Radclyffe Hall

Radclyffe Hall (1880 – 1943) was a British novelist, poet and lyricist. A contemporary of the Bloomsbury Group and proponent of Havelock Ellis' sexological theories, Hall is best known for the ground-breaking novel of sexual inversion, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). The novel was the centre of a landmark obscenity trial, and has continued to attract controversy. Its depiction of inversion has been both lauded and criticized by feminist, queer and trans\* theorists.

Hall was born Marguerite Antonia Radclyffe-Hall on August 12, 1880 to wealthy parents who divorced in 1883. She briefly attended King's College London and spent a year studying in Germany. In 1912, Hall converted to Catholicism with her then-partner, the singer Mabel Batten. At Batten’s request, Hall did not serve in the women’s ambulance corps during the Great War (Baker). However, a number of Hall’s fictional characters find autonomy and sexual identity through their war service.

In 1915, Hall became involved with Batten’s cousin, the sculptor Una Troubridge. After Batten's death, Hall and Troubridge developed an interest in spiritualism and joined the Society for Psychical Research. Faith and the potential of spiritual existence were constant themes in Hall’s work. In 1926, Hall was awarded the Prix Femina and the James Tait Black Prize for her fourth novel, *Adam's Breed*. Though an advocate of the rights of women and inverts, Hall was in many ways deeply conservative. A prominent member of PEN and the Writer’s Club, Hall was also a sympathizer of Italian fascism, though she reacted with horror to news of the Holocaust. She died of colon cancer on October 7, 1943.

Hall's fifth novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, tells the story ofStephen Gordon, a female invert born to an aristocratic English family. The novel refers to the work of Kraft-Ebbing and presents sexual inversion as a congenital condition: Stephen exhibits masculine physical and psychological characteristics from birth. Though serving bravely in the ambulance corps during the war and eventually becoming a successful novelist, Stephen sacrifices her relationship with a woman to allow her partner a heterosexual marriage. Havelock Ellis wrote a supportive introduction to the novel.

In contrast to Virginia Woolf's formally modernist depiction of gender fluidity in *Orlando*, *The Well of Loneliness* can be read as what critic Richard Dellamora calls “vernacular modernism.” Structured as a conventional realist novel, *Well* deploys the tropes of sentimental fiction to channel readerly empathy into compassion for female inverts. *Well* also contains a fictionalized depiction of Natalie Barney’s Paris salon, including portraits of Barney, Romaine Brooks, and other lesbian modernists.

Hall wrote *The Well of Loneliness* as an explicitly activist gesture. Although many reviews were favorable, the editor of the *Sunday Express*, James Douglas, attacked the novel. *Well* was tried under the Obscene Publications Act in November 1928, and Chief Magistrate Sir Charles Biron ordered the book destroyed. Many prominent authors, including E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, defended Hall both in print and at the trial.

Feminist critics from Woolf to Jane Rule have criticized Hall’s conventional prose, her association of homosexual desire with cross-gender identification, and her depiction of inversion as tragic. More recently, Esther Newton and Jay Prosser have defended the book using transgender theory. *The Well of Loneliness* remains an enduring, and enduringly disputed, document in queer and trans\* literary history, and a marker of Hall’s real courage in taking a public stand.

KEY WORKS

*The Forge*, 1924

*The Unlit Lamp*, 1924

*A Saturday Life*, 1925

*Adam's Breed*, 1926

*The Well of Loneliness*, 1928

*The Master of the House*, 1932

*Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself*, 1934

*The Sixth Beatitude*, 1936

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