AFAB Masculinity in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*

By Sara Madsen

Content Warning:

In this paper, I use what is now generally understood to be outdated and harmful language to analyze historical examples of gender diversity and show how gender has been historically understood through language. One such term is "sexual invert," a phrase that Victorian sexologists used to describe a person who is homosexual and has either masculine or feminine characteristics that deviate from their sex assigned at birth. This term carries negative stigma against the LGBTQIA+ community because it pathologizes such identities. I want to be clear that "sexual invert" is not an appropriate label for queer and trans people today, and I am in no way advocating for its resurgence. However, I use it throughout my paper to describe historical figures and literary characters who self-identify as such. My intention is not to perpetuate harmful language but to use terms in their historical context to examine their roles in the evolution of gender diversity in literature. It is also important to note the value of such terms to historical figures, such as John Radclyffe Hall, who claimed them to describe themselves as queer and gender diverse.

A Note on Pronouns:

I refer to Stephen Gordon using she/her pronouns. Although Stephen is a masculine character, I use she/her pronouns because pronouns are both culturally and individually specific. In 1928, gender pronouns were not viewed in the same way they are today, and John Radclyffe Hall (who self-identified as a sexual invert, like Stephen) used she/her pronouns to write about Stephen. I believe that because Hall had a similar gender identity, her use of pronouns in this book indicates how Stephen, as a character, understood her own gender identity. I likewise use she/her in order to avoid making assumptions about her that may be influenced by my personal understanding of gender pronouns.

John Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* is a foundational novel in queer literary history. The book follows Stephen Gordon, a masculine and homosexual AFAB person, and her journey through self-discovery and romantic relationships. Hall, a self-proclaimed "sexual invert," models Stephen's gender identity from her own. They both wear masculine clothing, have male-typical names, and reject conventional womanhood. Stephen is an example of an early 20th-century openly queer AFAB (assigned female at birth) character who contributes to a long history of gender diversity in English literature. There is an ongoing debate among contemporary audiences about whether Stephen is a lesbian woman or a trans man. I believe this question imposes a false binary because she is neither and both simultaneously, or rather, she is a sexual invert. History impacts not only gender norms but how people can think about and express gender diversity. The social discourse in 1928 around gender diversity was fundamentally different than it is today; without the existence of terms like "transgender" or "butch lesbian," it was not possible for Stephen (or Hall) to identify as such. Although Stephen shares characteristics with these contemporary labels, she does not fit perfectly in either category. Her deviance from both traditional gender norms and present-day queer and trans identities demonstrates that our understandings of gender are socially constructed and historically dependent.

As a queer woman with a mix of both masculine and feminine traits, I have a personal connection to and investment in this topic. I have never seen my sexuality and gender presentation represented so well in any form of classic literature as I have in Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. Stephen Gordon is a character unlike any other. She is energetic, stubborn, tenacious, hot-headed, and proudly wears masculine clothes and hairstyles. The best part about Stephen is that she maintains all these qualities throughout the novel. Unlike her predecessors, such as Jo

from *Little Women,* Elizabeth from *Pride and Prejudice,* and Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing,* her gender deviance is not resolved by the end of the story. In the classic masculine woman narrative, masculinity is seen as childish, and the protagonist ultimately matures into femininity, thus asserting that heterosexual, patriarchal marriage is her path to happiness. Stephen refuses to fit into this mold and is met with social ostracization. Even though it culminates in her unhappiness, Hall asserts that this fate is society's fault rather than Stephen's. While she ultimately concedes to Martin, and it is implied that he will marry Mary, this is not the happy ending one might expect. We are meant to question whether Mary would be happier in a heterosexual relationship. Stephen is an important character because many queer and trans people relate to her, regardless of the specificities of their identities. My interest in Stephen's identity led me to pursue this topic and research sexual inversion theory and other examples of AFAB masculinity. Although it was created and perpetuated by harmful heteronormative and cisnormative institutions, sexual inversion theory draws on the experiences of masculine AFAB people and demonstrates the role that language plays in forming cultural understandings of gender roles. There were people, like John Radclyffe Hall, who proudly claimed the phrase "sexual invert" and can be viewed as predecessors of LGBTQIA+ identities. Stephen Gordon is one of the first explicitly queer literary figures who is sympathetic, multifaceted, and written by an openly queer person. Her characterization can help us understand early 20th century American perspectives on homosexuality and gender diversity and the real experiences of queer and gender diverse people.

Jack Halberstam coined the term "female masculinity" and claims that Stephen Gordon is a literary example of such. "Female masculinity" is an umbrella term that describes a person assigned female at birth (AFAB) who is masculine in a way that deviates from the gender norm.

Halberstam argues that female masculinity includes transgender men, trans-masculine nonbinary people, masculine lesbians, and masculine straight women. However, I propose to amend the term from "female masculinity" to "AFAB masculinity" because the world "female" can be problematic. The transgender community states that the phrases "assigned male at birth" (AMAB) and 'assigned female at birth" are more accurate than the words "male" and "female" because people do not always identify with their sex assigned at birth. Therefore, there are many transgender men and nonbinary people who prefer to be called "AFAB" instead "female." AFAB masculinity is a term that is wide-reaching enough to capture the experiences of Stephen, contemporary trans-masculine folks, and masculine women. Stephen's character demonstrates that although the specificities and labels of gender identities may differ, AFAB masculinity is a flexible term that accounts for these historical changes and responds to contemporary discourses around gender diversity.

A crucial component to understanding AFAB masculinity is to define masculinity. Masculinity is challenging to define because it is socially determined. I believe the word "masculine" in a biological sense means nothing. Instead, it is a socially constructed concept that enforces power structures around gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability. It can also be reclaimed and redefined freely by those who do not fit into the traditional mold of masculinity. For this paper, I define "masculinity" as traits conventionally associated with maleness, queer women, and AFAB nonbinary people including appearance, behaviors, and personality. Some of the stereotypical qualities include and are not limited to physical strength, athleticism, mental fortitude, independence, courage, financial success, confidence, and assertiveness. It is usually considered to be the opposite of femininity. The traditional masculine appearance includes features such as sharp facial features, broad shoulders, large muscles, tall stature, short hair,

facial hair, tailored clothes, and trousers. Although masculinity is typically associated with maleness, it is not the sole property of cisgender men. AFAB masculinity challenges this patriarchal definition by demonstrating that anyone can have such traits and even that femininity and masculinity are not mutually exclusive or opposite. It also defies the importance of the physical body by proving that masculinity can exist in any form, including a female-typical body.

Stephen identifies as a "sexual invert," which is a term that falls under what I call AFAB masculinity. The term sexual invert originates from Havelock Ellis' sexual inversion theory. Ellis' theory emerged during a period in which sexology researchers were particularly interested in studying and pathologizing queerness and gender diversity. Sexual inverts could be AFAB people who were masculine or AMAB people who were feminine. Sexologists believed that AFAB sexual inversion was an innate condition in which an AFAB person had masculine behaviors and appearances and was involved in same-sex relationships. They often described it as "psychical hermaphroditism." Sexual inversion was viewed as a third gender identity separate from manhood and womanhood. Victorian sexologists described an AFAB invert as a "man's spirit in a woman's body" (Chauncey 99; Lafazanos 72). This description bears a strong resemblance to contemporary transgender identities when people feel like they are born in a physical body that does not match their internal sense of gender.

As a child, Stephen frequently dresses in boys' clothes and pretends to be a man named Nelson. "She would gloom about the nursery because Collins had snubbed her, because she was conscious of feeling all wrong, because she so longed to be someone quite real, instead of just Stephen pretending to be Nelson" (Hall location 294). This sadness and feeling like she is "all wrong" or not "real" may be an example of "gender dysphoria," which is a state of distress that

trans people experience when they feel like their sex assigned at birth does not reflect their gender identity. Gender dysphoria can sometimes threaten one's sense of identity, leading to feelings of stress, anxiety, and sadness. While not all trans people experience gender dysphoria, it is common in the transgender community, and can be alleviated through gender-affirming self-expression and treatments. The phrase has received criticism because it is considered a mental disorder in the DSM and therefore pathologizes transness. There are also debates about whether gender dysphoria is rooted in a problem with the physical body or if it is a consequence of societal cissexism. Even though I am cisgender and do not suffer from gender dysphoria, I also relate to Stephen's experience. I remember wishing I was a man as a child because that was the only way I could conceive of having a romantic relationship with a woman. Before I knew about different sexual orientations, I thought all people were heterosexual, and so I would need to be a man for my feelings to make sense. I felt like there was something wrong with me and that I needed to try to occupy the man's role in a relationship. I think that this childhood experience of not knowing one's place in a hetero and cisnormative society is applicable to both queer and trans youth.

Although sexual inversion theory is reductionist and offensive, there is evidence in *The Well of Loneliness* to show that it had some value for queer folks at the time who reclaimed it to describe their identity and relate to others. When Stephen discovers her father's sexology books by Krafft-Ebing, for example, she identifies with them immediately. She says out loud to her deceased father, "'You knew! All the time you knew this thing, but because of your pity you wouldn't tell me. Oh, Father -- and there are so many of us -- thousands of miserable, unwanted people, who have no right to love, no right to compassion because they're maimed - hideously maimed and ugly -- God's cruel; he let us get flawed in the making'" (Hall location 3664).

Stephen describes herself as "flawed in the making" which emphasizes that inversion is an innate condition. In 1869, Karl Westphal created the phrase "congenital invert" to describe sexual inversion because it was thought to be biologically determined (Faderman 239; Lafazanos 72). Even though Krafft-Ebing has problematic judgments about sexual inversion, this is a turning point for Stephen's character in learning to accept herself. She realizes that she cannot change her queerness or masculinity, so she gives up on pacifying people around her with feminine clothing and trying to blend in with women. Underneath her sadness at this moment, there is some hope because she learns in this book that there are "so many of us – thousands of miserable, unwanted people." She realizes that there are others like her, and she goes on to find queer friends who relate to her. She also describes inverts as having "no right to love." This phrase foreshadows the ending of the novel when Stephen decides to end her relationship with Mary because she believes she cannot make Mary happy. This is a tragic moment because many readers believe that Stephen does deserve love and makes a worthy partner. However, their love may be doomed because society is not willing to accept and legitimize homosexual relationships.

The AFAB sexual invert was often contrasted with conventional Victorian womanhood. Sexologists viewed women as being virtually sexless and uninterested in sex, which was a way to undermine their sexual autonomy. Sexual inversion theory helped sexologists reconcile the conflict between their views on women's sexuality and the existence of AFAB masculinity and queer desire:

Women were seen as passive recipients of men's sexual advances, and it was inconceivable to dominant social theory that a woman could be the sexual aggressor or that she could be involved with another woman sexually. Therefore, the sexologists theorized, based on these women's masculine appearance and behavior, that they actually were men on the inside, and thus had

sexual desires that they directed toward their opposite, women of feminine appearance and behavior opposite: feminine women. (Lafazanos 72)

Here, there is a distinction between queer and feminine women and their masculine partners. Sexual inversion was not just a matter of sexuality, but gender expression was perhaps the more critical differentiation. By imposing a strict gender binary, the only way that sexologists could wrap their heads around female homosexual relationships was to view them within the framework of heterosexuality. They believed that an AFAB masculine person is a heterosexual man on the inside and their more feminine partner is a heterosexual woman who is attracted to the other's masculinity. They sometimes called the AFAB masculine partner a "female husband" to describe their role in the relationship. In this way, sexual inversion theory undermined the existence of female masculinity and sexual desire by not recognizing its existence outside of heterosexual and cisgender masculinity, thus bisexual, lesbian, and trans identities. *The Well of Loneliness* helped bring female homosexuality to the public consciousness because Hall was publicly tried for obscenity for writing the novel. Jack Halberstam argues that this trial was as crucial in defining lesbian identity as Oscar Wilde's obscenity trial was for defining male homosexuality (97). Hall identified as an invert and fought to legitimize homosexual attraction by urging her lawyers to differentiate between the terms "inversion" and "perversion." This differentiation is important because it shows that same-sex desire is not perverse but natural (Saxey x).

The cultural understanding of homosexual relationships affects the dynamics between Stephen and her lovers in *The Well of Loneliness.* Stephen's identity is not just based on her sexual orientation but also on her gender expression. There are distinctions between Stephen, a sexual invert, and her feminine homosexual partners. Ironically, Stephen is the one whose gender

and sexuality are fixed, while her partners are portrayed as conventional women who may have a fleeting homosexual affair and then eventually settle down with a husband. This differentiation imposes false binaries in both gender and sexuality and erases the queerness of Stephen's partners. Hall says about Mary, "in her very normality lay her danger. Mary, all woman, was less of a match for life than if she had been with Stephen" (Location 7566). Mary's "normality" is her femininity. Although Mary is not heterosexual, she is still considered relatively "normal" because she conforms to the cultural concept of womanhood. Stephen's abnormality is not her sexual orientation but rather her gender expression, which was viewed at the time as distinctly separate from womanhood. Therefore, Stephen and Martin believe that Mary still has a chance at living a "normal" life because she is not fundamentally so different from a traditionally feminine, heterosexual woman. However, because she has sexual and romantic relationships with men and women, Mary should rather be understood as bisexual, and the notion that she is "normal" (unlike Stephen) contributes to the problematic convention of bisexual erasure.

Some scholars believe that the novel is partly autobiographical, and whether or not this is the case, Stephen and Hall share many characteristics. They have similar hairstyles, clothing preferences, masculine behaviors, relationship dynamics, and male-typical names. Although Hall describes herself as an invert, she shares similarities with contemporary definitions of butch lesbians and transgender men. Regarding real-life examples of sexual inversion, we must note that AFAB sexual inverts were a diverse group of people. Ellis interviewed AFAB sexual inverts in his case histories, and the transcripts show that his subjects varied in their gender expression, sexual preferences, and experiences. As a category, sexual inverts had no more in common with each other than lesbians or trans people have with other members of their groups today. The categories were created by sexologists to explain and pathologize masculine AFAB people and

were not always useful. However, identifying as an invert was valuable for some because it created a common language for them to explain their experiences and relate to queer communities. There were also people who essentially lived as transgender men and "passed," and some used he/him pronouns. But Hall did not want to pass and even disapproved of people who did. In 1929, she wrote to her agent denouncing a person known as Colonel Barker, who was tried for "male impersonation and marrying a woman under false pretenses" (Halberstam 90). Colonel Barker seems to have been closer to our modern-day understanding of a transgender man than Hall was. She stated in the letter to Heath:

I would like to see [Colonel Barker] drawn and quartered...A mad pervert of the most undesirable type, with her mock war medals, wounds, etc.; and then after having married the woman if she doesn't go and desert her! Her exposure at the moment is unfortunate indeed and will give a handle to endless people -- the more so as what I ultimately long for is some sort of marriage for the invert. (Radclyffe Hall to Audrey Heath; Halberstam 91)

Here, Hall differentiates herself from the transgender man by expressing contempt for him. Ironically, she uses the word "pervert," which was the word used against her at the trial. Hall's supposedly progressive attitude toward gender expression and sexuality seems to be limited. She also seems to believe that the existence of transgender men undermines her goal of obtaining marriage rights for sexual inverts. In my opinion, this logic parallels contemporary TERF rhetoric. TERFism, which stands for trans exclusionary radical feminism, is a transphobic political movement in which cisgender people, often lesbian women, argue that transgender rights are detrimental to the progress of women's and gay rights. This movement unnecessarily pits marginalized groups against one another by spreading misinformation and advocating for

discrimination against trans people. Hall's criticisms of Colonel Barker indicate that she is a TERF because she believes that Barker's transness threatens the legitimization of other AFAB masculine identities. She claims to advocate for AFAB masculinity rights but denounces Barker's identity and even misgenders him. While Hall does state that she is herself an invert and not a passing man, I do not necessarily think this statement proves that she is entirely separate from the contemporary trans male identity. Especially given the comparatively intolerant society that she lived in, a more progressive political climate may have allowed her the freedom to explore a male identity. This letter to Heath shows that despite her positive contributions to LGBTQIA+ history, Hall still held onto oppressive beliefs, as did many of her queer contemporaries. Even while celebrating her literature and accomplishments, we must not forget the harm she caused transgender men.

In the early 20th century, sexuality was viewed not as a fixed identity but as a set of behaviors. People with homosexual affairs were still considered predominately heterosexual if they performed their spousal duties in a heterosexual marriage. The idea of sexual orientation as a set identity emerged later in the 20th century as part of the gay rights movement. However, sexual inverts in 1928 were seen as fundamentally (and even biologically) different from men and women. Stephen Gordon identifies as an invert. Stephen is an important character because she helped to bring issues of queerness and gender diversity to the forefront of mainstream political discourse in 1928. Today, she is a kindred spirit for many queer and trans readers. Her identity as a sexual invert is separate from contemporary trans and queer identities but shares similarities with both. There is no way to know how Stephen Gordon may have identified in 2022 with the terms that we have now. However, Stephen is an important figure in queer and gender-diverse literary history, even though these identities were coded differently in various

eras. Queer and especially trans folks have a very limited canon due to heteronormative and cissexist censorship in English literature. This form of representation in *The Well of Loneliness* holds value today and demonstrates the enduring strength of LGBTQIA+ identities in the face of adversity.

Works Cited

Chauncey Jr., George. “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality; The Changing Medical Conceptualization of Female “Deviance.”” *Passion and Power*, edited by Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, Temple University Press, 1989.

Lafazanos, Christina. “The Female Sexual Invert: a Threat to Sexologists’ World View.” 2008.

Krafft-Ebing, Richard von. “Psychopathia Sexualis.” 1886. Pioneer Publications Inc., 1939.

Faderman, Lillian. “Surpassing the Lore of Men.” William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1981.

Miller, Heather Lee. “Sexologists examine lesbians and prostitutes in the United States, 1840-1940.” *NWSA* Journal 12, 2000.

Ellis, Havelock. “Sexual Inversion.” *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 1. 1905. New York: Random House, 1942.

Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Duke University Press, 2019.

Hall, Radclyffe, and Esther Saxey. “Introduction.” *The Well of Loneliness*, Wordsworth Editions, Ware, Hertfordshire, 2014, pp. v-xxiv.

Hall, Radclyffe, to Audrey Heath, 19 March 1929. Cited in Baker, *Our Three Selves.*

Hall, Radclyffe. *The Well of Loneliness.* E-book, General Press, 2021.