

**“IF THE BRITISH PUBLIC WILL STAND THIS,
THEY CAN STAND ANYTHING”:
THE RECEPTIONS OF *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY*
AND *THE WELL OF LONELINESS***

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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Oscar Wildeä ja Radclyffe Hallia pidetään englantilaisen seksuaalivähemmistöjen historian merkikhenkilöinä. Wilden homoseksuaalisia tekoja koskeneet oikeudenkäynnit ja tuomio jättivät merkittävän jäljen englantilaiseen kulttuuriin, kun taas Hallin ”seksuaalista inversiota” käsitellyt kielletty romaani <i>Yksinäisyyden kaivo</i> muistettiin pitkään lesbokirjallisuuden keskeisimpänä työnä. Pro gradu -tutkielmassani tutkin sekä Wilden ainoan romaanin <i>Dorian Grayn muotokuvan</i> (1890) että <i>Yksinäisyyden kaivon</i> (1928) vastaanottoa näiden julkaisuhetkinä, keskittyen kriitikoiden reaktioiden takana piileviin sosiaalisiin normeihin ja kulttuurisiin arvoihin sekä näiden vertailuun.</p> <p><i>Dorian Grayn muotokuvan</i> keskeisiä teemoja olivat hedonismi, kauneus ja synti. Kriitikot arvosittelivat Wildeä ja tämän ”epämiehekkäitä” hahmoja keskiluokkaisista normeista poikkeamisesta. Hahmojen väliset lämpimät suhteet saivat kriitikot suhtautumaan romaaniin epäileväisesti, kutsuen sitä moraalittomaksi. <i>Yksinäisyyden kaivo</i> kertoi nuoren homoseksuaalin naisen elämäntarinan, jonka kertomista kriitikot pitivät rohkeana ja kiittelivät romaanin vilpittömyyttä. Romaani kuitenkin kiellettiin oikeuden päätöksellä vedoten ”luonnottomien suhteiden” esittämiseen myönteisessä valossa, minkä pelättiin ”korruptoivan” lukijoita.</p> <p>Ensimmäisen maailmansodan ja seksuaalisuuden tutkimuksen tuomat muutokset selittivät romaanien vastaanottojen välisiä eroavaisuuksia. <i>Dorian Grayn muotokuvan</i> vastaanotto oli negatiivinen, kun taas <i>Yksinäisyyden kaivon</i> kriitikot ennen sen kieltoa konservatiivisten julkisen moraalien puolustajien käsissä suhtautuivat myönteisesti homoseksuaalisuuden teemaan. Suhtautuminen homoseksuaalisuuteen muuttui romaanien välisenä aikana moninaisemmaksi tieteen, feminismin ja poliittisen ajattelun kehityksen ansiosta.</p>	
Avainsanat Oscar Wilde, Radclyffe Hall, homoseksuaalisuus, sodomia, lesbous, sateenkaarikirjallisuus, seksologia, feminismi	
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1	Brief biographies of the authors.....	3
1.2	Terminology.....	4
1.3	Methodology and theory	6
1.4	Source material.....	7
1.5	Previous research	9
1.6	Societal context	10
2	<i>THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY</i>	15
2.1	Foreign aestheticism	17
2.2	Hedonistic leisure and industrious masculinity.....	20
2.3	Sham moral and questionable intentions	22
2.4	Sodomitical tendencies.....	25
3	THE WELL OF LONELINESS.....	30
3.1	Tendency to preach.....	32
3.2	Abnormality in human nature	35
3.3	The New Woman and the man-woman	38
3.4	Offensive to decency.....	41
4	COMPARISON	46
5	CONCLUSION	51
	REFERENCES.....	53

1 INTRODUCTION

“Oscar Wilde has sent me his novelette, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It is an odd and very audacious production, unwholesome in tone, but artistically and psychologically interesting. If the British public will stand this, they can stand anything.”¹

Poet and literary critic John Addington Symonds wrote thus in a letter dated 22 July 1890 to his friend Horatio Brown. He went on to state: “However, I resent the unhealthy, scented, mystic, congested touch which a man of this sort has on moral problems.”² After *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published, papers filled with unfavourable reviews and deliberation on Wilde’s moral character. After Wilde was convicted of gross indecency in 1895, his publishers stopped selling the book.³

Nearly forty years later, in August 1928, shortly after Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* was published and certain newspapers called for its withdrawal, author Virginia Woolf complained in a letter to her friend and lover Vita Sackville West:

“Morgan goes to see Radclyffe in her tower in Kensington, with her love [Lady Troubridge] and Radclyffe scolds him like a fishwife, and says that she won’t 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.”⁴

Her husband Leonard and author E.M. Foster (Morgan) were setting up a protest against the novel’s ban, but Woolf thought the cause wearisome, wishing it “unwritten”.⁵ *The Well of Loneliness* was banned as obscene mere months after its publication in England, not to be published again until 1959.⁶

¹ Quoted in Beckson 2003, 78.

² Beckson 2003, 78.

³ Stern 2017, 756.

⁴ Woolf 2003, 236.

⁵ Woolf 2003, 236.

⁶ Gilmore 1994, 603.

My master's thesis explores the public receptions of these two novels of English queer literature at the time of their publication: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde and *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, published in 1890 and 1928 respectively.⁷ Both of these authors are considered to have left a remarkable impression on the English-speaking world's ideas of homosexuality. Wilde's trials impacted British culture by giving the homosexual man a face in the eyes of the appalled Victorian society.⁸ Before *The Well* there was no common knowledge of lesbianism, but the obscenity trial "provided the public with one clear and identifiable image [...] of the "lesbian"⁹, after which *The Well* was long considered the most significant lesbian novel.¹⁰ Both authors have a scandal and a trial attached to their name, and scholars of later generations have been greatly interested in their lives, works, and legacies.

The objective of this study is to examine the public receptions of the novels in the couple of years after their publications, and compare them to pinpoint possible changes, differences, and similarities in attitudes that dictated the content of the receptions. Despite the keywords that these novels and their authors share – trial, obscenity, scandal, homosexuality – their connection is nuanced, partly because of the nearly forty-year gap between them but also the different heritages of gay and lesbian history. Even so, within the tradition of queer literature they share significance, *The Well* as the suppressed lesbian novel and *Dorian Gray* as the only full-length novel by a man whose trials constitute a major moment in queer history. Moreover, both ignited a controversy in the press upon publication.

With that in mind, I am interested in reading the literary critics' reactions to the novels, analysing on what accounts they were either welcomed or shunned and shedding light on attitudes towards homosexuality in Britain during the chosen time periods. I have three research questions:

1. How were *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Well of Loneliness* received at the time of their publications?
2. What societal norms and cultural values dictated the tone of the receptions?
3. Why, and in what ways, did the tone of the receptions change between these novels?

In this introduction I will go over the biographies of Wilde and Hall, central terminology, source material, theory and methodology, previous research, and an overview British society and its attitudes towards homosexuality at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Analysis is then divided into three chapters: the reception of

⁷ Frankel 2012, 4; Potter 2010, "Well of Loneliness, The".

⁸ Tamagne 2004, 16-17.

⁹ Doan 2001, 30.

¹⁰ Love 2006, "Hall, Radclyffe".

Dorian Gray, the reception of *The Well*, and comparison. Finally, I will summarise the answers to my research questions.

1.1 Brief biographies of the authors

The Picture of Dorian Gray was the only novel by Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854-1900), an Irish playwright and poet. Born to an intellectual upper-middle class family in Dublin, Wilde spent most of his adult life in London. He studied Classics at Trinity College in Dublin and Greats¹¹ at Magdalen College in Oxford. Wilde began his professional literary career with a volume of poems in 1881 and worked as an editor for a magazine called *The Women's World*. In 1884 he married Constance Lloyd, the daughter of an Irish lawyer; their sons Cyril and Vyvyan were born the following years in 1885 and 1886.

From 1888 onwards he published short stories for children and critical essays. By 1890 Wilde was a member of various gentlemen's clubs and an esteemed dinner guest known for his wit, conversation, lectures, poems, and stories. He published *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a novella in the *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890 and as a novel in 1891.¹²

Wilde trial for gross indecency took place at the Old Bailey in the spring of 1895.¹³ Before this, Wilde had a relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, "Bosie", the third son of the Marquess of Queensberry, sixteen years his junior. The Marquess disapproved of the couple, and after failed attempts to separate them, left a calling card at Wilde's club that read: "For Oscar Wilde posing sodomite [sic]."¹⁴ Wilde decided to sue Queensberry for libel – unbeknownst to him, Queensberry and his private investigators had found male prostitutes who claimed to have been intimate with him.¹⁵ Wilde was convicted of gross indecency and imprisoned for two years, dying of meningitis shortly after his release in 1900.¹⁶

Author and poet Radclyffe Hall's (born Marguerite Antonia Radclyffe Hall, 1880-1943) *The Well of Loneliness* was published in 1928, the heart of the interwar era.¹⁷ Hall was born into landed aristocracy to an American mother and an absent British father. She studied in King's College (London), and after inheriting her father's fortune in 1898

¹¹ Undergraduate course of classical history, philosophy, and languages at Oxford University. Wallace 2015, "Greats".

¹² Mighall 2000, ix-xi; Frankel 2012, 4; Welch 2000, "Wilde, Oscar [Fingal O'Flahertie Wills]"; Robbins 2001, 6-13; Guy & Small 2004, 16.

¹³ Fenn 2020, 97.

¹⁴ Holland 2003, xvi-xix.

¹⁵ Fenn 2020, 98; Holland 2003, xxii.

¹⁶ Welch 2000, "Wilde, Oscar [Fingal O'Flahertie Wills]".

¹⁷ Potter 2010, "Well of Loneliness, The"; Love 2006, "Hall, Radclyffe".

she began travelling and writing, publishing several poems.¹⁸ Her first short stories were published after the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

In the 1920s Hall became a novelist with two novels, *A Saturday Life* (1925) and *Adam's Breed* (1926), the latter of which won the renowned James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Prix Femina awards. During this time, she also became familiar with sexological ideas that are prominent in *The Well of Loneliness*. Hall's partner was Lady Una Troubridge, and their relationship lasted until the end of her life.¹⁹ Although she was a relatively successful author in her time, her mark in British literature was solidified by the obscenity trials and consequent banning of *The Well*.²⁰ The trial brought the novel huge publicity and enormous profit to Hall as it was sold abroad in the US and Paris, where it remained in print.²¹

1.2 Terminology

In my thesis I refer to queer literature, meaning literature that depicts same-sex desire, relationships, and identities. The word *queer* has an eventful history with changes in meaning and connotations. The emergence of *queer* as a slur has been connected to Wilde's trials where a letter from the Marquiss of Queensberry was read aloud, the Marquiss calling Wilde a "Snob Queer".²² *Queer* was also used as a self-identifying term by sexual minorities until the gay liberation in the late 1960s, signifying otherness and "emerging identity", but once the word *gay* was adopted to mean homosexuality, it became pejorative.²³ By the 1980s the term was adopted again by activists, its meaning reversed to mean "collective agency and militancy". With the emergence of academic queer theory in the same decade, queer was utilised to question the stability and binaries of categories of identity, homo- and heterosexual alike.²⁴ I find queer suitable for referring to the fiction in question as it allows a fluid understanding of identity and same-sex themes of the past, and it works as an umbrella term for both male and female homosexuality²⁵.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century doctors and activists invented several terms to describe same-sex desire, including *homosexuality* by Karoly Maria Kertbeny in 1869, but it was not widely utilised until decades later.²⁶ This coincided with the rise of sexology as a field of science – the term *sexuality* first appeared in 1837, *sexology*

¹⁸ Love 2006, "Hall, Radclyffe".

¹⁹ Souhami 2008, vii; Funke 2016, 1-5.

²⁰ Love 2006, "Hall, Radclyffe".

²¹ Souhami 1998, 213-214.

²² Clarke 2021, "'Queer' history: A history of Queer".

²³ Weeks 2012, 523-525.; Clarke 2021, "'Queer' history: A history of Queer".

²⁴ Weeks 2012, 525-526.

²⁵ Jagose 1996, 1.

²⁶ Hekma 2021, 297.

emerging at the end of the century.²⁷ Contemporary views on the history of sexology and homosexuality have been inspired by Michel Foucault, who argued that the emergence of the homosexual identity was linked with the development of sexology.²⁸ He theorised that sexuality was inseparable from the field of medicine, as sexology rose to answer modern society's public health issues, morality, and population control by coding and classifying individual and collective behaviours.²⁹ While mostly agreed on, critics of Foucault disagree with his focus on medicalisation alone, writing that the concept of sexuality was and continues to be determined by an array of social and ideological values in addition to medicine, such as religion, legislation, and art.³⁰

The novels at the centre of this study were published during the first waves of sexological research, interested initially in deviant and pathological sexualities and later, in the 1920s, the normalisation of non-reproductive sexual behaviours and sexual pleasure.³¹ In Wilde's trials the words *sodomy* and *sodomitical* were used, derived from the Biblical town of Sodom, a place of vice, and referring to any "unnatural" sexual act or relation.³² The concept of sexual inversion is central to *The Well*, where it is closely examined: it was developed primarily by the interwar era's most prominent sexologist Havelock Ellis to comprehend the innate nature of same-sex desire.³³ The terms *sapphic* and *lesbian* also existed at this time, both of which derive from the Ancient Greek lyric poet Sappho, known for her love poems addressed to women, who lived on the island of Lesbos.³⁴

In my analysis I utilise the contemporary terms found in the source material as needed as well as *queer*, *homosexual*, and *lesbian* on a more general level for the sake of clarity. That said, I approach these terms broadly, using them more as adjectives for same-sex acts and desire rather than indicators of identity, as understanding of sexual orientation was only forming at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While historians have appointed the trials of both Wilde and Hall as remarkable in "the transition of modern sensibility about sexual orientation" in Britain³⁵, Professor of History Barry Reay has remarked that using words such as "gay" (for men) and "lesbian" (for women) when studying same-sex desires and practices of the past "risks restricting interpretation before it begins"³⁶. Therefore, to avoid classification, I approach the history of homosexuality through the idea of multiple homosexualities, "without assuming either sexual identity or anticipating its complete absence."³⁷

²⁷ Giami 2021, 5-7.

²⁸ Beachy 2010, 802-803.

²⁹ Giami 2021, 6-7.

³⁰ Beachy 2010, 803; Giami 2021, 9.

³¹ Giami 2021, 7.

³² Sullivan 2003, 11-12.

³³ Tamagne 2004, 157-158.

³⁴ Colman 2008, "Lesbian", Colman 2008, "Sapphism"; Greene 2010, "Sappho".

³⁵ Moulton 2014, 65.

³⁶ Reay 2009, 215.

³⁷ Reay 2009, 216-217.

Homophobia will also be mentioned briefly: Originating from the 1970s, the term has been used to describe an irrational fear towards homosexuality. The term has been criticised for reducing the issue “to the level of individual psyche” while representing systematic and cultural structures that perpetuate discrimination against queer people.³⁸ To counter this, the term *heterosexism* was coined to stand for the belief that heterosexuality is the superior and natural form of sexuality.³⁹ One of the aspects of this study is the analysis of cultural values that created homophobic and heterosexist thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

1.3 Methodology and theory

At the basis of my methodology is close reading, which includes reading the text at hand multiple times from different points of view.⁴⁰ To process the text’s meanings thoroughly, it is read multiple times with different focuses and techniques. Coming back to the text ensures details and interpretations that might have been missed on the first and previous perusals are uncovered.⁴¹ When approaching my source material, I first read through all the reviews, then focused on the reviews of each respective book, and finally began analysis of individual texts which I read multiple times.

I utilise a simple form of critical discourse analysis, whose main principles are historicalness (context), focus on language, and an understanding of the hierarchy of discourses, language-based constructions of reality that manifest in the ways people act and express themselves. Discourses hold power and mandate what is talked about and what is not, building identities.⁴² Anu Pynnönen names three linguistic traits of discourses: naming, categorising, and describing. Naming refers to the names chosen when referring to different topics and phenomena; categorising puts topics into groups and hierarchies; and describing refers to what words, phrases and metaphors are used to portray the topics. Representations always include choices of what is included and what is left out, what is important and what is marginal – they are connected to power and status and are never impartial.⁴³

I also apply the basic tenets of queer theory to my analysis. Since notions of sexuality are constructed historically, culturally, and socially, there are no true accounts of homosexuality or heterosexuality.⁴⁴ Sexuality is, then, discursively produced, for example with terms like invert or sapphic, and the study of these discourses shed light

³⁸ Kent 1995, “Homophobia.”

³⁹ Kent 1995, “Heterosexism.”

⁴⁰ Pöysä 2015, 30.

⁴¹ Pöysä 2015, 30-31.

⁴² Locke 2004, 1-2.

⁴³ Pynnönen 2013, 16-19.

⁴⁴ Sullivan 2003, 10.

on the underlying aspects of what constituted sexuality in the cultural milieu at hand.⁴⁵ Moreover, the language used reflects class, gender, and ideology.⁴⁶ In my study, discourses that existed within the middle and upper classes will be apparent, and so the representations of queerness will be those of the middle and upper classes, not to be generalised to British society as a whole.

For comparison, I will compile my interpretation of the reviews and explain the differences and similarities between them. The comparison will have to note the differences in the histories of homosexual men and women since they should not be treated as interchangeable due to differences in quantity and quality of source material, visibility in legislation, and sexological models.⁴⁷ However, I believe the authors and the novels have enough similarities to invite examination of their receptions to determine why they roused such disapproval in the press and subsequently became remarkable in queer history.

1.4 Source material

Among source material used are reviews from newspapers and court records. Because of availability issues, such as not having access to the original newspapers and court documents, I largely rely on collections of contemporary reviews. The sources relating to *Dorian Gray* range from 1890-1891 and 1895, while sources on *The Well* are from 1928. For Wilde's trials in which the novel was used against evidence, I refer to *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (2003), a transcript of the court proceedings edited by his grandson Merlin Holland. I have not been able to find transcripts of *The Well*'s obscenity trial aside from the judgement, and therefore analysis on the trial will rely mostly on secondary sources. The trial itself is not the main focus of analysis: while it can be seen as the culmination of the negative views on the book, I aim to treat it as only a part the reception.

Contemporary reviews of Oscar Wilde's works have been collected into a *Critical Heritage* volume on the author, edited by Karl Beckson; the series "collects together a large body of criticism on major figures in literature".⁴⁸ The Wilde volume includes texts on both the 1890 and 1891 versions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, resulting in seven reviews total, most on the original version published in *Lippincott's* magazine. The newspapers included are *St. James's Gazette*, *Daily Chronicle*, *Scot's Observer*, *Punch*, *Theatre* and *Athenaeum*. *Athenaeum* was a literary magazine with a focus on the arts

⁴⁵ Sullivan 2003, 11.

⁴⁶ Tamagne 2004, 3.

⁴⁷ Tamagne 2004, 176, 318.; Bullough & Bullough 1977, 896.

⁴⁸ Beckson 2003, ii.

and literature⁴⁹, while *Punch* a satirical magazine⁵⁰. *Scot's Observer* was a Conservative paper⁵¹, the *Daily Chronicle* was liberal.⁵²

In addition, I browsed Newspapers.com⁵³ to collect scans of newspaper clippings, most of which are short notes and reviews due to the columns of the newspapers often showcasing other novels as well. Using the name of the novel as keyword, I based my selection on the readability of the text and relevancy (in some papers the novel was only mentioned and examined briefly, for example in comparison to another book). I saved clippings about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from *The Royal Cornwall Gazette*, *Falmouth Packet and General Advertiser*, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, *The Graphic*, *The Gloucester Journal*, *The Exeter Flying Post*, *The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, *Manchester Evening News*, *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, *Liverpool Mercury*, and *Hampshire Telegraph and Naval Chronicle*. Many of these papers were local news publications, as their titles indicate. *The Graphic* was originally established to promote social reform with illustrations⁵⁴, *Pall Mall Gazette* was Conservative newspaper (although at times it supported the Liberal cause as well).⁵⁵

For contemporary reviews on *The Well of Loneliness* I utilise *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on The Well of Loneliness* (2011), edited by Laura Doan and Jay Prosser, that includes a variety of reviews and essays on the novel from different eras. There are twenty-two early writings and reviews, ranging from August to October 1928. Several newspapers are represented in the collection: *Saturday Review*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Nation & Athenaeum*, *Sunday Times*, *Evening Standard*, *Glasgow Herald*, *Morning Post*, *Time and Tide*, *North Mail and Newcastle Chronicle*, *T.P.'s & Cassell's Weekly*, *Liverpool Post and Mercury*, *Tatler*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily News and Westminster Gazette*, *Country Life*, *New Statesman*, *People*, *Truth*, *Lancet*, *Life and Letters*, and *British Journal of Inebriety*.

Conservative newspapers included are the *Daily Telegraph* and *Morning Post*.⁵⁶ *Tide and Time* was a strongly feminist left-wing publication⁵⁷, *New Statesman* was "left-of-middle"⁵⁸, and *Daily News and Westminster Gazette* was Liberal publication⁵⁹. *Life*

⁴⁹ The Athenaeum Projects: Overview, athenaeum.city.ac.uk.

⁵⁰ Cannon 2009, "Punch".

⁵¹ The Waterloo Directory of Scottish Newspapers and Periodicals, "Scots Observer, The", scottish.victorianperiodicals.com.

⁵² Edwardlloyd.org, "The Daily Chronicle".

⁵³ www.newspapers.com. Online newspaper archive run by the genealogy company Ancestry.com that includes newspapers from around the world. To access the archive, I signed up for a week-long free trial in March 2022, during which I collected the clippings I use in my analysis.

⁵⁴ Spartacus Educational, *The Graphic*, spartacus-educational.com.

⁵⁵ The British Newspaper Archive, "The Pall Mall Gazette", britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.

⁵⁶ Drabble, Stringer, and Hahn 2007, "Daily Telegraph."

⁵⁷ Birch 2009, "Time and Tide."

⁵⁸ Harcup 2014, "New Statesman."

⁵⁹ Drabble & Stringer & Hahn 2007, "Daily News."

and *Letters* was a literary publication.⁶⁰ There is also some continuity between the publications of 1890 and 1928, with *Athenaeum* of Wilde's time having merged with the *Nation*, forming *Nation and Athenaeum*.⁶¹ Since *Palatable Poison* offers already several reviews to analyse, I did not deem it necessary to collect more material.

1.5 Previous research

Research into queer fiction, after the rise of queer theory in the 1980s, has been extensive.⁶² Before the last decades of the nineteenth century homoerotic sentiments were mostly expressed in poetry. Although queer theme existed in literature before the invention of sexology, the shift from poetry to novel was kindled by sexological research and the development of the novel as an art form.⁶³

The works of two scholars, Professor of English Regina Gagnier and Professor of Woman's and Gender Studies Ed Cohen, are the most important to my analysis of *Dorian Gray's* reception. Cohen has studied Victorian era masculinity, both in- and outside the framework of Oscar Wilde and his works. In the article "Writing Gone Wilde" he states that *Dorian Gray* encoded "male homoerotic passion", which led to speculation about the "preferences" of its author, later confirmed by Wilde's trials.⁶⁴ In her book *Idylls of the Marketplace* (1986) Gagnier writes about British aestheticism and its audience, studying Wilde's texts as part of other historical discourses. Gagnier connects the scandal to the culture of advertising in the 1890s that created the "normative image" of the middle-class gentleman, as well as his conflict with "the dandy" of high society.⁶⁵ According to Gagnier, when explaining the disdain the book caused in the press, "it is probably more useful to look at the audience scandalized than to look at the work".⁶⁶

The Well and Radclyffe Hall have also been studied from various viewpoints. The reception of the novel has been studied at length by Professor of English and American Studies Laura Doan in her book *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (2001), in which she argues that Hall's "daring in troubling the conventions of gender" and "her powerful literary representation of the female sexual invert" solidified her as a "cultural figure far more threatening than the modern woman; as with Wilde, so too with Hall".⁶⁷ *The Well* and Hall have been studied often

⁶⁰ Drabble, Stringer & Hahn 2007, "Life and Letters."

⁶¹ Spartacus Educational, *The Athenaeum*, spartacus-educational.com.; Spartacus Educational, *The Nation*, spartacus-educational.com.

⁶² Hurley 2018, 2.

⁶³ Wilper 2016, 1. Hurley 2018, 224.

⁶⁴ Cohen 1987, 805, 811.

⁶⁵ Gagnier 1986, 1-4, 51-52.

⁶⁶ Gagnier 1986, 7.

⁶⁷ Doan 2001, xvii, xxiii.

in comparison with Virginia Woolf and her sapphic novel from the same year, *Orlando*. For example, Professor of English and Gender Studies Laura Green has explained Woolf's disdain of *The Well* with "Hall's curiously 'lukewarm' stance toward her immediate literary context", Modernism, whose typical traits such as abstract stream of consciousness were absent in *The Well*.⁶⁸ Professor of English Leigh Gilmore has studied the relationship between authorship, sexuality, and the obscenity law in Britain through the case of *The Well* and Djuna Barnes's lesbian novel *The Nightwood* that evaded censorship.⁶⁹ According to Gilmore, obscenity rulings were used by dominant classes to control "literacy and the literary", as well as "to block the emergence of new writing about homosexuality, including but not limited to writing by lesbians and gay men themselves".⁷⁰

1.6 Societal context

Researching the history of sexuality demands an extensive context that spans a multitude of cultural aspects from legislation to art.⁷¹ The temporal boundaries of this study coincide with the *fin de siècle*, end of century, described by Professor of History Michael Saler as "fascinating, complex, and transitional historical period between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" spanning "late 'Victorianism' and early 'Modernism'".⁷² During this time, British society went through numerous social changes.

In the late Victorian era, Britain enjoyed international dominance as the British Empire became "integrated" and "cohesive" for the first time.⁷³ The empire was thought to reflect and forward the British values of liberalism, free trade, progress, and civilisation.⁷⁴ The previous century had seen the Industrial Revolution and urbanisation, transformations further accelerated by Victorians. Middle classes – industrialists, lawyers, and merchants – thrived in the market-driven economy, gaining political and societal power previously held by the aristocracy. Bourgeois values began to dictate "social and moral standards, fashionable manners and political and economic policies".⁷⁵ Yet, the final decades of the nineteenth century were plagued by a "sense of crisis" caused by economic difficulties, fears of social instability, and class conflict.⁷⁶

⁶⁸ Green 2003, 278.

⁶⁹ Gilmore 1994, 603-604.

⁷⁰ Gilmore 1994, 624.

⁷¹ Tamagne 2004, 3-4.

⁷² Saler 2015, 1.

⁷³ Moran 2006, 39-40, 51; Hewitt 2012, 39.

⁷⁴ Hewitt 2012, 57.

⁷⁵ Moran 2006, 39-40.

⁷⁶ Hewitt 2012, 38.

The growing dependence on the empire and foreign trade shook Victorian perceptions of governance, as “self-government” and local control were considered integral to British character.⁷⁷ To counter this, unity and self-reliance were promoted to build national identity.⁷⁸ Fears of invasion, ignited by Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo, the advancements of Germany, the challenging rule of Ireland, and the Indian Rebellion of 1857-1858, were utilised to strengthen cohesion.⁷⁹ Especially France was depicted as Britain’s opposite as Catholic, autocratic, and, after the French Revolution, unstable.⁸⁰ The Irish, Welsh, and Scottish were frequently portrayed as the spontaneous “other” to rational Saxons.⁸¹

Concern for crime, vice, and public order⁸² was met with stressing the importance of propriety. Urbanisation had led to the dilution of old social disciplines⁸³: While in past leisure and work were intermingled and enjoyed in small communities, the anonymity of large cities allowed for free time to become divided from work, custom, community, and supervision. Respectability became key, and although it was practiced differently depending on situation, gender, age, and lifestyle, correct personal conduct and good character held ideological power.⁸⁴ Strict distinctions between genders created different societal rules for men and women, men being guided by ideas of industry, work ethic, and commitment to the home, while women were revered as mothers.⁸⁵ Male privilege was sustained by belittling women’s mental and physical capabilities.⁸⁶ Ed Cohen has explained that English men applied their privilege and authority to create signifiers of difference, legitimising “healthy” practices that solidified their positions. Differences between classes equalled distinctions in social, political, economic, and sexual attributes, and in this hierarchy, middle class men came on top.⁸⁷

Queen Victoria died in 1901, in the midst of already on-going social change. The Boer War (1899-1902) and the economic anxieties it roused invoked criticism towards Victorian economical ideas.⁸⁸ As other economies expanded, Britain lost global importance.⁸⁹ Transformation into a new era was precipitated with technological inventions such as electricity and the wireless⁹⁰, with the First World War acting as a final

⁷⁷ Goodlad 2004, 3-4; Moran 2006, 51; Buzard 2014, 478-479.; Goodman 2004, 3-4.

⁷⁸ Buzard 2014, 477-479.

⁷⁹ Vaughan 1990, 19.

⁸⁰ Buzard 2014, 480-481.

⁸¹ Buzard 2014, 479-480.

⁸² Moran 2006, 45-47.

⁸³ Bailey 1977, 7-11.

⁸⁴ Huggins 2000, 585-586.

⁸⁵ Amigoni 2011, 20, 30; Tosh 2005, 330-332.

⁸⁶ Tosh 2005, 337-338.

⁸⁷ Cohen 2013, 18-20, 25.

⁸⁸ Hewitt 2012, 40-42.

⁸⁹ Hewitt 2012, 45.

⁹⁰ Hewitt 2012, 42.

catalyst for societal change.⁹¹ Post-war economic instability combined with developments in science called into further question imperialism, the free market, and Victorian values.⁹² The middle classes reached a “bourgeois enlightenment” in which resisting hypocrisy, militarism, ignorance, and imperialism became the attributes of a civilised individual.⁹³

Greater personal freedom and higher disposable incomes of ordinary people provoked concern about the decline of moral standards. The late Victorian era had seen the retreat of religion, a trend that continued into the interwar period as attendance in church and Sunday schools dropped.⁹⁴ Because of casualties in the war, the population of women exceeded men by nearly 2 million, the “shortage of husbands” and women’s emancipation rousing worries about the survival of the nation.⁹⁵ Art, cinema, and literature of the interwar era “engaged with concerns about economy, gender, and nation after the war”, while embracing Englishness and painting men as breadwinners.⁹⁶ Although issues such as reconstruction, national security, and depopulation had priority, feminist ideas were present in young women seeking independence.⁹⁷ Sexual difference between men and women was diminishingly explained with biology, even conservatives adopting new language of “‘personality’ and ‘colour’” in justifying for their thinking.⁹⁸ Finally, 1928 was the year the suffrage movement achieved equal enfranchisement with the Representation of the People Bill, giving everyone aged 21 the right to vote and making women the majority of the electorate.⁹⁹

For most of British history, legislation concerning sexual acts did not exist. Homosexual acts were first brought under jurisdiction by the Buggery Act of 1533 after the Church of England renounced papal authority, and during the Victorian era homosexual acts were criminalized under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 through a clause banning “any act of gross indecency with another male person”.¹⁰⁰ Whereas the Buggery Act only targeted anal intercourse, the new amendment made all homosexual acts illegal; “gross indecency” was interpreted as any intimate act between men.¹⁰¹ The maximum sentence for the crime was two years with hard labour.¹⁰² In 1921, there was an attempt to add a clause mentioning “acts of indecency between women” to the Criminal Law Amendment Act, but its passing was prevented

⁹¹ LeGates 2001, 281-282.

⁹² Wasson 2016, 288.

⁹³ Williams 1980, 62.

⁹⁴ Wasson 2016, 288; Hewitt 2012, 38.

⁹⁵ Pugh 2009, 2-3.

⁹⁶ Grandy 2016, 1-4.

⁹⁷ LeGates 2001, 291, 301.

⁹⁸ Delap 2011, 158.

⁹⁹ Smith 2009, 107-108.

¹⁰⁰ Fenn 2020, 94-95, 97.

¹⁰¹ Fenn 2020, 97.

¹⁰² Fenn 2020, 97.

by the House of Lords on the account that such a law would “would only introduce obscene thoughts into the minds of innocent people.”¹⁰³ Therefore, there was legislation criminalising sexual relations between women.¹⁰⁴

Before the mid-nineteenth century knowledge of homosexuality relied on jurisprudence instead of scientific knowledge – however, with the rise of the authority on sexual matters was transferred from the clergy and the legislative-judicial realm to medicine.¹⁰⁵ Phenomena studied by early sexologists included prostitution, masturbation, birth control, and sodomy.¹⁰⁶ Richard von Krafft-Ebing was the most influential psychologist of the nineteenth century, a transitive thinker between “Victorian and modern styles of sexual theorising”.¹⁰⁷ His groundbreaking, twelve-part *Psychopathia Sexualis* was first published in 1886. The series was the first comprehensive biomedical account of sexual deviance, including a large amount of autobiographical case studies.¹⁰⁸ During the nineteenth century the consensus was that homosexuality was caused by sexual excess, usually masturbation – Krafft-Ebing, however, suggested that homosexuality could be both acquired and congenital.¹⁰⁹ Havelock Ellis, whose seminal work *Sexual Inversion* was published in 1897, believed that homosexuality was always congenital, but unlike Krafft-Ebing, he argued that it was not a disease.¹¹⁰

Sexological thinking was challenged by Sigmund Freud, whose early work focused on the sexual instinct, infantile sexuality, and sexual aberrations, as expressed in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), were.¹¹¹ Freud aimed to examine the variance of human sexual development¹¹², claiming that an individual must successfully go through transitions (such as the infantile oral, anal, and genital stages) to attain “normal sexual life”. Deviant or abnormal sexual life did not consist necessarily of homosexuality or fetishism, but disturbance with the individual’s capability for sensuality and affection.¹¹³ He did, however, assume “all forms of non-heterosexual” behaviour was abnormal¹¹⁴, but abnormality in this instance was, again, ambiguous¹¹⁵ – “exclusive” heterosexuality was not “self-evident” to Freud either.¹¹⁶

Sexologists typically explained same-sexual behaviour by naturally caused “gender inversion, the femininity of homosexuals and the masculinity of lesbians”: for example, Karl Heinrich Ulrich’s Uranian was a “female soul in a male body”. Since the

¹⁰³ Tamagne 2004, 318-319.

¹⁰⁴ Tamagne 2004, 318.

¹⁰⁵ Modellmog 2014, 269.

¹⁰⁶ Modellmog 2014, 272.

¹⁰⁷ Robinson 1989, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Beachy 2010, 816-817.

¹⁰⁹ Robinson 1989, 5.

¹¹⁰ Robinson 1989, 4-5, 7.

¹¹¹ Lauretis 1994, 8-9.

¹¹² Carr 1987, 361-362.

¹¹³ Carr 1987, 364.

¹¹⁴ Carr 1987, 366.

¹¹⁵ Robinson 2001, 92.

¹¹⁶ Robinson 2001, 93.

attraction of opposites, of men towards women and vice versa, was the basis for heterosexual attraction, homosexual attraction followed the same model: the feminine homosexual man was understood to feel attraction towards heterosexual men and the masculine homosexual woman towards feminine women.¹¹⁷

Since legislation ignored same-sex relations between women, sexologists paid little attention to lesbians, resulting in restricted models of lesbianism occupied with the masculinity of female homosexuals.¹¹⁸ Krafft-Ebing was the first to examine female "deviants", defining them by their varying masculinity and responsiveness to approaches by masculine-looking women.¹¹⁹ Ellis struggled to find signs of female homosexuality, settling to a definition of two categories: "actively inverted" masculine-appearing women and feminine-appearing women who were "not repelled" by advances from other women.¹²⁰ For Ellis, female homosexuality always entailed masculine instinct.¹²¹ Similarly, while Freud maintained that homosexual men were not always feminine, homosexual women were always masculine.¹²²

Sexology began to be considered a legitimate branch of science in the interwar years, which changed attitudes towards sex and sexuality.¹²³ The moral stances held by the middle classes began to diversify in the beginning of the twentieth century with attitudes towards sexuality growing slacker.¹²⁴ Homosexuality was discussed more openly.¹²⁵ Yet, while in Berlin and Paris homosexual subcultures thrived, the scene in London was discreet, centralised on elites.¹²⁶ Those who "were acquainted with the new sexual science"¹²⁷ were often highly educated, liberal, and had same-sex relations themselves.¹²⁸ Depictions of homosexuality were popular in the literary world: many modernist authors were influenced by sexological ideas, harnessing them as "a site of resistance" in addressing issues related to gender.¹²⁹ Since the research on homosexual men was more sophisticated than the research on homosexual women and the study of lesbians relied on its own unique narratives and history, the early gay novel reacted to a more distinct discourse than its lesbian counterpart. However, lesbian novels that responded to sexological ideas were not unimaginable, as *The Well* demonstrates.¹³⁰

¹¹⁷ Hekma 2021, 298.

¹¹⁸ Tamagne 2004, 155; Newton 1984, 566.

¹¹⁹ Tamagne 2004, 155.

¹²⁰ Vicinus 2012, 566.

¹²¹ Newton 1984, 568.

¹²² Robinson 2001, 94-95.

¹²³ Wasson 2016, 288; Bronstein & Harris 2012, 200.; Moddelmog 2014, 272.

¹²⁴ Rayside 1992, 130.

¹²⁵ Tamagne 2004, 207.

¹²⁶ Tamagne 2004, 37, 45.

¹²⁷ Moddelmog 2015, 270.

¹²⁸ Moddelmog 2014, 271.

¹²⁹ Moddelmog 2014, 269-272.

¹³⁰ Wilper 2016, 2.

2 THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

The Picture of Dorian Gray tells the story of Dorian, a beautiful young man, whose portrait is painted by his friend, Basil. In the beginning of the story Dorian meets an older gentleman, Lord Henry, who praises his beauty and youth. As his portrait is painted, Dorian wishes that the picture would age instead of him – in the spirit of a Faustian bargain¹³¹, his wish comes true. Dorian soon falls in love with an actress, Sybil, and proposes to her, but temporarily loses interest in her and rejects her after she gives a bad performance on stage. Dorian quickly realises his mistake but finds out that Sybil has killed herself. He notices his portrait has become distorted and hides it in his attic. Dorian then throws himself into a life of sensualism, all the while his portrait keeps turning more abhorrent. Later Basil visits him, and Dorian allows him to see his painting. Basil is horrified by what it has become, and in a fit of rage, Dorian kills him. Over the span of eighteen years Dorian does not age as he continues to indulge in vices, but the portrait becomes more and more distorted. Eventually his conscience catches up to him and he decides to destroy the last piece of evidence of his wrongdoing, stabbing the painting. He dies himself, his body turning old and worn, the portrait returning to its original glory.

Dorian Gray was published first as a novella in 1890 and later as a lengthened novel with six new chapters a year later.¹³² The first edition in the *Lippincott's* magazine was met with negative reviews, igniting a controversy that Regenia Gagnier has argued rooted in social tensions related to the advertising industry. The last decades of the nineteenth century, the heart of industrialisation, established advertising as means to encourage consumerism and identify products with desired lifestyles.¹³³ Enjoyment of goods and evangelical morality were accommodated by intertwining faith with

¹³¹ Baker 1969, 349.

¹³² Gagnier 1986, 61.

¹³³ Gagnier 1986, 54.

goods for the home and artistic taste.¹³⁴ Advertisements filled with images of dandies and gentlemen, encouraging self-reliance, originality, and subsequently self-promotion, a person's ability to advertise themselves.¹³⁵ Since members of the Victorian society saw Wilde, being Irish and "by inclination homosexual", as removed from its middle-class and imperial values, Wilde utilised consumerist culture by making a product of himself in order to sustain his career, the objective of which Gagnier identifies as "an engaged protest against Victorian utility, rationality, scientific factuality, and technological progress" and, above all, conformity.¹³⁶

Wilde funded his fashionable London lifestyle by working as a freelance journalist for a variety of publications, reviewing books and plays, and writing about art, often using his platform to address his own intellectual concerns. He was also one of the biggest celebrities of his time: his lectures and attendances in various events and parties were reported in detail and he was often interviewed.¹³⁷ By 1890 his own journalistic work had decreased as he focused on writing literature and comedies, and he came to criticise journalism with a heavy hand.¹³⁸ There was talk of a "New Journalism"¹³⁹: Mass media was forming and journalism was becoming an eligible profession.¹⁴⁰ The number of daily newspapers grew substantially, and the general structure of the newspaper industry was changing.¹⁴¹ News reporting gained more prominence, the practicalities of reporting were enhanced and sped up by technological advancements. Objectivity became the central tenet for reporting.¹⁴²

According to Wilde, journalists were utilitarian and specialized, overly focused on proof and evidence, causing them to "impede art and menace the imagination".¹⁴³ In his 1891 essay, "The Soul of Man under Socialism", Wilde wrote about the importance of individual freedom and essentially about media control, arguing that technology would liberate workers to be artists "or people who produce according to their own desires and natures, rather than people like journalists, who produce for the status quo"¹⁴⁴. Wilde saw journalism's rule over public opinion as tyranny, encouraging the public to be receptive to art and ultimately open to different kinds of lives and people, for "selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live".¹⁴⁵

¹³⁴ Hahn 2015, 396.

¹³⁵ Gagnier 1986, 51-52; Hahn 2015, 396.

¹³⁶ Gagnier 1986, 3, 6-7.

¹³⁷ Turner 2013, 270-271.

¹³⁸ Turner 2013, 270, 276.

¹³⁹ Williams 2009, 101; Campbell 2003, 20-22; This is a different phenomenon from the New Journalism of 1960s and 1970s.

¹⁴⁰ Turner 2013, 270, 274-275.

¹⁴¹ Williams 2009, 99-100.

¹⁴² Williams 2009, 100.

¹⁴³ Gagnier 1986, 21.

¹⁴⁴ Gagnier 1986, 29.

¹⁴⁵ Guy 2013, 242; Gagnier 1986, 29, 30, 33.

Gagnier has argued that the cause of the controversy around *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was the “journalistic hostility toward the socially mobile self-advertisers”, and that Wilde “paid for his attacks on journalists” with the reception of the novel.¹⁴⁶ Wilde was seen as “a presumptuous social climber who penetrated artistic circles with offensive ease”, advertising himself in a manner unsuitable for a gentleman.¹⁴⁷ After all, Victorian society was preoccupied with social status that could be deduced from the accent, attire, demeanour, associates, and other attributes of an individual, and conforming to one’s status ensured stability.¹⁴⁸ Gagnier’s analysis combines examination of contemporary culture, social realities, art, gender, and Wilde’s personal character to explain the reception of *Dorian Gray*. Likewise, I further define the public reception of the novel by scrutinising the *fin de siècle* Victorian culture and society.

2.1 Foreign aestheticism

The most recurring theme in the reviews is the novel’s immorality. According to the author of a review published in the *Daily Chronicle*, the novel’s moral is that “when you feel yourself becoming too angelic you cannot do better than to rush out and make a beast of yourself”, in other words, use the senses to “cure the soul whenever the spiritual nature of man suffers from too much purity and self-denial”.¹⁴⁹ This is a reference to the novel’s concept of “new Hedonism” which Lord Henry teaches to Dorian when he catches him smelling lilacs in a garden in the second chapter:

“You are quite right to do that,” [Lord Henry] murmured, “Nothing can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul.” [...] “Yes,” continued Lord Henry, “that is one of the great secrets of life – to cure the soul by means of the senses, and the senses by means of the soul.”¹⁵⁰

Lord Henry states that “the true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible”, warning the beautiful Dorian that he has “only a few years in which to really live” for “when your youth goes, your beauty will go with it”.¹⁵¹ He tells him:

“Live! Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. A new Hedonism! That is what our century wants.”¹⁵²

After the death of Sybil, Dorian succumbs to these ideals, growing “more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his

¹⁴⁶ Gagnier 1986, 56.

¹⁴⁷ Gagnier 1986, 65.

¹⁴⁸ Shea 2014, 7-8.

¹⁴⁹ Beckson 2003, 71.

¹⁵⁰ Wilde 1890/2012, 77.

¹⁵¹ Wilde 1890/2012, 78.

¹⁵² Wilde 1890/2012, 79.

own soul".¹⁵³ New Hedonism is revisited by name in the nineteenth chapter, where it is stated that its goal "was to recreate life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival".¹⁵⁴

Admiration of beauty was the cornerstone of aestheticism, Wilde's choice of artistic movement. He had dedicated a large portion of his career to questioning the disjunction and relations of art, life, and beauty¹⁵⁵ – one review even called him "the whilom leader of the aesthetic school".¹⁵⁶ Beginning in the 1860s, aestheticism's core principles were the admiration of beauty and refinement of taste, "art for art's sake". It embraced style, art, past aesthetic traditions such as the Renaissance, Orientalist exoticism, and gender ambiguity, resisting the moral and political limitations of art and bourgeois taste.¹⁵⁷ Aestheticism drew also from decadence and social theories popular in France at the time, exploring the decline of civilizations as well as moral and spiritual degeneration. Decadent literature delved into exhaustion, ennui, and horror with the use of irony, self-parody, and extravagant tropes, while tension was created by mixing elegant poetic language with gruesome subject matter.¹⁵⁸ In opposition to the general judgement of art in the nineteenth century that asked whether a piece of art was good and taught moral lessons to its audience, aesthetes were interested in the beauty and meaningfulness of the work.¹⁵⁹ Wilde, although late to the movement, both exemplified (and parodied) aestheticism with his use of the epigram and dandyism that he availed, in the words of Gagnier, in the commodification of himself.¹⁶⁰

In the cultural context of the empire and building English identity by reflection on other nations such as France or Ireland, the distinction of English and foreign was carefully maintained.¹⁶¹ This manifested as establishing a national school of art and separating Englishness from the British Isles' and Empire's other traditions, depicting it as superior.¹⁶² By 1890 British art was guided by the pieces in the Royal Academy of Arts, and the purpose of art was believed to be the imparting of social values.¹⁶³ The commercial success of artists was considered a sign of "their unity with the British public, their work ethic, and their domestication citizens and normal paterfamilias".¹⁶⁴ Decadent art was considered opposed to middle class ideals and, subsequently, insulting to national values.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵³ Wilde 1890/2012, 158-159.

¹⁵⁴ Wilde 1890/2012, 162.

¹⁵⁵ Livesey 2013, 261.

¹⁵⁶ *Hampshire Telegraph and Naval Chronicle*, Jul 12, 1890, 12.

¹⁵⁷ Hanson 2013, 150-152.

¹⁵⁸ Hanson 2013, 153-154.

¹⁵⁹ Livesey 2013, 261-262.

¹⁶⁰ Hanson 2013, 150-152; Gagnier 1986, 7, 51.

¹⁶¹ Buzard 2014, 484; Vaughan 1990, 11.

¹⁶² Buzard 2014, 484; Vaughan 1990, 11.

¹⁶³ Dorment 2013, 101-102; Moran 2006, 10.

¹⁶⁴ Codell 2014, 284-285.

¹⁶⁵ Dorment 2013, 101-102, 105.

Most critics disapproved of the aesthetic attributes of *Dorian Gray*: Journalist and biographer Samuel Henry Jeyes, at the time the Assistant Editor of the conservative and imperialist newspaper *St. James' Gazette*¹⁶⁶ and a “moderate conservative”¹⁶⁷ wrote in his review (published anonymously) that Wilde “bores you unmercifully with his prosy rigmaroles about the beauty of the Body and the corruption of the Soul”¹⁶⁸. The aforementioned *Daily Chronicle* called the novel “a gloating study of the mental and physical corruption of a fresh, fair and golden youth”, faulting it for its “effeminate frivolity”, “theatrical cynicism”, and “tawdry mysticism”.¹⁶⁹ In a pseudonymous review in the satirical *Punch*¹⁷⁰ the author, named “The Baron de Book-Worms”, recommended the novel for “anybody who revels in diablerie” (witchcraft) and compared it unfavourably to another aesthete Théophile Gautier’s “sensuous and hyperdecorative” novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*.¹⁷¹ The same review stated:

“The luxuriously elaborate details of his ‘artistic hedonism’ are too suggestive of South Kensington Museum and aesthetic Encyclopaedias. A truer art would have avoided both the glittering conceits, which bedeck the body of the story, and the unsavoury suggestiveness which lurks in its spirit.”¹⁷²

The collections of South Kensington Museum¹⁷³ included objects from Southeast Asia, China, Japan, and India, reflecting Victorian imperialism.¹⁷⁴ The museum was established after the Great Exhibition of 1851 to preserve colonial works and provide models and inspiration to British designers and craftsmen.¹⁷⁵ The *Daily Chronicle* review talked similarly of “garish vulgarity which is over all Mr Wilde’s elaborate Wardour Street aestheticism and obtrusively cheap scholarship” – Wardour Street, located in West End’s Soho, was famous in the Victorian era for its diversity, artistic culture, and leisure industry.¹⁷⁶ While the rest of West End was praised for its cosmopolitanism in the papers, Soho was home to foreign refugees and known for crime and sex work, and thus represented “a different cosmopolitanism: a debased condition of sexual transgression, displacement, and degeneration”.¹⁷⁷ Due to Soho’s connection to prostitution, this mention was also likely a reference to rumours about Wilde’s homosexuality.¹⁷⁸ “Wardour Street English” was also a term first used in 1888 to ridicule

¹⁶⁶ Cove, “St. James Gazette Review Was Published”, editions.covecollective.org.

¹⁶⁷ The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, “Samuel Henry Jeyes”, www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk.

¹⁶⁸ Beckson 2003, 67.

¹⁶⁹ Beckson 2003, 72.

¹⁷⁰ Cannon 2009, “Punch”.

¹⁷¹ Beckson 2003, 75-76; Udall 1999, 2-3.

¹⁷² Beckson 2003, 76.

¹⁷³ Today’s Victoria and Albert Museum.

¹⁷⁴ Barringer 1998, 11-12.

¹⁷⁵ Vaughan 1990, 11, 18.

¹⁷⁶ Walkowitz 2011, 419.

¹⁷⁷ Walkowitz 2011, 420.

¹⁷⁸ Gagnier 1986, 59.

the archaic language of bad historical novels¹⁷⁹, suggesting the critic might have been referring to the rather flowery language and style of Wilde's prose.

Therefore, aestheticism and hedonism were connected with the foreign by the critics. Jeyes wrote that Wilde aired "his cheap research among the garbage of the French Décadents like any drivelling pedant"¹⁸⁰ while the *Daily Chronicle* stated that the novel "is a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French Décadents"¹⁸¹. Despite Wilde being Irish, his novel was not (at least outright) dismissed by his nationality, but rather his French influences. However, the critics did not depreciate all French art, as was evident by the favourable mention of the French aesthete Théophile Gautier by both the *Punch*¹⁸² and *St. James's Gazette*¹⁸³.

Therefore, the critics insinuated that Wilde's aestheticism was of the foreign and immoral kind, for they did not follow the proper values of English art. According to Gagnier, *Dorian Gray* leaned too heavily on "art for art's sake" and represented a part of society the middle class could not relate to, "idle aristocrats and romantic artists". This violated the "social function of art" – representing the middle class and preserving societal values such as industry and productivity.¹⁸⁴

2.2 Hedonistic leisure and industrious masculinity

Aside from its purely aesthetic connections, "the pursuit of pleasure" in *Dorian Gray* was set against the rise of modern leisure in British society as the world of free time expanded from the already recreationally diverse eighteenth century.¹⁸⁵ As a group whose traditions were deeply entrenched in the disciplines of work, the newfound free time brought about by industrial prosperity was considered shameful for the middle classes.¹⁸⁶ It was believed leisure could lead into "indolence and prodigality", and it was portrayed either as working-class lack of discipline or an unwarranted attribute of the aristocracy.¹⁸⁷ Influenced by evangelicalism, moralists argued that pleasure and personal gratification were sinful, and that duty, family, and morality were paramount.¹⁸⁸ Leisure posed a threat not only to the social structure of class but the "discipline and cohesion of the bourgeois world" and needed "moral legitimation".¹⁸⁹

¹⁷⁹ "Wardour Street," *Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage*.

¹⁸⁰ Beckson 2003, 68.

¹⁸¹ Beckson 2003, 71.

¹⁸² Beckson 2003, 76.

¹⁸³ Beckson 2003, 69.

¹⁸⁴ Gagnier 1986, 65.

¹⁸⁵ Bailey 1977, 7-11.

¹⁸⁶ Huggins 2000, 585-586.

¹⁸⁷ Bailey 1977, 15-17.

¹⁸⁸ Huggins 2000, 586-587.

¹⁸⁹ Bailey 1977, 14, 17-18.

While most clergymen agreed that recreation was allowed in correct company and setting to maintain efficiency at work, there was no unanimous understanding of leisure within the middle classes. The respectability of leisure was determined by different social variables, such as gender, and male leisure was consequently considered to be a particularly vulnerable area for social misconduct: as men ruled the public sphere, women had influence over family activities and the behaviour of their children, constructing a kind of respectability that was often in conflict with certain kinds of masculinity.¹⁹⁰

From the point of view of respectability, *Dorian Gray* depicts middle class male characters who embrace the gratifications of leisure.¹⁹¹ Lord Henry, Dorian, and Basil are, in the words of Ed Cohen, “freed from the activities and responsibilities that typically consumed the energies of middle-class men” as the novel relinquished traditional male values, such as morality and industry, “in favor of the aesthetic”.¹⁹² Jeyes took note of this by describing the main characters as filling up “the intervals of talk by plucking daisies and playing with them, and sometimes drinking ‘something with strawberry in it’”.¹⁹³ He also referred to the main characters as “Puppies” which might have been to accentuate their effeminacy or simply to mock them, puppy archaically meaning a “foolish, conceited, or impertinent young man”¹⁹⁴. Wilde’s characters did not follow the public idea of a man as independent and vigorous¹⁹⁵, instead exemplifying traits considered effeminate: neglect of one’s masculine achievements, spending too much time in the company of women, enjoyment of luxury, and homosexuality.¹⁹⁶

Indeed, *Athenaeum* called the revised novel “unmanly, sickening, vicious”¹⁹⁷, and a review in the *Graphic* described the characters as “emasculate men”.¹⁹⁸ Gagnier has stated that the novel’s decadence was attributed not to the femininity of its characters alone: Wilde, having written for women as the editor of the *Woman’s World* and reviewed dozens of novels by women, based the narrative of *Dorian Gray* on elements present in upper-class women’s literature, such as art, psychology, sin, and luxury. Although middle class society was largely managed by women, who raised children and organised social events, the negative response to the novel was partly “an outcry against the male author who won the support of Society [...] by writing a book that would appeal to women.”¹⁹⁹ *Dorian Gray*, then, treaded on a cultural ground

¹⁹⁰ Bailey 1977, 20, 23; Huggins 2000, 587-588.

¹⁹¹ Joyce 2002, 505-507.

¹⁹² Cohen 1987, 805-806.

¹⁹³ Beckson 2003, 68.

¹⁹⁴ “Puppy”, *Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹⁹⁵ Tosh 2005, 335.

¹⁹⁶ Tosh 2005, 337-338.

¹⁹⁷ Beckson 2003, 85.

¹⁹⁸ *The Graphic*, Jul 12, 1890, 18.

¹⁹⁹ Gagnier 1986, 65-66.

unsuitable for men, luxurious instead of industrious. Not following the rules of middle-class propriety and gender, it shook the “certainty of bourgeois categories”.²⁰⁰

Gagnier also points out Wilde’s dandyism: In the debate around the novel, the critics viewed themselves as “gentlemen guardians of public morality” while Wilde portrayed himself as “the subtle dandy-artist of higher morality”. Wilde appeared as someone who was familiar with “an aristocratic mode of life” through his own persona and depiction of middle- and upper-class characters, which the critics believed to be false²⁰¹: Jeyes, for instance, remarked that Wilde knew “nothing of the life” he has depicted.²⁰² After all, Wilde’s upper-class characters did not follow the established bourgeois ideals – Lord Henry and Dorian’s pursuit of beauty and pleasure ultimately lacked moral justification. Thus, the critics seemed to suggest that Wilde did not know his place, or that “it was not that of a middle-class gentleman”²⁰³. In short, in this intersection of gender and class, Wilde’s portrayal of men was effeminate, a mode of being unacceptable for a middle-class gentleman.

2.3 Sham moral and questionable intentions

Victorians believed art and literature had a public responsibility: art critic and polymath John Ruskin (1819-1900) argued that “art expressed a society’s character and beliefs”, and that artistic achievement was connected to the nation’s ethical and spiritual health, which is why the morals and ideologies behind art had to be sound. Art critics acted as “public custodians” of moral and artistic standards, and the subjects and style of art and literature were carefully policed in order to maintain propriety.²⁰⁴ Art built national identity but also addressed the realities and directions of society, whereupon topical issues were a significant theme in art and literature.²⁰⁵

In the nineteenth century the novel had replaced the long Romantic poem and the lyric as the most popular genre of literature. Prose fiction was the most common form of writing in the periodical publications since it yielded profits for both the author and the publisher.²⁰⁶ The Gothic novel of the late eighteenth century, depicting the supernatural and the occult, inspired the Victorian genres of crime literature and neo-Gothic that explored the definitions and psychology of scientists, criminals, fugitives, and exiles.²⁰⁷ Famous works of this genre included Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

²⁰⁰ Cohen 1987, 806.

²⁰¹ Gagnier 1986, 57.

²⁰² Beckson 2003, 68-70.

²⁰³ Gagnier 1986, 59.

²⁰⁴ Moran 2006, 10-12.

²⁰⁵ Moran 2006, 11.

²⁰⁶ Shea 2014, 12-13.

²⁰⁷ Moran 2006, 89-91.

(1818/1831), Robert Downing's *Laboratory* (1844), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and *Dorian Gray*.²⁰⁸

Despite societal fears surrounding it, literature about crime was immensely popular: for example, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was received with high praise of its psychological complexity, becoming an instant classic.²⁰⁹ In *Dorian Gray* the main character similarly attempts to hide his criminal side as his hedonism turns from luxurious pursuit of pleasure to criminal acts ranging from opium dens to murder.²¹⁰ As such, multiple reviewers of *Dorian Gray* made comparisons to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Theatre* suspected that Wilde's novel could not have been written without *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.²¹¹ Jeyes praised Stevenson over Wilde, for he could have made the dilemma of the portrait in the attic "convincing, humorous, pathetic."²¹²

Dorian Gray fails to be read as a crime novel in the same way as *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Crime literature of the time was chiefly the "the province of privileged classes", as Professor of English Simon Joyce has written: In Stevenson's and Arthur Conan Doyle's works – most famously *Sherlock Holmes*²¹³ – the culprit is often a member of higher society, "the privileged offender", who is ultimately "a cultural fiction" diverting attention away from "genuine social problems of poverty".²¹⁴ According to Joyce, *Dorian Gray* deviates from this trend because Dorian fails to combine aesthetics and crime: As he visits the distorted portrait with Basil, Dorian comes to blame the painter for what he has become and stabs him to death. The murder is unceremonial, carried out poorly and spontaneously, and his motive is dull.²¹⁵ In addition, although it has been suggested that *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* could also be read as a story dealing with homosexuality²¹⁶, it ties up the unlikely friendship between its heroes by revealing they are the same person, while Wilde leaves a great deal up to interpretation.²¹⁷ Mr Jekyll also atones for his sins by taking his own life at the end of his story, while Dorian did not intend to die when destroying the painting. Baron de Book-Worms questioned this in *Punch*:

"Does [Wilde] mean that, by sacrificing his earthly life, Dorian Gray atones for his infernal sins, and so purifies his soul by suicide? 'Heavens!'"²¹⁸

The *Daily Chronicle* wrote similarly:

²⁰⁸ Shea 2014, 12-13; Moran 2006, 89.

²⁰⁹ Adams 2009, 294; Joyce 2002, 501-50.

²¹⁰ Joyce 2002, 505-507; Adams 2009, 294.

²¹¹ The *Pall Mall Gazette*, Jun 26 1890, 3; Beckson 2003, 83..

²¹² Beckson 2003, 69.

²¹³ Keulks 2006, "Doyle, Arthur Conan."

²¹⁴ Joyce 2002, 503.

²¹⁵ Joyce 2002, 502, 503-506.

²¹⁶ Sanna 2012, 26-27.

²¹⁷ Mighall 2008, xiv.

²¹⁸ Beckson 2003, 75.

"[Wilde's] desperate effort to vamp up a 'moral' for the book at the end is, artistically speaking, coarse and crude, because the whole incident of Dorian Gray's death is, as they say on the stage, 'out of the picture.'"²¹⁹

Like Baron de Book-Worms, this critic did not find the ending with Dorian's accidental suicide sufficient. While Baron de Book-Worms found the novel "not 'satisfying' artistically, any more than it is so ethically"²²⁰, this critic worded their opinion more strictly:

"This is a sham moral, as indeed everything in the book is a sham, except for the one element in the book which will taint every young mind that comes in contact with it. That element is shockingly real, and it is the plausibly insinuated defence of the creed that appeals to the senses to 'cure the soul' whenever the spiritual nature of man suffers from too much purity and self-denial."²²¹

The critic harboured concern for "young minds". The youth were thought to be the most inclined to delinquency, and in the last decades of the nineteenth century the understanding of the causes of juvenile delinquency began to shift from poverty to a more multifaceted account of social and psychological growth in adolescence.²²² The Victorian era saw an increase of stories catered for children, aiming to teach them moral lessons, imperial responsibilities, and adequate gender roles under the guise of entertainment. However, literature for adults and children alike was didactic in tone, and most stories were written for audiences of all ages.²²³

Against this background, the moral of *Dorian Gray* was lost to the critics, and they struggled to see why the novel was written. Jeyes wondered why "a young man of decent parts who enjoyed (when he was at Oxford) the opportunity of associating with gentlemen, should put his name (such as it is) to so stupid and vulgar piece of work".²²⁴ His theory was that Wilde wanted to "shock readers, in order that they might cry Fie! upon him and talk about him" or that he derived pleasure from "treating a subject merely because it is disgusting".²²⁵ Baron de Book-Worms similarly suspected that Wilde's aim was to "frighten" one Mrs Grundy, defined by the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as "an imaginary English character, who typifies the disciplinary control of the conventional 'proprieties' of society over conduct"²²⁶, suggesting "young Grundies" would discuss the novel to showcase their own virtuousness. However, Baron de Book-Worms and other critics believed the novel should not be talked about, for that would give it prominence. Jeyes wrote:

²¹⁹ Beckson 2003, 71.

²²⁰ Beckson 2003, 75-76.

²²¹ Beckson 2003, 72.

²²² Bailey 1977, 17; Gillis 1975, 97.

²²³ Nelson 2014, 77-78; Fleming 2013, 468.

²²⁴ Beckson 2003, 68.

²²⁵ Beckson 2003, 69.

²²⁶ Beckson 2003, 75; "Grundy, Mrs", *Encyclopædia Britannica* 11th ed.

“Not being curious in ordure, and not wishing to offend the nostrils of decent persons, we do not propose to analyse *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: that would be to advertise the developments of an esoteric prurience.”²²⁷

Wilde himself was confused as to why the moral caused such a stir. In the spring of 1891, he wrote to fellow author Conan Doyle professing that he could not understand how “they can treat *Dorian Gray* as immoral”, for he thought the moral was “too obvious”.²²⁸ Some reviews agreed with this, like the reviewer in *Manchester Evening News*, who defended Wilde against the critics, condemning how “it is hinted that the great work is merely a story a study of puppydom, and its hero himself a puppy of an unpleasant kind.”²²⁹ *Exeter Flying Post*, on the other hand, called the moral “obvious” but Wilde’s “method” not “pleasant to the taste.”²³⁰

This clarifies the fundamental values behind the novel’s reception: Although easily interpreted as criticising vanity and excess, there was other subject matter and vagueness that diluted the novel into a mere “study of puppydom”, as Jeyes called it. From this point of view, the moral of the novel did not come true as strong enough – Dorian’s accidental suicide seemed to be too mild a punishment for his undescribed sins. Accordingly, the critic in the *Scots Observer* called the novel “false to morality – for it is not made sufficiently clear that the writer does not prefer a course of unnatural iniquity to a life of cleanliness, health, and sanity.”²³¹ With its aesthetic descriptions of hedonism and emasculate men, *Dorian Gray* alluded to homosexuality, which called the otherwise clear moral into question. Illustrating this, the *Scots Observer* concluded:

“Mr. Wilde has brains, and art, and style; but if he can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys, the sooner he takes to tailoring (or some other decent trade) the better for his own reputation and the public morals.”²³²

2.4 Sodomitical tendencies

The homoeroticism in *Dorian Gray*, in Ed Cohen’s words, never descends “to a crude biographical explanation”, but instead “encodes traces of male homoerotic desire”.²³³ Wilde’s original typescript was altered greatly by *Lippincott’s* editor J.M. Stoddart and his associates, changing Wilde’s punctuation, capitalisation, and spelling.²³⁴ Even though the aspects that most blatantly insinuated homoeroticism were removed or altered and the level of intimacy between the male characters was toned down, the

²²⁷ Beckson 2003, 68.

²²⁸ Beckson 2003, 73.

²²⁹ *Manchester Evening News*, Sep 25, 1890, 2.

²³⁰ *The Exeter Flying Post or, Trewman's Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, Jul 12, 1890, 6.

²³¹ Beckson 2003, 74.

²³² Beckson 2003, 74.

²³³ Cohen 1987, 805.

²³⁴ Frankel 2012, 36-38.

published version of the novel was considered frank.²³⁵ Wilde made only minor editions to the *Lippincotts'* version in the full-length 1891 novel.²³⁶ For example, in the scene where Basil confesses his love for Dorian in *Lippincott's*, he declares:

"It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend. Somehow, I had never loved a woman. I suppose I never had time."²³⁷

In the novel version, he says:

"Dorian, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power, by you."²³⁸

His speech focuses more on his attraction to Dorian as a muse, an inspiration for his art, rather than an object of romantic interest: instead of the painting showing his "love" in "every stroke", he is now afraid of others knowing of his "idolatry".²³⁹ However, in both versions he goes on to say:

"I was jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you."²⁴⁰

Despite the changes to the original text, the homoeroticism of the novel did not escape critics. For instance, Basil was described as "an artist, who raves about [Dorian] as young men do about the women they love not wisely but too well"²⁴¹ and the novel's interest was called "medico-legal"²⁴² – at the time the most famous sexological text that touched the topic of homosexuality was Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 1886 study, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, subtitled "eine Klinisch-Forensische Studie", a clinical-forensic study.²⁴³ Homosexuality in *Dorian Gray* lurked "between the lines", disturbing normative heterosexuality and gender ideals instead of suggesting it point-blank²⁴⁴, yet coming across strong enough for readers to grasp. Cohen has explained this by the deviation from the Victorian male ideal that the central characters embody, Dorian himself representing male desire in that he "enchants" Basil. The characters pushed at heterosexual norms, "evoking possibilities for male same-sex eroticism without explicitly voicing them".²⁴⁵

The language of the reviews follows this same theme, being both definite and vague: although the critics used strong adjectives to voice their opinion of the novel,

²³⁵ Mighall 2000, xliii; Frankel 2012, 36-38.

²³⁶ Gagnier 1986, 61.

²³⁷ *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*/Volume 46, 56.

²³⁸ Wilde 1891/2008, 110.

²³⁹ *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*/Volume 46, 57; Wilde 1891/2008, 110.

²⁴⁰ *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*/Volume 46, 57; Wilde 1891/2008, 110.

²⁴¹ Beckson 2003, 72.

²⁴² Beckson 2003, 73-74.

²⁴³ Tamagne 2004, 153

²⁴⁴ Cohen 1987, 805.

²⁴⁵ Cohen 1987, 803, 805-806, 809.

their argumentation leaned on suggestions, cultural associations, and intertextual references, such as mentions of South Kensington Museum and Wardour street. This is best exemplified by the critics' allusions to homosexuality, "outlawed gentlemen and perverted telegraph boys" being one of the most articulate expressions for homosexual men in the reviews at hand. According to Cohen, the press had a large effect on "structuring public representations of nominally 'unrepresentable' practices" and "constituting an important nexus for the construction of popular concepts of male sexuality".²⁴⁶ In other words, the press provided associations journalists could utilise without talking about homosexuality explicitly. In *Scots Observer*, the critic stated that *Dorian Gray's* story "deals with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department",²⁴⁷ referring to the "Cleveland Street Affair" where a London male brothel selling young postal workers ("perverted telegraph boys") to upper class clientele ("outlawed gentlemen") in West End was discovered by the police. The scandal implicated many titled men and received wide press coverage, leading to the first major gross indecency trial before Wilde's.²⁴⁸

Jeyes associated *Dorian Gray* with another text, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, journalist W.T. Stead's expose of child prostitution published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885 that ignited a national scandal. The exposé depicted the sale of children to older men in the West End in "lurid and prurient detail" and forced the Criminal Law Amendment of 1885 to pass, raising the age of consent for girls from thirteen to sixteen and giving the authorities greater power to prosecute streetwalkers and brothel keepers.²⁴⁹ Although the public good brought on by Stead's articles was recognised, they were also considered rhetorically provocative and shameless, as any open discussion about sexuality was considered offensive to the public.²⁵⁰ Both depicted the sexual promiscuity of upper classes, *Dorian Gray* portraying its middle class characters as emasculate and homosexual, *Maiden Tribute* incriminating certain upper class gentlemen as the clientele of child prostitutes. Jeyes claimed that both works "ought to be chucked into the fire" and that, while both are corrupt but not dangerous, they were "catchpenny revelations of the non-existent".²⁵¹

Jeyes also referred to a text in the *Universal Review* by Grant Allen, which aroused "by a licentious theory of the sexual relations, an attention which is refused to his popular chatter about other men's science"²⁵², most likely meaning Allen's essay *The Girl of the Future* from the same year (1890) in which he criticised marital monogamy and advocated for pre-marital sexual relationships.²⁵³ He also mentioned Leo

²⁴⁶ Cohen 2013, 121.

²⁴⁷ Beckson 2003, 74.

²⁴⁸ Cohen 2013, 121; Fenn 2020, 90-91.

²⁴⁹ Walkowitz 1998, 8.

²⁵⁰ Stern 2017, 757; Adut 2005, 223.

²⁵¹ Beckson 2003, 68-70.

²⁵² Beckson 2003, 69.

²⁵³ Cameron 2020, 54; Daly 2006, 126.

Tolstoy's 1889 novella *Kreutzer Sonata*, produced in his view by "Puritan prurience".²⁵⁴ In *Kreutzer Sonata*, Tolstoy campaigned for chastity and sexual abstinence even within marriage, causing for the novella to be banned in Russia.²⁵⁵ Jeyes's pattern of thought suggests a specific acceptable kind of sexuality: heterosexual, within the institution of marriage, and not discussed in public. This is in line with the scholarly depiction of Victorian sexuality: sex was seen as a natural part of life as long as it was heterosexual, enjoyed within partners married to one another, and not talked about publicly.²⁵⁶ The *Scots Observer* review, similarly, wrote that the story of Dorian Gray should have been discussed "in a hearing *in camera*", in secret.²⁵⁷

The discussions about *Dorian Gray* during Wilde's libel trial against the Marquess of Queensberry brought the thinly veiled subtexts of *Dorian Gray's* negative reviews to text and illuminates what parts of the novel were found "sodomitical". The first of Wilde's trials, Regina (on the prosecution of Oscar Wilde) v. John Douglas (Marquess of Queensberry) began on 2 March 1895.²⁵⁸ On 3 April 1895, Wilde was cross-examined by Queensberry's attorney, Edward Carson.²⁵⁹ Questioning Wilde on his literary production, Carson brought up the *Scots Observer* review of *Dorian Gray*, to which Wilde had written a response (read by Carson in court) stating that for the story to have "meaning" and the plot "issue", Dorian had to be surrounded "with an atmosphere of moral corruption". Wilde had also written: "Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are, no one knows. He who finds them has brought them."²⁶⁰

Carson's line of questioning Carson mentioned Basil's "affection" and "love" towards Dorian, asking if it "might lead an ordinary individual to believe it had a sodomitical tendency".²⁶¹ Namely, the scene in which Basil confesses his love to Dorian in the *Lippincott's* version was brought up.²⁶² Carson also wondered if Dorian's sins could have been inferred by "some people upon reading the book" to be sodomy.²⁶³ Accordingly, Carson continued to inquire if Wilde thought a "sodomitical novel" could be a good book, and if *Dorian Gray* is "open to the interpretation of being a sodomitical book".²⁶⁴ Similarly, in a plea filed by Queensberry's solicitor, it was written that *Dorian Gray* was "was understood by the readers thereof to describe the relations

²⁵⁴ Beckson 2003, 69.

²⁵⁵ Wilson 2016, 502; Rogatchevskaia 2017, "Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*".

²⁵⁶ Fenn 2019, 19, 30-31.

²⁵⁷ Beckson 2003, 74.

²⁵⁸ Holland 2003, 1.

²⁵⁹ Holland 2003, xxii, 7.

²⁶⁰ Holland 2003, 77-78.

²⁶¹ Holland 2003, 81.

²⁶² Holland 2003, 87.

²⁶³ Holland 2003, 78-79.

²⁶⁴ Holland 2003, 81.

intimacies and passions of certain persons of sodomitical and unnatural habits tastes and practices".²⁶⁵

While the language in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is coded, "directing those in the know to understand its hints and suggestions"²⁶⁶, the homoeroticism of the novel was easily deciphered. While no doubt brought on by the rumours of Wilde's own sexual encounters, a large portion of this reading was supported by the effeminacy of the characters, Basil's adoration of Dorian, and the undescribed vices Dorian indulged in. These aspects of the book led the critics to the conclusion that Dorian's undescribed sins included sodomy, and therefore the novel was immoral.

Dorian Gray deviated from the cultural values defined by the middle class and the public objective of art and literature to teach and represent them. The novel's aesthetic attributes were deemed as foreign, not following the tenets of English art. The depiction of effeminate men and homosexuality broke the rules of propriety and respectability by breaking gender rules and the sanctity of heterosexual family. The effeminacy of the characters tied with class: Proper middle-class men would have been devoted to their work and family, not interested in luxury, hedonism, or other men like Dorian, Lord Henry, and Basil. The actions and traits of his character reflected on Wilde, whose own status as a gentleman was put to question by critics, and finally played a part in incriminating him in his trial in 1895.

After Queensberry was acquitted, a warrant was issued for Wilde's arrest on the charge of gross indecency. Despite his friends' advice to flee to France, Wilde stayed in London, and on May 25, 1895, he was found guilty and sentenced to hard labour for two years.²⁶⁷ Afterwards, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was pulled from print for nearly twenty years.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁵ Holland 2003, 290.

²⁶⁶ Mighall 2008, xv.

²⁶⁷ Fenn 2020, 98-99.

²⁶⁸ Stern 2017, 756.

3 THE WELL OF LONELINESS

The protagonist of *The Well of Loneliness* is a young woman named Stephen²⁶⁹ Gordon, who has been boyish since childhood. Her father, Sir Phillip, suspects that she is a “sexual invert”, but does not let her know of this. At eighteen she befriends a Canadian man, Martin, who proposes to her. Stephen is horrified and rejects him. After a love affair with a woman, Stephen’s mother becomes aware of her condition and denounces her. Stephen finds a book on sexual inversion from her late father’s study and discovers her identity herself. She moves to London and becomes an author, meeting Jonathan, a homosexual man, who tells her to move to Paris. During World War I she serves at the front in an ambulance unit and falls in love with Mary, who moves in with her after the war. Mary becomes lonely as Stephen resumes writing. Stephen meets Martin again, who falls in love with Mary, and by pretending to have an affair, she drives Mary to his arms. The novel ends with Stephen pleading with God on the behalf of inverts:

“‘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!’”²⁷⁰

The novel was published on July 27, 1928, by publishing house Jonathan Cape. Hall herself called it the first “long very serious novel entirely upon the subject of sexual inversion”.²⁷¹ It is essentially a *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age story, with elements of a manifesto²⁷² and even sexological case studies²⁷³. Indeed, Hall was greatly inspired by the work of sexologists, especially Richard von Krafft-Ebing, utilising the idea of “female masculinity” associated with female homosexuality in writing her protagonist.²⁷⁴ To ensure that inverts would appear sympathetic, Stephen was written as a highly virtuous, serious character.²⁷⁵ Having read Wilde’s last works, *Ballad of the Reading Gaol* and *De Profundis* as well as a biography of him, Hall’s objective was to “rid lesbianism of the stigma of moral degradation”.²⁷⁶

Hall did not allow Cape to make any edits to the manuscript.²⁷⁷ Cape encouraged Hall to ask the sexologist Havelock Ellis for an endorsement, to which he agreed.²⁷⁸ Although Hall was initially elated over Ellis’s draft, edits carried out by Cape left its

²⁶⁹ Stephen’s parents were wishing for a boy and kept the name they had chosen.

²⁷⁰ Hall 1928/2008, 496.

²⁷¹ Doan & Prosser 2001, 1-3.

²⁷² Gilmore 1994, 603.

²⁷³ Bauer 2003, 25.

²⁷⁴ Bauer 2003, 25.

²⁷⁵ Parkes 1994, 435.

²⁷⁶ Souhami 1998, 171.

²⁷⁷ Doan & Prosser 2001, 1-3; Souhami 1998, 167, 170.

²⁷⁸ Souhami 1998, 168-169.

language ambiguous.²⁷⁹ In the published comment Ellis announced that he read the book with “great interest” and called it the first English novel which presented “in a completely faithful and uncompromising form, one particular aspect of sexual life as it exists among us today”. Praising Hall as an author, he wrote that the novel “possesses a notable psychological and sociological significance”.²⁸⁰

Cape had not sent review copies to the conservative *Daily Express* or its sister paper *Sunday Express*.²⁸¹ Yet, a few weeks after *The Well*'s publication, a piece headlined “The book that must be suppressed” appeared in the *Sunday Express*, written by its editor James Douglas who called for the Home Secretary to withdraw the novel.²⁸² Douglas was a popular defender of public morality who frequently used his editorial to agitate a “Protestant and Puritanical renaissance” against the “degeneracy and decadence” of modern life.²⁸³ Strongly worded editorials and campaigns were not uncommon for Douglas²⁸⁴ – for example, prior to *The Well* he had attacked “modern sex novelists” with similar rhetoric that often drew from religion, mortality, and disease.²⁸⁵ He had also successfully campaigned for the banning D. H. Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow* in 1915.²⁸⁶ In his attack against *The Well*, he warned novelists and “men of letters” that “literature as well as morality is in peril”, and that literature had “not yet recovered from the harm done to it by the Oscar Wilde scandal.”²⁸⁷

Since overzealous attacks had their advantage of selling newspapers, other publications were quick to question and challenge Douglas's attack, calling it hypocritical, hysterical, and “indecent, from the standpoint of honorable journalism”.²⁸⁸ Most newspapers ignored the editorial altogether.²⁸⁹ He did, however, have powerful connections who also worried for public morality. The Home Secretary at the time was William Joynson-Hicks under whose reign “a group of ‘social purists’ were allowed ... undue influence over public policy”.²⁹⁰ Joynson-Hicks and Sir Chartres Biron, the magistrate who ruled *The Well*'s judgement, had only two years earlier been united in a similar indecent that resulted in the withdrawal of Shane Leslie's novel *The Cantab*.²⁹¹

Cape responded to Douglas's campaign by sending a copy of *The Well* to Joynson-Hicks.²⁹² Following his wishes and much to Hall's dismay, Cape stopped the novel's distribution as the Department of Public Prosecutions prepared legal

²⁷⁹ Doan & Prosser 2001, 2-3.

²⁸⁰ Doan & Prosser 2001, 35.

²⁸¹ Souhami 1998, 176.

²⁸² Souhami 1998, 176-178.

²⁸³ Doan 2001, 16.

²⁸⁴ Doan 2001, 15.

²⁸⁵ Doan 2001, 15.

²⁸⁶ Souhami 1998, 202.

²⁸⁷ Doan & Prosser 2001, 38.

²⁸⁸ Doan 2001, 18-20.

²⁸⁹ Doan 2001, 19-20.

²⁹⁰ Doan 2001, 21.

²⁹¹ Doan 2001, 23.

²⁹² Souhami 1998, 178-180.

proceedings.²⁹³ The law that Cape was prosecuted under was the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, which did not define obscenity, but rather indicated that the state could control the circulation of works to protect audiences from their influence. In 1868, in the case *Regina v. Hicklin*, obscenity was given a vague definition, emphasising its potential to “deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences”. Under this definition practically all material could be targeted despite the author's intention, intended audience, or conventions and traditions of discipline.²⁹⁴ In November of the same year Sir Biron ruled *The Well* obscene.²⁹⁵

In later studies Douglas's attack on *The Well* has often been explained by “widespread hysterical homophobia, aggravated by feminist successes in the political arena”²⁹⁶, such as The Representation of the People Equal Franchise Bill.²⁹⁷ However, Doan has suggested the background of the attack is more “aberrant and opportunistic” than mere “hostility towards lesbians”.²⁹⁸ After all, before its ban *The Well* was received with little opposition to its lesbian subject matter. According to Doan, the ban resulted from Douglas and Joynson-Hicks's will to “monitor cultural production in their search for anything thought immoral”.²⁹⁹ In the following analysis I map out the aspects behind *The Well*'s reception, both the forthcoming approach to the subject matter and the moral panic instigated by Douglas, by viewing it through the lenses of the literary culture of the time, sexological advancements, notions of gender, and public morality. At the core of the analysis is the question of what values played a part in the obscenity of *The Well*.

3.1 Tendency to preach

The Well's sincerity was brought up time and again in its reception: in several newspapers and magazines the novel was called “sincere”, “passionate”, and “courageous”.³⁰⁰ For example, the novelist L. P. Hartley wrote in the *Saturday Review* that *The Well* is not only a novel, but “also a tract and an apologia”. He found Hall's appeal “a powerful one [...] supported by passages of great force and beauty”.³⁰¹ In the *Daily Telegraph*, the alias M. M. wrote that *The Well* was “remarkable as dealing with an aspect of abnormal life seldom or never presented in English fiction – certainly never

²⁹³ Souhami 1998, 181; Doan 2001, 1.

²⁹⁴ Gilmore 1994, 606-607.

²⁹⁵ Doan 2001, 1.

²⁹⁶ Doan 2001, 3.

²⁹⁷ Doan 2001, 3-4.

²⁹⁸ Doan 2001, 4.

²⁹⁹ Doan 2001, 22.

³⁰⁰ Doan & Prosser 2001, 51, 58, 60.

³⁰¹ Doan & Prosser 2001, 50-51.

with such undeserved frankness".³⁰² It was widely agreed that Hall's novel was candid, for the most part to its benefit, and many noted the significance of its publication. I. A. R. Wylie wrote in the *Sunday Times*: "If [the novel] is received as it was written, it will be something of a landmark in the history of human development."³⁰³ *The Well* was proving to be a success upon initial release: Harrods and the Times Bookshop sold all copies within two weeks and ordered more.³⁰⁴

Although most critics had no opposition to the subject matter, they deemed the didactic nature of the novel to weaken its prestige as art. Because of the novel's ties with sexology through its language and Ellis's foreword, some critics struggled to balance artistic and the scientific in their review. *Times Literary Supplement* wrote that the novel was courageous, but "failed as a work of art through divided purpose", indicating that it was "meant as a thesis and a challenge as well as artistic creation".³⁰⁵ *Sunday Review's* Hartley retorted that it was "not always easy to disassociate the artist's intention from the propagandist's"³⁰⁶, while the *Glasgow Herald* wrote that the novel is "marred by a tendency to preach"³⁰⁷.

While some critics encouraged other readers to "accept [Hall's] book as a whole"³⁰⁸, most separated *The Well's* artistic value from its subject matter. This was how, notably, author and publisher Leonard Woolf³⁰⁹ approached his review in *Nation & Athenaeum*. On the subject of *The Well*, Woolf wrote that the novel was interesting "as a study of a psychology which is neither as uncommon nor as abnormal as many people imagine", and that it was "written with understanding and frankness, with sympathy and feeling". While he praised Hall as an author, his verdict was that *The Well* failed "as a work of art" for its characters "appeared to be creations of the intellect", lacking "emotional content".³¹⁰ His wife Virginia Woolf wrote in her diaries and letters unfavourably about *The Well* on the same reasoning, calling it "dull" and essentially too polemic to be good literature.³¹¹

Hall and Woolf have been associated with one another because of their relationships with women and respective sapphic novels published only months apart in 1928. However, while *The Well* was declared obscene, Woolf's *Orlando* escaped censure and became a best-seller.³¹² Laura Green has written that Woolf's (and perhaps, by association, her husband's) stance towards Hall has traditionally been explained "as a marking of the boundary between modernist aesthetics and the traditions of Victorian and

³⁰² Doan & Prosser 2001, 65.

³⁰³ Doan & Prosser 2001, 55.

³⁰⁴ Souhami 1998, 174.

³⁰⁵ Doan & Prosser 2001, 51.

³⁰⁶ Doan & Prosser 2001, 50.

³⁰⁷ Doan & Prosser 2001, 57.

³⁰⁸ Doan & Prosser 2001, 65.

³⁰⁹ Sutherland 2005, "Woolf, Leonard".

³¹⁰ Doan & Prosser 2001, 52-54.

³¹¹ Parkes 1994, 435, 438.

³¹² Parkes 1994, 446-447.

Edwardian realism from which modernism distinguished itself".³¹³ Woolf was considered a central figure in the modernist literary movement, having written two of her major novels, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To The Lighthouse* (1927), by 1928.³¹⁴ In British and Irish literature modernism stemmed from (and can be used as an umbrella term for) the *fin de siècle* movements such as naturalism, symbolism, decadence, and aestheticism. Resisting exact definition, modernist novels generally broke narrative frames, played with levels of narration, emphasised characters' conscious and perception (inspired by for example psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud), and embraced ambiguity and complexity. Conventions and formulas of Victorian genre literature were replaced by fragmentation, free verse, allusions, and the obscure.³¹⁵ In this literary context, *The Well* comes across as disjointed: instead of embracing the modernist "interior consciousness" or even the Victorian "social and material milieu", it appeared nostalgic for the traditional novel with the setting of Stephen's family home in the country.³¹⁶

Virginia and Leonard Woolf were also members of the distinguished Bloomsbury Group, a grouping of friends named after their initial meeting place in Bloomsbury, London. A founding member³¹⁷, Leonard Woolf wrote that the roots of the group were in the University of Cambridge, and although they had no official common ideas, they were brought together by shared interest in art, philosophy, and politics.³¹⁸ Considered the educated elite of their time, the members of the group were highly educated upper class³¹⁹, who, in the spirit of postwar intellectualism³²⁰, had a disputing attitude towards the "establishment": the monarchy, bourgeoisie, the church, the army, and the stock exchange.³²¹ Hall was outside this elite, as conservative, anti-feminist, and devout Roman Catholic.³²²

Regarding this, Doan has explained Woolf's chill attitude towards Hall and *The Well* with "brow culture": books, readership, and authors could be separated into low-, middle- and highbrow communities, the boundaries of which were "seldom breached". In practice, a novel embraced by a lowbrow newspaper would evoke a middlebrow paper to treat it coolly and a highbrow paper to give it little attention or dismiss it completely.³²³ Woolf admitted in her personal writings that she seldom regarded "middlebrows" with "entire cordiality", while Hall was proud of her station as a middlebrow author. Woolf disapproved of how middlebrows made money with

³¹³ Green 2003, 277-278.

³¹⁴ Birch 2009, "Woolf, Virginia".

³¹⁵ Birch 2009, "Modernism."

³¹⁶ Green 2003, 278.

³¹⁷ Birch 2009, "Bloomsbury Group"; Rosenbaum 1981, 332-333.

³¹⁸ Birch 2009, "Bloomsbury Group"; Rosenbaum 1981, 332; Williams 1980, 42.

³¹⁹ Williams 1980, 51, 58.

³²⁰ Williams 1980, 62.

³²¹ Williams 1980, 47-48.; Doan 2001, 8-9.

³²² Doan 2007, 93-94, 104.

³²³ Doan 2001, 8-9.

their writing: Since the masses were generally not interested in the works or culture of the intelligentsia, her own novels before *Orlando*, although critically acclaimed, were not best-sellers.³²⁴ Woolf had also never read Hall's work before *The Well*, even though both won the Femina Prize back-to-back in 1927 and 1928 – Hall considered it a mark of her authorship while Woolf called it her “dog show prize”. In addition to the cultural chasm, Woolf found *The Well* conventional in style, and disapproved of its polemic representation of lesbianism.³²⁵

This difference in hierarchy continued to affect Bloomsbury's treatment of *The Well* during its trial when Leonard Woolf and another member, celebrated author E.M. Forster, began to collect names in protest of “the suppression of literature”.³²⁶ The endeavour was primarily for the sake of freedom of speech as the members of Bloomsbury continued to agree that *The Well* had little artistic value.³²⁷ Hall was reluctant to accept their support, feeling “patronised and paranoid” under Bloomsbury's “intellectual superiority and equivocation”.³²⁸ Hall's demands of aesthetic acknowledgment were off-putting to the members of Bloomsbury, and in December when the appeal of *The Well*'s ban was processed, Virginia Woolf referred to her as “the bloody woman” and did not attend.³²⁹

Hall's views on homosexuality also differed from those of the Bloomsbury Group. Members of Bloomsbury performed great caution when it came to same-sex relationships, keeping them private³³⁰ – for example, Forster had written a homosexual novel of his own, *Maurice*, in 1913, but left it unpublished.³³¹ Many of them also had heterosexual marriages, like Leonard and Virginia Woolf, unlike Hall, whose life partner was a woman. This divergence in beliefs was connected to the deeper scientific discourse of the time, with the contest of sexological and Freudian views.

3.2 Abnormality in human nature

Aside from its literary context, *The Well* also rejected the Freudian accounts of sexuality popular at the time, drawing instead from the sexological tradition.³³² In *Orlando*, Woolf mocked “normative sex and gender codes destabilizing the very grounds on which sexological as well as legal conventions were founded”, playing with less determined ideas of sexuality and gender, all the while Hall was on a mission to establish

³²⁴ Doan 2001, 11-12.

³²⁵ Doan 2001, 10-11; Parkes 1994, 435.

³²⁶ Souhami 1998, 185.

³²⁷ Souhami 186, 185-186.

³²⁸ Souhami 1998, 185-186.

³²⁹ Parkes 1994, 435, 438.

³³⁰ Tamagne 2004, 128-129.

³³¹ Souhami 1998, 186-187.

³³² Green 2003, 278.

lesbianism as “truth” and “fact”, following Ellis’s idea of congenital sexual inversion.³³³ The developments in sexual science, driven by both sexologists and Freudians, conducted the critics’ attitudes towards the central aspect of the novel, its subject matter of sexual inversion.

Many critics indicated an encompassing understanding of scientific knowledge relating to homosexuality. This is explained by education and social standing, since homosexuality was primarily a topic discussed within the educated upper class.³³⁴ *Glasgow Herald* – a major newspaper in Scotland³³⁵ – stated that *The Well’s* “core is psychological, not sociological; its central situation arises directly from an abnormality in human nature, not from an ephemeral abnormality in society”.³³⁶ *North Mail and Newcastle Chronicle* wrote:

“I would... hesitate to call “The Well of Loneliness” a novel. It is a plea, passionate, beautiful and sometimes little shrill, not for toleration, but for recognition of what, although the phrase sounds offensive, can only be called abnormality.”³³⁷

As this critic remarked, “abnormal” in this context did not necessarily indicate disdain for the matter at hand, as it was a term borrowed from sexological discourse. Ellis, attempting to avoid pathological language when describing the subject, called homosexuality an “abnormality” or an “anomaly” instead of a disease³³⁸, while Freud was interested in defining “normal” sexuality and sexual development³³⁹. This scientific basis for same-sex desire enabled that critics viewed *The Well’s* theme sympathetically. For example, Arnold Bennett (1867–1931), a prolific author³⁴⁰, wrote in his review in the *Evening Standard* that Ellis’s foreword had persuaded him into reading the novel although he was not familiar with Hall’s previous work, as Ellis’s essays were to thank for “the enlargement of [his] outlook”.³⁴¹ In more Freudian terms, author and suffragist I. A. R. Wylie³⁴² wrote that psychoanalysis, “if it has done anything else, has made us deal more gently with abnormality, since it has made us uncertain as to what the norm really is.”³⁴³

However, Freud and Ellis were not the only theorists on the field of sexual research, resulting in a multitude of terms – lesbianism, sapphism, inversion, homosexuality – that were utilised in *The Well’s* reviews.³⁴⁴ Magazines and newspapers of the

³³³ Parkes 1994, 436.; Robinson 1989, 5.

³³⁴ Doan 2001, 25.

³³⁵ Cannon & Crowcroft 2015, “*Scotsman*”.

³³⁶ Doan & Prosser 2001, 57.

³³⁷ Doan & Prosser 2001, 60.

³³⁸ Robinson 1989, 7.

³³⁹ Lauretis 1994, 8.

³⁴⁰ Koenigsberger 2006, “Bennett, Arnold”.

³⁴¹ Doan & Prosser 2001, 56.

³⁴² Kemp, Mitchell, & Trotter 1997, “Wylie, I. A. R. [Ida Alexa Ross Wylie].”

³⁴³ Doan & Prosser 2001, 55.

³⁴⁴ Doan 2001, 25.

educated mainly used sexological terminology³⁴⁵: most publications stuck to terms established by Ellis³⁴⁶, while only *New Statesman's* Cyril Connolly and the *British Journal of Inebriety* mentioned homosexuality³⁴⁷. Some critics spoke of “the intermediate sex” and the “midway between sexes”³⁴⁸, leaning on language associated with radical thinker Edward Carpenter, who viewed the rise of the women’s movement as a “new sex”³⁴⁹. Victorian-era definitions of female homosexuality were also common in the reviews, referring not to the same phenomenon as male homosexuality, but instead a “total reversal” of gender³⁵⁰, demonstrated by terms like “the masculine woman” and “the man-woman”³⁵¹. Terminology could also stem from the world of ancient poetry, as Leonard Woolf called Stephen “a Sapphic or a Lesbian”.³⁵²

The mixture of terminology indicates multiple possible of ways to view female same-sex attraction and desire, “sexual inversion” referring to a “broad range of deviant gender behaviour” which included homosexual desire but only vaguely, “homosexuality” focusing on the more refined concept of same-sex sexual attraction.³⁵³ Nevertheless, according to Doan, only a few publications were aware of these conceptual differences, which is why one review could intermingle both “homosexual” and “inversion” in describing *The Well's* theme.³⁵⁴

Many gave greater focus on the scientific aspect of the book than its artistic merit: after all, discussions of homosexuality had primarily been reserved for “textbooks of medical science and psychology”, not the novel, as the *Morning Post* mentioned.³⁵⁵ Richard King of the *Tatler* wrote that *The Well* is “a story solely for the scientist, the psychologist, the earnest student of human nature” and urged his readers to read it if “certain aspects of the novel” did not terrify them.³⁵⁶ The alias V. H. F. wrote in *Country Life* that the novel is “not for every reader but the mature, the thoughtful, and the open-minded” who will find “in it much food for reflection, a window giving upon understanding, and a psychological study of profundity and pathos”.³⁵⁷ Bennett of the *Evening Standard* professed, likewise:

³⁴⁵ Doan 2001, 25.

³⁴⁶ Doan 2001, 25.

³⁴⁷ Doan & Prosser 2001, 68, 72.

³⁴⁸ Doan 2001, 26, Doan & Prosser 2001, 57, 63.

³⁴⁹ Leng 2014, 233.

³⁵⁰ Doan 2015, 26.

³⁵¹ Doan & Prosser 2001, 51, 55.

³⁵² Doan 2001, 25.

³⁵³ Doan 2001, 26.

³⁵⁴ Doan 2001, 26.

³⁵⁵ Doan & Prosser 2001, 57.

³⁵⁶ Doan & Prosser 2001, 64.

³⁵⁷ Doan & Prosser 2001, 67.

“Nature has no prejudices, but human nature is less broadminded, and human nature, with its deep instinct for the protection of society, can put up a powerful defense of its own limitations. “The Well of Loneliness” is not a novel for those who prefer not to see life steadily and see it whole.”³⁵⁸

Most critics agreed with the sexological idea that sexual inversion was congenital and therefore not the fault of the individual. For example, the *The Times Literary Supplement* asserted that the world “denies” the female invert a place in it and “persecutes her kind by isolating them from all the happy and fine contacts of life, without regard for their highest mental qualities or for the invert’s consciousness of loving no less nobly than any other human being.”³⁵⁹ Con O’Leary wrote similarly in *T.P.’s & Cassell’s Weekly* that the novel’s thesis is that “there is a particular nature from birth that is, in the inscrutable designs of God, set apart from the recognized divisions of mankind, and that the censures of society are therein unjust”.³⁶⁰

Comparing to Wilde’s time, these attitudes are thoroughly different. Sexology had gained stature to the point of guiding critics’ views on same-sex desire to acceptance and sympathy, compared to the revulsion based on ideas of propriety forty years earlier. The reviews reflect the newfound openness towards sexuality in postwar Britain. However, although education and ideology formed a foundation for the tolerant reception of *The Well*, they also allowed for a deeper analysis of Hall’s depiction of gender. The efforts of the suffrage movement and development of feminism had created a basis for questioning the traditional strict division of femininity and masculinity, on which the sexological idea of “gender inversion” and the female masculinity of *The Well*’s protagonist was built.

3.3 The New Woman and the man-woman

Much like sexology and Freudian sexuality, opposing ideas of gender showed the ideological differences between Hall and critics of more feminist political thinking. Since the novel was modelled after sexological knowledge and placed securely within that discourse³⁶¹, following the sexological model of the “masculine female invert”, critics with different, essentially more feminist, understandings of gender took issue with Hall’s depiction of her characters. Previous research has linked this to two aspects: the idea of the “mannish lesbian” that Hall and Stephen exemplified according to Professor of Anthropology Esther Newton³⁶² and the general role of women in the interwar years.

³⁵⁸ Doan & Prosser 2001, 56.

³⁵⁹ Doan and Prosser 2001, 51.

³⁶⁰ Doan & Prosser 2001, 61.

³⁶¹ Parkes 1994, 436.

³⁶² Newton 1984, 559-560.

In the Victorian era, bourgeois women were first and foremost mothers, seen as pure and passive objects of men's lust.³⁶³ To counter this ideation, women born in the 1850s and 1860, who had access to higher education, maintained their independence by avoiding marriage and seeking companionship in "romantic friendships" with other women instead.³⁶⁴ Dubbed New Women, their second generation came of age in the first decades of the twentieth century and continued to seek economic independence and autonomy from family.³⁶⁵ Bourgeois women, like Hall, had to invent their sexual identity from scratch, embracing masculine professions, dress, and habits, such as smoking and drinking.³⁶⁶ According to Newton, "to become avowedly sexual, the New Woman had to enter the male world, either as a heterosexual on male terms (a flapper³⁶⁷) or as-or with-a lesbian in male body drag (a butch)".³⁶⁸ Similarly, Hall used masculinity to portray Stephen's sexual inversion in *The Well*.³⁶⁹

Adam Parkes has written that Virginia Woolf's caustic treatment of Hall might have been because she was "reluctant to publicly endorse the image of the 'mannish lesbian'".³⁷⁰ However, as Doan has suggested, masculine attire did not at this time indicate lesbianism as the fashion of the 1920s allowed women a wide range of clothing.³⁷¹ Since knowledge of lesbianism was not widespread, it was yet to be associated "with style or image"³⁷² – instead of utilising a prefabricated idea of the "mannish lesbian", *The Well* preceded this image.³⁷³ While it is possible Hall's masculine pre-war clothing was influenced by sexological ideas of the female invert's masculinity, masculine dress was also associated with educated women, spinsters, and feminists.³⁷⁴ According to Doan, Hall was not "the inventor and embodiment of a deviant mannish lesbian style", but a "thoroughly modern woman" in the eyes of her contemporaries.³⁷⁵ It was the trial of *The Well* that brought lesbianism to wider visibility all the while cementing the novel as the "embodiment of lesbianism", and, as a result, "the masculine woman" became increasingly associated with lesbianism outside of sexological discourse.³⁷⁶

Nevertheless, *The Well*'s portrayal of gender did amass criticism. Feminist, pacifist, and the author of the successful autobiographical WWI memoir *Testament of Youth*

³⁶³ Newton 1984, 561.

³⁶⁴ Newton 1984, 561.

³⁶⁵ Newton 1984, 562.

³⁶⁶ Newton 1984, 564.

³⁶⁷ "A fashionable young woman" who defied conventional standards of behaviour. Knowles 2005, "flapper".

³⁶⁸ Newton 1984, 573.

³⁶⁹ Newton 1984, 571.

³⁷⁰ Parkes 1994, 436.

³⁷¹ Doan 2001, xiv, 99.

³⁷² Doan 2001, xiv.

³⁷³ Doan 2001, xvii.

³⁷⁴ Doan 2001, 101.

³⁷⁵ Doan 2001, 113.

³⁷⁶ Doan 2001, 123.

Vera Brittain³⁷⁷ questioned in the feminist *Time and Tide* the novel's ambiguousness on "the question as to how far the characteristics of Stephen Gordon are physiological and how far they are psychological".³⁷⁸ She criticised Hall's approach of "exaggeration of sex differences", noting that the English middle classes of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were prone to this, continuing:

"Miss Hall appears to take for granted this over-emphasis of sex-characteristics is part of the correct education of the normal human being; she therefore makes her 'normal' women clinging and 'feminine' to exasperation, and even describes the attitude towards love as 'an end in itself' as being a necessary attribute of true womanhood. Many readers will know too many happy wives and mothers to whom it is not, to take on Miss Hall's selection of the qualities essential to one sex or the other. This confusion of what is 'male' or 'female' and what is merely human in our complex makeup persists throughout the book."³⁷⁹

Brittain took issue with Hall considering Stephen's interests, such as sports, as primarily masculine.³⁸⁰ Brittain was on par with the Bloomsbury Group when it came to intellectualism, being Oxford-educated and following the intellectual trends of her time – Woolf also contributed to *Time and Tide*.³⁸¹ Yet, Brittain's issue was not with the man-woman but Hall's simplified portrayal of gender differences, especially her female characters. Reducing womanhood to traditional ideas of femininity and the longing for love were reductive in the contemporary context of feminism.³⁸² If Brittain's take is counted as the reflective of the views of other highly educated women of her time, it can be deduced Woolf had an issue not with the mannish lesbian, but the exaggerated portrayal of masculine and feminine which followed the strict gender divisions of the Victorian era rather than modernist gender fluidity. While Hall's depiction of women and femininity relied on traditional ideas³⁸³, Woolf's *Orlando* played with gender, the titular character changing from man to woman in the middle of the story.³⁸⁴

Traditional gender roles were also embraced in search of domesticity and normalcy after wartime.³⁸⁵ Sexual reform embraced premarital relationships and demanded equality and harmony in marriage.³⁸⁶ Marriage, with promises of equality and sexual promiscuity, became more compelling than ever.³⁸⁷ Meanwhile the romantic friendships enjoyed by New Women began to be explained with pathology by sexologists and other experts, who connected female same-sex desire with feminism.³⁸⁸

³⁷⁷ Poetry Foundation, "Vera Mary Brittain", poetryfoundation.org.

³⁷⁸ Doan & Prosser 2001, 59.

³⁷⁹ Doan & Prosser 2001, 60.

³⁸⁰ Doan & Prosser 2001, 60.

³⁸¹ Mellown 1983, 215-216.

³⁸² Smith 2009, 107-108.

³⁸³ Tamagne 2004, 277.

³⁸⁴ Parkes 1994, 457.

³⁸⁵ LeGates 2001, 290.

³⁸⁶ LeGates 2001, 301.

³⁸⁷ LeGates 2001, 306.

³⁸⁸ LeGates 2001, 303.

Freud, for instance, described the “spirited girl” as a feminist who “rebelled against the lot of women”.³⁸⁹ Although homosexuality regardless of gender was considered corruptive (a view that had been amplified by Wilde’s trials³⁹⁰), lesbians were thought to embody “the very worst fantasies about feminism”.³⁹¹ The general concern was that feminists would corrupt fellow women into their lesbian ways.³⁹² While Hall was not a feminist, against this cultural background, her book roused concern of corrupting women. This was demonstrated in *Daily News and Westminster Gazette*, a Liberal publication³⁹³, by the critic W. R. Gordon: while, like Brittain, he questioned Hall’s depiction of gender differences, he stated that “the sort of relationship which Miss Radclyffe Hall attempts to justify ... poisons ... innocent, cheerful affectionate relationships.”³⁹⁴

In other banned books from the era, women were often portrayed outside their traditional child-rearing role, which was seen as a threat in interwar Britain where women were expected to partake in the reproductive service.³⁹⁵ Declining birthrates after the great death toll of the war concerned contemporaries and inspired criticism towards single and working women.³⁹⁶ Lesbians, not doing their part in birthing children, were seen as traitors to the nation.³⁹⁷ In this setting, Stephen’s “alienation from the cultural script” and hierarchies of gender³⁹⁸ endangered the status quo of men and women that sustained the nation. At the same time, as strict Victorian gender roles and ideals were on the decline, Hall’s distinction between masculine and feminine was questioned by feminist critics. However, there were still some who drew the line at sympathy towards sexual inversion – on the other side of the scientific and curious approach of most reviewers there was a keen disapproval of the subject matter based on the idea of lesbian corruption.

3.4 Offensive to decency

The pen name “A Truthful Tory” wrote in *Truth* after *The Well*’s trial: “Had the Public Prosecutor failed today to secure a verdict, the evil would have been great in society where so many of the old restraints upon sexual license are denounced and derided.”³⁹⁹ “Truthful Tory” asserted that “the book is not a novel at all, but a clever and

³⁸⁹ LeGates 2001, 303.

³⁹⁰ Tamagne 2004, 17.

³⁹¹ Tamagne 2004, 405.

³⁹² LeGates 2001, 303.

³⁹³ Drabble & Stringer & Hahn 2007, “Daily News.”

³⁹⁴ Doan & Prosser 2001, 66-67.

³⁹⁵ Gilmore 1994, 610-611.

³⁹⁶ LeGates 2001, 289.

³⁹⁷ Gilmore 1994, 611.

³⁹⁸ Gilmore 1994, 609-610.

³⁹⁹ Doan & Prosser 2001, 69.

audacious piece of propaganda to secure the recognition by the serious world of female inversion or sensual passion between women."⁴⁰⁰ Reflecting the fear of corruption and "the swarming of modern women," "Truthful Tory" wrote that "the hysterical excitement" is "why such a book is peculiarly mischievous today; and I think the grave and reverend bench of critics might have discerned the danger".⁴⁰¹

Although negative reviews like this were in the clear minority, the views expressed in them went on to have the most influence, as James Douglas's editorial demonstrated. The infamous editorial by Douglas was published in the *Sunday Express*, titled "A Book That Must Be Supressed".⁴⁰² "In order to prevent the contamination and corruption of English fiction," Douglas wrote, referring to the novel's sombre reception, "it is the duty of the critic to make it impossible for any other novelist to repeat this outrage."⁴⁰³ Asserting that the novel is "not fit to be sold by any bookseller or to be borrowed from any library", he described its theme as "utterly inadmissible in the novel" because "the novel is read by all ages": "Therefore, many things that are discussed in scientific textbooks cannot decently be discussed in a work of fiction offered to the general reader".⁴⁰⁴ Claiming that the invert's "defiance of public opinion" was "wrecking young lives" and "defiling young souls"⁴⁰⁵, he summarised:

"The answer is that the adroitness and cleverness of the book intensifies moral danger. It is a seductive and insidious piece of special pleading designed to display perverted decadence as a martyrdom inflicted upon these outcasts by a cruel society. It flings a veil of sentiment over their depravity. It even suggests that their self-made debasement is unavoidable, because they cannot save themselves."⁴⁰⁶

Believing *The Well* to be a "challenge", Douglas assured that its "doctrine" could not be "reconciled with Christian religion or with the Christian doctrine of free-will", and that it must be "fought to the bitter end by the Christian Churches".⁴⁰⁷ Douglas went on to state that "our children" must be protected "against their specious fallacies and sophistries"⁴⁰⁸, famously adding: "I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel."⁴⁰⁹ Next to the editorial was printed a photograph of Hall, with her short hair and masculine clothes.⁴¹⁰

The Well's obscenity trial began on 9 November. Hall herself was not the one prosecuted, but her publisher Cape.⁴¹¹ It was up to Biron to decide whether *The Well*

⁴⁰⁰ Doan & Prosser 2001, 70.

⁴⁰¹ Doan & Prosser 2001, 70-71.

⁴⁰² Doan & Prosser 2001, 36.

⁴⁰³ Doan & Prosser 2001, 36.

⁴⁰⁴ Doan & Prosser 2001, 36-37.

⁴⁰⁵ Doan & Prosser 2001, 37.

⁴⁰⁶ Doan & Prosser 2001, 38.

⁴⁰⁷ Doan & Prosser 2001, 38.

⁴⁰⁸ Doan & Prosser 2001, 38.

⁴⁰⁹ Doan & Prosser 2001, 38.

⁴¹⁰ Souhami 1998, 178.

⁴¹¹ Souhami 1998, 184.

was considered obscene under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857.⁴¹² The definition of obscene had been determined in 1868 during the *Queen v. Hicklin* trial, in which obscenity was defined as publication's tendency to "deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immortal influences".⁴¹³ Hypothetical vulnerable readers were the young, uneducated women, and the working-class.⁴¹⁴

Cape had considered this definition of obscenity in the publication of *The Well* and prepared for legal trouble: In advertisements of the novel its subject matter was not mentioned, the book's physical form was visually formal with black binding, and it was priced at fifteen shillings, twice the average price for a new novel. In addition, review copies had only been sent to more highbrow publications than Hall's usual middlebrow readership.⁴¹⁵ In Cape's responses to Douglas it was stressed that "most careful attempts" were made to "see that this book reaches the right class of reader", and that the editorial was "a wide and unnecessary advertisement" to the book.⁴¹⁶

The judgement was ruled on November 16.⁴¹⁷ Biron began by asserting that there was no "question of censorship", only the matter of whether or not the book "is an obscene libel according to the common law of this country".⁴¹⁸ He defined obscenity as "offensive to chastity, delicacy or decency" and "offensive to the moral sense because of a tendency to excite lustful passions", commenting that this was in line with the Hicklin case's definition of obscenity.⁴¹⁹ Biron argued that while the book has "some literary merit", it had "certain deplorable lapses of taste".⁴²⁰ Biron explained at length that what made *The Well* obscene was its depiction of sexual inversion as sympathetic:

"It is not the tragedy of people fighting against horrible instincts and being unable to resist them, but, on the contrary, the tragedy presented here is that people who indulge in these vices are not tolerated by decent people; and the whole note of the book is a passionate and almost hysterical plea for the toleration and recognition of these people who, in the view presented in this book, are people who ought to be tolerated and recognized, and their practices tolerated and recognized, in decent society."⁴²¹

Ruling that the novel was obscene libel, that "it would corrupt those into whose hands it should fall", he ordered it to be destroyed.⁴²² Hall appealed the ruling which was set for 14 December in the London Sessions Court.⁴²³ The appeal was dismissed.⁴²⁴

⁴¹² Souhami 1998, 201-202.

⁴¹³ Hilliard 2013, 654.

⁴¹⁴ Hilliard 2013, 655.

⁴¹⁵ Doan 2001, 7-8.

⁴¹⁶ Hilliard 2013, 666.

⁴¹⁷ Souhami 1998, 209.

⁴¹⁸ Doan & Prosser 2001, 39.

⁴¹⁹ Doan & Prosser 2001, 40-41.

⁴²⁰ Doan & Prosser 2001, 41.

⁴²¹ Doan & Prosser 2001, 42.

⁴²² Doan & Prosser 2001, 49.

⁴²³ Souhami 1998, 214.

⁴²⁴ Souhami 1998, 217.

The reasons behind the novel's obscenity were manifold. Against the loss of population in the war, worries about the survival of the nation were persistent. The victory of the suffrage movement with equal franchise in the spring of 1928 also represented the growing social and economic independence of women. Indeed, traditional values that represented morality and embraced older ideas of propriety were on the decline, worrying public moralists like Douglas. In his editorial he painted a picture of a society in which civilisation "built on the ruins of paganism" would fall if young people learned of sexual inversion.⁴²⁵ Obscenity, in the case of *The Well*, seemed to serve the ideal of correct morality and the nation that were at risk to become "destroyed"⁴²⁶ by sexual inversion. As Judge Biron listed hypothetical portrayals of sexual inversion that were not obscene, for example a book that represented "the whole matter as a tragedy" with the result of "moral and physical degradation indulgence in those vices must necessarily involve"⁴²⁷, he highlighted that the sympathetic portrayal of homosexuality was dangerous and corruptive.

The key to obscenity was *The Well's* depicting of Stephen as a martyr for the invert cause and as a virtuous character, instead of a "woman in the grip of vice" as the *Daily News and Westminster Gazette* wrote.⁴²⁸ Had she been a deeply flawed or humorous, the novel's moral influence would not have been read as similarly corruptive.⁴²⁹ The novel's genre of the coming-of-age story also added "a proximity of the author to the protagonist, and of text to crime".⁴³⁰ Comparing again to *Orlando*, which escaped censorship and was at its core a humorous book, *The Well* was serious. *Orlando's* sapphic undertones were written elusively, "by casting doubt, by intimating that it may be nothing but a joke."⁴³¹ *The Well*, on the other hand, utilised scientific language to validate its message, the medium of the novel, and touching portrayal of its subject matter to drive home Hall's vision of bringing "normal men and women of good will to a fuller and more tolerant understanding of the inverted"⁴³².

Even though newspapers discussed the dangers of censorship and possibilities for changing the obscenity law after the trial⁴³³, the novel's ban had little opposition. Leonard Woolf and E.M. Forster's efforts to protest the novel's censure were insufficient to Hall because they refused to praise the novel as a work of art, and the protest soon tapered out.⁴³⁴ To begin with, the defence's expert witnesses brought in to defend the novel, including Virginia Woolf and Forster, were reluctant to give testimony and

⁴²⁵ Doan & Prosser 2001, 38.

⁴²⁶ Doan & Prosser 2001, 38.

⁴²⁷ Doan & Prosser 2001, 42.

⁴²⁸ Doan & Prosser 2001, 67.

⁴²⁹ Parkes 1994, 435.

⁴³⁰ Gilmore 1994, 605-606.

⁴³¹ Parkes 1994, 457.

⁴³² Souhami 1998, 151.

⁴³³ Souhami 1998, 214.

⁴³⁴ Souhami 1998, 186.

were relieved when nobody was called to stand.⁴³⁵ At the heart of the matter was no doubt the difference in “brow” between Hall and Bloomsbury, but also fear of incriminating oneself. Virginia Woolf noted in her letter to Vita Sackville-West that her husband and Forster did not collect her signature for the protest because her “proclivities” were “too well-known”⁴³⁶, referring to Sackville-West’s same-sex relationships.⁴³⁷

As Douglas mentioned in his editorial, literature was only recovering from Wilde’s scandal, but so was society on the whole: silence around homosexuality persisted, and few were willing to risk the kind of ostracization Wilde went through. While Hall had the science of the time on her side, the rest of society hesitated, for reasons that Douglas and Biron proved to be well-grounded.

⁴³⁵ Tamagne 2004, 321.

⁴³⁶ Souhami 1998, 185.

⁴³⁷ Johnston 2004, 125-126.

4 COMPARISON

The Picture of Dorian Gray and *The Well of Loneliness* differed greatly in tone. Major events, such as Oscar Wilde's trials and the First World War, had a deep influence on British culture in the 38-year gap between the novels. Sexological advances had moulded the discourse around homosexuality while the efforts of feminists changed attitudes towards gender. Strict Victorian rules of respectability and gender roles transformed into a more temperate understanding of gender differences while still maintaining the importance of family in the postwar world.

Despite the middle classes' newfound liberal attitudes towards homosexuality, "fears about the breakdown of sexual restraints and gender boundaries" remained in the postwar cultural milieu.⁴³⁸ Amplified by the growing portion of women in the workforce⁴³⁹ and feminist victories such as equal franchise, lesbianism was understood as offensive to decency since it could have lured women further away from their roles as mothers and wives. In the interwar period, the family was an important building block of the war-torn society. Similarly, in the late Victorian era, masculine work ethic and the feminine care of children were needed to ensure the survival of the nation. This suggests that condemnation of same-sex relationships is connected to beliefs about the heterosexual family and the nation. The nation state has been theorised as a masculine project in which the nation is "(re)produced through either subordinate or marginalised masculinities" - in other words, while nationalism and homophobia both police the "biological continuation of the nation", they also "organise and maintain the gendered hierarchy within and among nations".⁴⁴⁰

Critics of both eras saw homosexuality as nearly treacherous, contradictory to Englishness. *The Well* depicted women outside of this maternal role, while the male characters of *Dorian Gray* stepped outside the appropriate bounds of middle-class masculinity. Stephen broke the status quo of heterosexuality and male dominance by seeking both the object of male attraction and the role of a man⁴⁴¹, while Dorian did the same by deviating from it. Critics saw this as offensive to morality, decency, or propriety, as something that could corrupt vulnerable readers. Homosexuality threatened the hierarchy of sexuality and gender in which certain masculinities and femininities (those defined by the middle class) were superior and desirable. On this account, silence about homosexuality was encouraged. For example, Jeyes commented:

⁴³⁸ Rayside 1992, 130.

⁴³⁹ Rayside 1992, 130.

⁴⁴⁰ Sloomaeckers 2019, 240-242, 260.

⁴⁴¹ Gilmore 1994, 611.

Whether the Treasury or the Vigilance Society will think it worth while to prosecute Mr. Oscar Wilde or Messrs. Ward, Lock & Co., we do not know; but on the whole we hope they will not."⁴⁴²

Ward, Lock & Co. was the publisher of *Lippincott's*.⁴⁴³ Although legislation for the prosecution of obscenity was active during the time of *Dorian Gray*, Jeyes advised against legal action. With *The Well*, Douglas's approach was different but followed the same reasoning: As the *Daily Chronicle* worried in its review of *Dorian Gray* that the book's "sham moral" would "taint every young mind that comes to contact with it"⁴⁴⁴, Douglas claimed that *The Well* would "defile young souls".⁴⁴⁵ Although the critics of *Dorian Gray* were more committed to the tactical silence, Douglas's editorial included much of the same rhetoric apparent in *Dorian Gray's* reviews, focusing on public morality and the corruptive power of homosexuality. Paradoxically, sexological language and the new openness around sexuality in postwar Britain made it possible for Douglas to crusade against sexual inversion more openly than the average *Dorian Gray* critic, resulting in a more straightforward and strongly-worded text.

Indeed, the most evident difference between the reviews is the relinquishing of coded language, which is visible in the novels themselves as well. *Dorian Gray* hints and leaves things up to interpretation, while *The Well* is explicit, clear in its intention. In part, this ties organically with the different styles and aims of the novels: *The Well* is essentially a *bildungsroman*, *Dorian Gray* representing the genre of Victorian Gothic. While *The Well* was written for the purpose of representing sexual inverts and pleading for their right to exist, in *Dorian Gray* homosexuality exists concurrently with the themes of hedonism and aestheticism, its final moral (as intended by Wilde) focusing on vanity. Nevertheless, in reviewing *Dorian Gray*, critics utilised remarks to recent events and cultural associations when referring to the homosexual aspects of the novel, while the critics of *The Well* had a wide array of terminology to choose from in discussing the novel's subject matter explicitly. Concern about immorality shifted to curiosity about abnormality.

Comparing the works in this sense, *The Well* represents the advancements of sexual science: while sexological ideas existed at the time of *Dorian Gray*, they were not as widespread as they were in 1928. Sexology had become a serious science in the interwar era, which made it possible to write a novel that drew from its observations. The accumulation of knowledge relating to homosexuality gave Hall the tools to write her polemic novel, to the point where she intentionally imitated sexological case studies to bring her cause potency. Hall also had the legislation on her side, as female gross indecency was not criminalised, giving her more elbowroom in depicting romance between women. Nevertheless, even though she depicted relationships that were

⁴⁴² Beckson 2003, 68.

⁴⁴³ Beckson 2003, 68.

⁴⁴⁴ Beckson 2003, 72.

⁴⁴⁵ Doan & Prosser 2001, 37.

technically legal, homosexuality was still considered corruptive, which led to the novel's ban.

In comparison to *Dorian Gray*, the reception of *The Well* was more nuanced and diverse. Evaluations of *The Well's* relied roughly on three themes: the subject matter, artistic merit, and the depiction of gender, resulting in alternating stances on the book. While *Dorian Gray* had some defenders, a clear majority of the reviews were negative, and always on the basis of immorality or effeminacy. In the case of *The Well*, the political standing and "brow" of the critic and the publication were more visible in the text, while with *Dorian Gray* they had little influence on how the novel was reviewed.

The decline of Victorian values had led to a new type of intellectual elite that cared less about public morality and cultural constraints around sexuality and gender. In the stream of social change in the beginning of the twentieth century, the British political field had gained a new agent with the forming of the Labour Party in 1900.⁴⁴⁶ The Liberal Party suffered great loss in credibility when their tenets of peace and social reform had to be relished to further wartime efforts, Labour replacing Liberals as the main opposition to the Conservatives in the 1920s⁴⁴⁷ and becoming the party of choice for the establishment-opposing intellectual elite such as the Bloomsbury Group.⁴⁴⁸

However, the party affiliation of a critic or publication also had little indication on how *The Well* was received: most publications, liberal or conservative, had no issue with the homosexual subject matter of *The Well*. The opposite was also true for *Dorian Gray*: both conservative and liberal publications condemned the novel: The liberal *Daily Chronicle* and the conservative *Scots Observer* both compared *Dorian Gray* to impurities. The Liberal *Daily News and Westminster Gazette* described *The Well* negatively as "falsifying realities"⁴⁴⁹, while the conservative *Daily Telegraph* called *The Well* "truly remarkable", the also conservative *Morning Post's* critic having "nothing but respect and admiration" for Hall's "handling" of her theme.⁴⁵⁰

While there is little overlap between the papers that gave reviews of both novels in this study, ideological change between 1890-1891 and 1928 is evident in the *Athenaeum* calling *Dorian Gray* "unmanly"⁴⁵¹, while in its successor *Nation and Athenaeum* Leonard Woolf expressed tolerant views, as expected of someone his social standing. However, since all papers seemed to have become more sympathetic towards the portrayal of homosexuality in literature, this is explained by the developments of sexology rather than certain political agents embracing homosexuality more than the other. To some extent it can be generalised that the more liberal educated elites, such as the

⁴⁴⁶ Daly 2015, 120.

⁴⁴⁷ Daly 2015, 120.; Wasson 2016, 270.

⁴⁴⁸ Williams 1980, 49.

⁴⁴⁹ Doan & Prosser 2001, 67.

⁴⁵⁰ Doan & Prosser 2001, 58.; Drabble, Stringer, and Hahn 2007, "Daily Telegraph."

⁴⁵¹ Beckson 2003, 85.

Bloomsbury Group, were more likely to be supportive of homosexuality, and that conservative public moralists like Douglas disapproved of homosexuality, but between these extremes, variation was great. This suggests that neither approval or condemnation of homosexuality had solidified into typical liberal or conservative modes of thinking.

The secularisation of British public was visible in the reviews of both books, as religion was the backbone of only Douglas's argumentation. Although religion can be understood as a "pretext" of prejudice against homosexuality, as the state also opposed homosexuality on the basis of concern for public morality and the population⁴⁵², religion and the Anglican church, "as an institution invested in tradition, service and obedience", were associated with conservative thinking in the interwar era.⁴⁵³ Douglas and his ally the Home Secretary Joynson-Hicks, as well as other men in their circle, were "either current or past members of fringe organisations, with narrow interests in reviving religious values and policing public morality".⁴⁵⁴ Considering the reprehending reaction of the other press to Douglas's editorial, it comes evident that Douglas was part of a small, but influential group of moralists, and the ban of *The Well* was made possible by the relations of these men.

Considering this, the aspect that best explains the changes between the receptions of the two novels is the development of sexological models around same-sex desire and more open attitudes towards sexuality in general. The way critics signed their reviews might be expressive of this: *Dorian Gray's* critics wrote their reviews anonymously, while the majority of *The Well's* reviews were published with the real name of the author. Even though Douglas, the Home Secretary Joynson-Hicks, and Judge Biron were in the clear minority in condemning the novel on such cutting terms and on the basis of public morality, as their reaction even roused criticism by other papers,⁴⁵⁵ the conclusion that the British public of 1928 was on the whole sympathetic towards homosexuality cannot be made on the basis of this source material: While Labour was the favourite of the educated elite, most of the dominant working-class treated homosexuality with abhorrence, associating it with the upper classes and the clergy who were thought to prey on working-class youth.⁴⁵⁶ This proves that the views expressed in *The Well's* reviews were, above all, those of the educated, who had access to scientific knowledge of homosexuality.

Mentions of Wilde in the texts surrounding *The Well* prove the cultural connection between these two authors. Although the outcomes of these breaches of the silence around homosexuality were ill-fated, these efforts were long remembered, for better and for worse. Wilde's name haunted notions of homosexuality and literature,

⁴⁵² Tamagne 2004, 208-209, 211.

⁴⁵³ Delap 2011, 151.

⁴⁵⁴ Doan 2001, 21.

⁴⁵⁵ Doan 2001, 18-20.

⁴⁵⁶ Rayside 1992, 133.

reminding people of vice and its consequences⁴⁵⁷, but his trial had also both revealed the existing homosexual lifestyle and underlaid a foundation for a new sense of identity⁴⁵⁸, and, in a way, Hall did the same as *The Well* became a lesbian classic and cemented new impressions of lesbianism. In the history of queer people and literature, their stories follow a similar pattern of breaching the silence around homosexuality.

⁴⁵⁷ Tamagne 2004, 193.

⁴⁵⁸ Tamagne 2004, 17.

5 CONCLUSION

In this conclusion I answer my research questions regarding the novel's reception, the values behind the critics' observations, and the differences between the receptions. It is crucial to remember the reviews addressed only two novels and therefore the views expressed in them are limited. The analysis, however, does give an indication of how same-sex desire and relationships as well as works of art depicting them were viewed among the educated middle-classes.

The critics of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were convinced the novel was immoral and effeminate. Its decadent themes of sin and hedonism were frowned upon because the primary purpose of art was to convey proper societal and national values. Critics determined that the novel was influenced by French decadence, which affirmed the idea that *Dorian Gray* was not British art. Critics questioned why Wilde wrote the novel, speculating that his purpose was to gain notoriety or shock readers. Coded-language and associations, such as allusions to the Cleveland Street affair, were used to refer to the novel's homoerotic aspects. Most critics agreed the novel should not be discussed publicly as they feared it would deprave readers.

In the background of the reception was, in part, Wilde's personal character. Critics viewed him as an outsider in the middle-class social sphere, implying he was merely posing as a gentleman. Considering Wilde's own persona and the characterisations of his main characters, the critics concluded the novel was effeminate. The characters of the novel did not follow the middle-class male ideal as they embraced luxury and aesthetic pursuits instead of demonstrating industry and other masculine achievements. This placed them outside the proper and respectable male conduct, which, in the cultural context of the time, implied homosexuality. In addition, *Dorian Gray* included attributes of women's literature, alienating the average middle-class male reader. The "sodomitical tendencies" of the novel stemmed from Wilde's decision to leave interpreting the nature of Dorian's sins up to the reader, Basil's adoration of Dorian, and rumours of Wilde's own same-sex endeavours.

The Well of Loneliness was mostly received with curiosity appreciation of its sincerity. Critics were generally sympathetic about the subject matter, noting that sexual inverts were treated unjustly by society. Even though most critics viewed the novel's theme as important, *The Well's* shortcomings – polemic, martyrdom, reductive depiction of gender attributes and differences, detachment from modernism – hindered its success as art. Especially the polemic tone displeased some critics, and words such as "propaganda", "apologia", and "plea" were used to describe the novel. Critics utilised a variety of terminology in discussing the subject matter, including homosexuality, lesbianism, and sapphism, though most stuck to sexual inversion. This demonstrated the quantity of discourses describing same-sex attraction and behaviour at the time.

Since models of sexual inversion and female homosexuality described female inverts as masculine, and *The Well's* main character was a masculine woman like Hall herself. Some critics, namely Vera Brittain, disagreed with Hall's depiction of gender, interpreting it as amplifying the difference between genders and depicting women especially as overtly traditionally feminine. Previous research has explained this by the critics' disapproval of the masculine lesbian, but I argue this was because highly educated women such as Brittain and Virginia Woolf, in the spirit of feminism, modernism, and Freudian thinking, embraced the ambiguity of gender and saw *The Well's* portrayal of gender differences as old-fashioned. Ideological and artistic differences between the women placed Hall lower in their hierarchy as a conservative middle-brow author.

Strongly negative stances towards sexual inversion were expressed mainly by James Douglas in his famous editorial. Douglas's main argument was that the novel might corrupt readers, imitating the legal definition of an obscene publication. Lesbianism was thought to corrupt women, whose ideal role was as the homemaker and the mother. Same-sex relations between women were kept quiet about to the point of omitting it from legislation, and the rhetoric of both Douglas and Biron claimed that decent people would not discuss homosexuality, not to mention campaign for its acceptance like Hall.

The biggest difference between the receptions was the abandonment of coded language and the tolerance of homosexuality, as scientific research and the more open postwar attitudes allowed for some open discussions about sexuality in the time of *The Well*. Despite this, the importance of the heterosexual family to public morality and the nation's survival prevailed. The language and values of the late Victorian critics who tore through *Dorian Gray* lived on in the ideas of the small group moralists who censored *The Well*. While they held the less popular of the stances towards the novel in the press, their voices were the loudest.

Wilde's trials remained in public memory in the interwar era as ideas of corruption, disease, and immorality persisted in the cultural sphere. Despite the growing authority of scientific explanations of homosexuality, few came to defend *The Well of Loneliness* upon its ban despite Hall's heartfelt plea for acceptance. After all, Wilde had transformed from an illustrious London socialite to a social pariah in almost overnight, his name representing degradation in the decades to come. On his deathbed, Wilde has been rumoured to have said:

"I will never outlive the century. The English people would not stand for it."⁴⁵⁹

In his memory, many waited for a better time.

⁴⁵⁹ Frankel 2012, 3.

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