenario, in psychoanalytic terms, for a lesbian daughter. A modern reader is, of course, more likely to be familiar with psychoanalytic theories than sexological explanations, as psychoanalysis has filtered through to influence mainstream explanations of sex, childhood and consciousness.

Whether Stephen's identity is acquired or innate affects how the reader is to interpret her childhood. We are trained as readers to make causal connections between narrative incidents – E. M. Forster defines 'plot' as the causal and logical structure that connects incidents, giving the example: 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' (*Aspects of the Novel*, 1927). Linking events in the first half of *The Well* in this causal fashion makes sense if Stephen's sexuality is acquired – each childhood event contributes to her adult identity. But this produces a very different novel than one in which Stephen is born an invert. When the narrator observes that 'Sir

Philip [. . .] longed for a son', and Stephen states: 'I must be a boy', is this coincidence, or cause and effect? One scene can demonstrate the difference these two approaches might make. When young, Stephen is distressed to see the housemaid she loves kissing the footman. Stephen pours her troubles out to her father, and he tells her: ' "And now I'm going to treat you like a boy" ' (p. 22). He asks her always to turn to him for help and not to her mother. Sir Philip's treatment in the novel is generally shown as merciful, and indeed, if Stephen's masculinity is inborn, his acknowledgement is an act of kindness. However, if her identity is acquired, then Sir Philip is underestimating his own considerable influence. He has made an open plea that his daughter behave more like a son, and not be so close to her mother, who encourages her to be feminine. At the end of this discussion, 'he kissed her in absolute silence – it was like the sealing of a sorrowful pact.' This pact is presented as a respectful response to Stephen's invert identity – her father will treat her like a boy, and Stephen will not worry her mother with the truth. But could it be a pact that Stephen strive to please her father, and eventually grow into the identity he has diagnosed for her? Whichever it is, the pact of silence lasts until Sir Philip's death and beyond.

Alongside the unresolved question of whether Stephen's sexuality is innate or acquired, other perspectives on her identity are brought into play, and sometimes into conflict. Chief among these perspectives is Roman Catholic Christianity. Stephen's and the narrator's attempts to understand her identity through the prism and language of religion has proved one of the most difficult elements for subsequent generations of readers; Jane Rule, a feminist critic writing in the 1970s, stated that 'the bible [Hall] offered is really no better for women than the Bible she would not reject.' It can seem remarkable to modern readers that Stephen finds comfort not only in organised religion, but in a branch of Christianity which has been most insistent that sex be confined to heterosexual marriage. Although homosexuality was recognised by the Vatican as an innate orientation in 1975, modern Roman Catholic doctrine still states that lesbians and gay men are called to live in celibacy, and that any same-sex sexual acts are sinful.

In part, this perspective is autobiographical. Hall was herself a Catholic convert, introduced to Catholicism by her first long-term partner. Together they attended the fashionable Brompton Oratory and had a private audience with the Pope in 1913. Catholic

symbolism frequently appears in Hall's novels, culminating in *The Master of the House* (1932), which retells the story of Christ in modern Provence. By Troubridge's account, Hall was greatly upset by a blasphemous cartoon that was published after the ban of *The Well* (depicting a crucified Hall with a naked woman leaping across her loins) and wrote *The Master of the House* in part to atone for this offence to her faith.

Stephen's sexuality cannot be considered apart from her childhood Christianity and adult Catholicism. Stephen uses biblical references to name herself, often in negative ways: 'What am I, in God's name – some kind of abomination?' (p. 136). She writes to Angela: 'I'm some awful mistake – God's mistake – I don't know if there are any more like me, I pray not for their sakes . . . ' (p. 179). Stephen is named after the first Christian martyr. She also identifies with other suffering biblical characters. One is Cain, the first murderer; in the speech she prepares to warn her lover Mary about the hazards of their relationship, Stephen refers to herself as 'one of those whom God marked on the forehead' (p. 273). Her other chief identification is with Jesus. She emotionally comprehends Jesus' crucifixion because of the pain of her beloved housemaid, Collins:

'I'd like to be awfully hurt for you, Collins, the way Jesus was hurt for sinners.' [. . .] She had often been rather puzzled about Him, since she herself was fearful of pain [. . .], but now she no longer wondered. [pp. 14–15]

Through this, Hall emphasises that faith is possible for Stephen only through her love of women. This is echoed in the relationship of Jamie and Barbara: 'For believing in Jamie she must needs believe in God, and because she loved Jamie she must love God also – it had been like this ever since they were children' (p. 326). And Stephen's relationships are permanently tinged with an air of martyrdom; Stephen loves Collins more because Collins is a liar, and thus ripe for salvation through Stephen, a pattern that repeats with her second love, Angela Crossby. Stephen's moments of self-identification as Jesus or Cain may be self-hating or self-aggrandising, but they are central to her sense of identity.

Much of the time, Stephen's difference is visible, but nameless. Angela Crossby asks, 'Can I help it if you're – what you obviously are?' and Stephen's mother states, 'And this thing that you are is a sin against creation' (p. 182). Angela may not wish to use the names she

knows ('pervert', 'degenerate creature' [p. 180]) to Stephen's face, and Stephen's mother may lack any suitable vocabulary, but this silence is oppressive in itself – drawing attention to Stephen's difference, but refusing to give Stephen a name which might acknowledge her, or inform her that there are others like her.

However, sympathetic characters also refuse to name Stephen. Puddle says, 'just because you are what you are . . .' And although Stephen's cry of, 'Why am I as I am – and what am I?' is apparently resolved, she still refrains from using sexological labels, or any labels at all. When meeting Valérie Seymour, Stephen fears that Valérie 'liked me because she thought me – oh, well, because she thought me what I am.' Stephen never refers to herself as an invert or as a lesbian.

The narrator moves between all these competing perspectives and, as a result, makes contradictory comments on Stephen's origins. The narrator states that 'in such relationships as Mary's and Stephen's, Nature must pay for experimenting' (p. 305), implying an evolutionary (or capricious) origin for Stephen. In another moment, the narrator states that 'God, in a thoughtless moment, had created in His turn those pitiful thousands who must stand for ever outside His blessing' (p. 171). The narrator here echoes Puddle and Stephen's father, both of whom rage at God for making Stephen; this seems to contradict the former, evolutionary interpretation. Nature and God as creator are sometimes aligned, sometimes judged separately. To have the omniscient narrator voicing these antagonistic alternatives is confused and confusing. It indicates the degree to which the book is built on conflicting foundations.

It is worth returning to Stephen's scene of revelation, in Sir Philip's study, to see how these multiple, contradictory explanations are layered together. Through reading Sir Philip's books, including one by Kraft Ebing, Stephen seems to claim the identity that the narrator has already assigned her, of 'invert': 'there are so many of us' (p. 186), she cries. This is where I left Stephen in my earlier summary. But in the next moment, she clasps her father's Bible, and takes a new name from there: 'And the Lord set a mark upon Cain . . .' (p. 186). Then Puddle, Stephen's governess and a figure of some authority, intervenes to provide another viewpoint: '“Nothing's completely misplaced or wasted, I'm sure of that – and we're all part of nature”' (p. 187). Critic Laura Doan believes that Puddle voices the philosophy of Edward Carpenter, an English writer on love between men, who had a more mystical and celebratory approach than many

sexologists. Puddle's words close the scene and, enigmatically, Stephen's response is not recorded.

So although the novel has been criticised for unilaterally supporting sexology and its 'invert' label, there are competing discourses working around the youthful Stephen. The many clues of Stephen's childhood are ambivalent; the reader knows that Stephen is heading towards her identity, but each reader will have their own idea of what this identity will be – is Stephen a butch lesbian? A pervert? An invert? A transsexual? A saint or a saviour? Or something with no name at all? Wanda, a 'struggling Polish painter . . . dark for a Pole' (p. 317), is a fellow invert, according to the narrator, but also does not name her identity: "Nor was I as my father and mother; I was – I was . . ." She stopped speaking abruptly, gazing at Stephen with her burning eyes which said quite plainly: "You know what I was, you understand." And Stephen nodded . . . (pp. 339–40). This may be the love that dare not speak its name, but it could equally be the love for which there are many, competing names, at this point in the century, none of which Wanda or Stephen chooses to use.

## 3

One of Hall's chief successes in writing *The Well* is to bring multiple viewpoints into an uneasy temporary unity to champion relationships between women. But can these diverse strands – God, nature and sexology – come together to support the sustained social critique that Hall attempts? Stephen's suffering is the basis of Hall's appeal. Stephen is established as a likeable, romantic and noble character, so that her experiences of rejection – by her first adult love, her cold mother and the initially friendly Lady Massey – hurt the reader also. But Stephen's moments of suffering, like her childhood experiences, are clues to be interpreted. The different discourses and terminologies between which Hall shifts could offer very different explanations for such incidents.

In sexological terms, Stephen's suffering may be the result of her innate inversion, and the resulting attraction Stephen feels to 'normal' women. Some of the social pressure could be removed from Stephen and Mary's relationship, but the question is never settled as to whether there is a more basic level at which a 'normal' woman will always want a 'normal' man, rather than an inverted

woman. If this is the case – that invert love is inevitably, biologically doomed – social reform will not remedy Stephen's pain. Stephen's mother's rejection is similarly ambiguous. Although the mother is certainly self-serving in blaming her cruelty on Stephen, the narrator depicts a very early estrangement between them: 'these two were strangely shy with each other – it was almost grotesque'. Stephen's mother 'would wake at night and ponder this thing, scourging herself in an access of contrition . . .' (p. 9). Presumably had Stephen's mother been educated in her daughter's ways by Sir Philip, she might have conquered this instinctive aversion. But the initial suggestion remains, that the invert and the 'normal' mother must stand somewhat apart, 'tongue-tied, saying nothing at all'.

Stephen's childhood faith has already demonstrated that Stephen has a propensity for suffering, and even for self-harm. For example, her childhood love, the housemaid, has a painfully swollen knee. Stephen's love, faith and identification with Christ combine in a masochistic ritual in which she kneels on the hard floor to damage her own knees and take away her love's pain. Near the close of the novel, Stephen reveals her final self-sacrificing plan (again for the benefit of her love) to Valérie Seymour, who advises her to risk her partner's happiness in order to preserve her own. Stephen says she cannot. Valérie exclaims in irritation: '“Being what you are, I suppose you can't – you were made for a martyr!”' It is again uncertain what Valérie believes Stephen *is* that makes her martyr herself – a dutiful English gentleman? An invert, with 'terrible nerves' and a morbid outlook? – but Valérie ruthlessly observes that Stephen is predisposed to make herself suffer. In this light, it is easy to read Stephen's conversion as part of her capacity for self-injury. Most obviously, the Church to which she turns condemns same-sex relationships – as Stephen herself observes: 'What of that curious craving for religion which went hand in hand with inversion? [. . .] this was surely one of their bitterest problems. They believed, and believing they craved a blessing on what to some of them seemed very sacred – a faithful and deeply devoted union. But the Church's blessing was not for them' (p. 369). But more generally, this faith traditionally sees earthly suffering and self-abnegation as a route to salvation, not as a prompt for social reform. How can Catholicism therefore assist the novel's social critique? It is true that, throughout the novel, God is called on to judge cruelty to his created animals and humans. The novel tries to unite theology and social justice in its final thundering cry: 'Acknowledge us, O God, before the whole

world' (p. 399). But despite significant work on the part of Hall to keep these strands of God and man together, they pull in opposite directions.

Hall must redirect both sexology and Catholicism, channelling them into a unified plea for social justice. One scene in Paris is designed symbolically to bring about this unity. At the flat of Jamie, a Parisian invert, two African-American singers come to perform spirituals. Through the music, the inverts and their partners are able to express their own longings: 'Not one of them all but was stirred to the depths by that queer, half-defiant, half-supplicating music' (p. 329). This moment of communal feeling has been accurately named 'cultural ventriloquism' by critic Jean Walton. Thus, though it expands reader sympathy for the white invert characters, it belittles the black characters, who are described using racist stereotypes and eugenicist myths: 'A crude animal Henry could be at times, with a taste for liquor and a lust for women – just a primitive force rendered dangerous by drink . . .'

But as well as allowing the white inverts to express their discontent, the black characters help Stephen, and the reader, to negotiate the problematic tension between religion, sexology and social justice that is woven through the book. In the chapters following this scene, Stephen and Mary's relationship is tested. They increasingly spend time in sordid 'drug-dealing, death-dealing' Parisian bars, as there they can socialise freely with other inverts ('the most miserable of all those who comprised the miserable army' p. 352). Underlying this bleak section of the novel is the fear that this misery is biologically determined: Stephen's inversion will always wreck her attempts at romantic love; sordid bars are the 'natural' home of degenerate inverts and homosexuals. Also in the following chapters Stephen renews her interest in religion, and specifically in Catholicism, at the church of Sacre Coeur. Will Stephen be encouraged towards repentance, self-suppression and suffering? Between Stephen's biology and her theology, the reader may well see no future in social reform.

The presence of the African-American characters points to another way of thinking; they represent a minority who have strategically combined social critique and spirituality. African Americans during slavery and after emancipation traditionally sought support in religion, while simultaneously working for social reform. Churches functioned as centres of grassroots political resistance. Just as US feminism in both the nineteenth century and



the 1970s adopted the rhetoric and actions of African-American political campaigning, here Hall is highlighting tactics she sees as suitable for an invert-liberation campaign. Walton notes that the inverts appropriate the biblical analogies that the black characters use: when the singers ask, ‘“Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel, then why not every man?”’ the narrator, speaking for the audience, responds: ‘Yes, but how long, O Lord, how long?’ (p. 330). But this identification with Daniel also highlights Stephen’s own religious identification with Cain and Jesus. Such identification is elevated from being Stephen’s individual morbid spiritual habit to being the proper rhetoric of the oppressed minority. The slave’s spiritual is enshrined as the ideal dignified, sanctified social protest, and *The Well* recommends a similar approach for the invert. Supplication need not defuse anger: ‘And now there rang out a kind of challenge; imperious, loud, almost terrifying’ (p. 330). The cry of Stephen at the close of the novel is the successor of the singers’ ‘challenge to the world’. This scene, then, sums up the problems and the successes of the novel. It is, exploitative and rooted in Hall’s ideas of racial and sexual biology. Nevertheless, it is an ambitious, emotionally involving scene, uniting diverse contemporary discourses to sanctify sexual relationships between women.

## 4

Hall wrote *The Well* to gain social recognition for a ‘misunderstood and misjudged’ sexual minority. This central ambition of Hall’s, rather than any pornographic depiction or obscene language, brought about its ban. The editor who first attacked it, James Douglas, feared that ‘sexual inversion and perversion [...] is wrecking young lives. It is defiling young souls [...] I have seen the plague stalking shamelessly through great social assemblies. I have heard it whispered about by young men and women who cannot grasp its unutterable putrefaction.’ Many of *The Well*’s defenders argued that the novel is a cautionary tale – Stephen does not prosper, sexual inversion is not shown to be enjoyable. But Douglas was in one sense right – Stephen is an attractive, glamorous and passionate character. When the book reached court, the defence stated that the love between the women characters was treated with restraint, a lack of sensationalism, and ‘reverence’. The magistrate, Chartres Biron, took this defence and made it the keynote of his condemnation. Same-sex sex could be depicted in fiction, he stated, but this could