From Indeterminacy to Acknowledgment

Topoi of Lesbianism in Transatlantic Fiction by Women, 1925 to 1936

by

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ABSTRACT

This project will attempt to supplement the current registry of lesbian inquiry in literature by exploring a very specific topos important to the Modern era: woman and her intellect. Under this umbrella, the project will perform two tasks: First, it will argue that the Modern turn that accentuates what I call negative valence mimesis is a moment of change that enables the general public to perceive lesbianism in representations of women that before, perhaps, remained unacknowledged. And, second, that the intersection of thought and resistance to heteronormative structures, such as heterosexual desire/sex, childbirth, marriage, religion, feminine performance, generate topoi of lesbianism that lesbian studies should continuously critique in order to index the myriad and creative ways through which fictional representations of women have evaded their proper roles in society.

The two tasks above will be performed amidst the backdrop of a crucial moment in history in which lesbianism jumped from fiction to fact through the publication and obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall’s novel, *The Well of Loneliness*. Deconstructive feminist and queer inquiry of under-researched novels by women from the UK and the US written within the decade surrounding the trial reveals the possibilities of lesbianism in novels where the protagonists' investment in heteronormativity has remained unquestioned. In those texts where the protagonists have been questioned, the analysis of lesbianism will be delved into more deeply in order to illustrate new ways of reading these texts. I will focus on women writers who, as Terry Castle suggests, "both usurped and deepened the
[lesbian] genre" with the arrival of the new century (Literature 29). It is my attempt to combat heteronormativity through a more positive approach. As Michael Warner asserts, "heteronormativity can be overcome only by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world" (xvi). This is not to say this study will be all roses and no thorns; a desirably queer world is not about a wish for an utopia. For this project, it is about rigorously engaging in the lesbianism of literature while acknowledging how a lesbian reading, a reading for lesbianism, can continue to both expand and enrich the critical tradition of a text and the customary interpretation of various characters.
To me
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PREFACE</strong></td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>SECTION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>THE JUMPING OFF POINT</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II. Feminism Lesbianism and Literary Criticism: A Commingled</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Complicated History</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>III. A Sign of the Times: Performative Mimesis of Lesbianism</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>BRITISH WOMEN AND THEIR THINKING</strong></td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I. “Well Sydney – what have I done?”: Warren, Kerr, and</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Devastating Lesbianisms in Elizabeth Bowen’s <em>The Hotel</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II. “I am like a match; I must have a box to strike on”: Elizabeths on</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fire in Willa Muir’s <em>Imagined Corners</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>III. Unwomanliness of Mind and Maternity in Olive Moore’s Spleen</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IV. Lesbianism as the Implausible in Sylvia Townsend Warner’s Summer</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Will Show</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>AMERICAN WOMEN AND THEIR NON-THINKING</strong></td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I. Team Teaching: Education, Sexuality, and the Body in Anita Loos’</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gentlemen Prefer Blondes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II. Willful Ignorance as Lesbian Topos: Nella Larsen’s Quicksand and</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
III. Thinking Too Much to Think: Deluge of Desire in Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood* ................................................................. 225

4 CONCLUSION ........................................................................... 248

REFERENCES ............................................................................. 252
Today, then, theory and practice appear to be just as out of synch as they were by the end of the 1980s. The result is a kind of intellectual schizophrenia, in which one half of the brain continues to read women writers, while the other continues to think that the author is dead, and that the very word ‘woman’ is theoretically dodgy. No wonder then, that so many books and essays on women writers begin by a series of apologies. Usually, the writer begins by assuring us that she really doesn’t have anything against Barthes or Foucault; or that she isn’t really writing about real, living authors, but only about the figure of the author in the literary text; or that when she writes woman, she really means ‘woman’, and so on. Such formulations are symptoms of a theoretical malaise. Instead of supporting women interested in investigating women’s writing, our current theories appear to make them feel guilty, or – even worse – scare them away from working on women and writing altogether. This is one of the rare situations today in which I would argue that there actually is a need for more theory (or more philosophy, if you prefer). We actually need to be able to justify theoretically a kind of work that many women and men clearly think is important, and that has no problem at all justifying itself politically. (Moi “I am not” 264)

In my related project, *Indeterminate Subjectivities: Performative Appraisals of Mimesis Through Representations of Women in Wharton, Larsen, and Barnes*, I was dogged at every turn by some members of my committee asking the same question again and again: “Why are you focusing only on women authors?” In this way, I was placed exactly in the position suggested by Toril Moi in the above excerpt from her essay “I am not a woman writer: about women, literature and feminist theory today.” I was strongly urged to find an explanation – or apology – for my study of fiction written by women. Ultimately, I argued that my project was a retrospective second wave move in which my goal was to revisit the tasks of developing the female literary tradition and scrutinizing female literary images or more appropriately literary images of women. In other words, I viewed my project as a continuation of enriching the pool of feminist criticism about texts written by women, especially broadening images of women through
unconventional readings of conventional female characters. In this vein, I analyzed the novels of three modern American writers and the ways Judith Butler’s philosophical concept of performativity intersects with my readings of the mimetic representations of the female protagonists. Through a variety of female representations, I investigated opportunities in which to performatively interpret these characters in less conventional ways than they have previously been seen. Because my focus was a radical deconstruction of heteronormativity through gender, it is not surprising that many of the chapters inevitably became deconstructions of – and arguments against – the implicit heterosexual mimesis underlying normative (and even some non-normative) readings of these female protagonists.

Explorations of the mimetic representations of gender led inevitably to explorations of those aspects conventionally associated with gender, for, although contemporary critical theory has severed the link between gender and desire – the one that first assumes only two genders, and then assumes each gender will only be attracted to the opposite – the specters of association continue to linger within

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1 I realize that in this approach, I go against much contemporary scholarship that is more inclusive of male authors in feminist – and as noted by Laura Doan and Jane Garrity, lesbian – critique, but will not apologize (as I am ironically doing now?) for continuing to direct my academic vigor toward a feminist tradition of literary criticism of women’s writing. In “Modernism Queered” (2006), Doan and Garrity indeed suggest that “today queer theorists are more likely to argue that William Faulkner presents himself ‘as a lesbian author,’ or that the writings of Marcel Proust reveal ‘the centrality of lesbianism as sexual obsession and aesthetic model’” (547). Please see full citation in the bibliography.

2 The linkage was initially seen as sex/gender/desire, but I follow Judith Butler’s lead in assuming perhaps sex has been gender all along, since they have always been conflated to some extent. Gender theorists have indeed come to a consensus on this particular idea, in that the causal myth that suggests one’s biological sex leads to one’s gender expression, which leads to one kind of desire, has been rejected. For more on the debunking of the causal linkage between sex/gender/desire, please see Chapter 1 of Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Full citation is in the bibliography.
literary criticism. This is what enables, for example, Lily Bart in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* to have endured over one hundred years of criticism without anyone rigorously questioning her desire for Lawrence Selden, although there is meager evidence to support that desire.³

I sought to find indeterminate desires, sexualities, gender performances, etc., in the representations of women in five novels. The women of these novels, even the ones only relatively recently recovered during second wave feminism in literature studies, have typically been read as conventional protagonists. Lily Bart, Zeena Price, Helga Crane, Irene Redfield, and Clare Kendry all have been read within the confines of a heteronormative paradigm; all have been read against a backdrop of family, community, and historicity which is held up by the pillar of heterosexual marriage. Robin Vote is the only character who has been allowed a variation, although it turns out to be on the very same theme. Although she has been openly discussed as lesbian, most criticism continues to juxtapose her and her sexuality against that of the “normal” heterosexual, which is one reason she and the other characters of the novel have been characterized so often

³ Although Louis Auchincloss writes in the 1960s: “Lily Bart’s love for Lawrence Selden is the one hollow note of *The House of Mirth,*” (qtd in Hoeller 102) and others have noted the lackluster love affair, none has followed up on the radical implications to the very core of our criticism of the novel, which takes for granted Lily’s desire for Lawrence, and vice versa, as a significant portion of the plot. With this said, it should be noted that in her 1996 article Lori Merish comes closest to demonstrating how a more perverse reading might affect the heteronormative “coupling” plot of the novel. She notes that “Lily Bart’s ‘femininity,’ and Selden’s ‘masculinity,’ are tenuous constructions, while their heterosexual ‘passion’ is ambiguously presented in the text. […] Lily Bart’s passion for men is much less convincingly rendered than her passion for things. […] Selden’s general skittishness in love and his emotional vacillations regarding Lily – criticized as moral spinelessness by Wharton’s feminist readers, as by Wharton herself – bespeak a certain sexual ambiguity, as does his characterization as a bachelor-professional – a type whose historical relationship to the emergence of gay identities Eve Sedgwick has examined at length” (324-5). Please see full citations of Merish and Sedgwick’s work in the bibliography.
Indeed, I was reminded by one of my dissertation examiners that gender and sexual indeterminacy did not particularly mean homosexuality, and that I had been caught up in the very binary split from which I was trying to release my characters. However, upon further deliberation, I concluded that indeterminacy in gender and sexuality cannot even be spoken without noting homosexuality, since heterosexuality in literary criticism continues to be the standard position, the jumping off point. It is true, I did not argue bisexuality, or asexuality, monosexuality, or polysexuality, pansexuality, pomosexuality, or transsexuality, etc., in my recent study; however, there is good reason for this. All of these variant sexualities and genders allow for an intelligible homosexuality, unlike heterosexuality, which still attempts to conceal and suppress it. One would not be able to fathom the various sexualities mentioned above without the work that has been done in Lesbian and Gay studies. Therefore, the strengths of my previous arguments lie in the movement toward seeing something other than heterosexuality.

In the present project, I will return to my exploration of mimesis in order to draw attention to the way in which the performative in mimesis so altered the representation of women in literature – by acknowledging the lesbian – that it

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4 To name just a few, see Robin Blyn’s article “Nightwood’s Freak Dandies: Decadence in the 1930s”; Dana Seitzler’s “Down on All Fours: Atavistic Perversions and the Science of Desire from Frank Norris to Djuna Barnes,” Jane Marcus’ “Laughing at Leviticus: Nightwood as Woman’s Circus Epic,” and “Convulsive Beauty: Images of Hysteria and Transgressive Sexuality, Claude Cahun and Djuna Barnes” by Sharla Hutchison. Full citations are in the bibliography.
transformed the British and American collective consciousness, and cultures, as well.
SECTION 1
THE JUMPING OFF POINT

I

Introduction

In her exhaustive study *The Literature of Lesbianism*, Terry Castle explores prose and poetry, short fiction and novels that employ the idea of lesbianism from the ancients to the present. This project will not. It is a more narrow approach, but one that should assist in what Castle calls a “systematizing” of the “myriad ‘secondary’ tropes, topoi, and subtopics associated with the central lesbian idea” (40). For example, lesbianism has been presented by writers through such motifs as the “maternal” and “sororal” dynamics between women. “[S]ensual correlatives,” which are the “physical tropes and representative actions by which writers have conventionally signaled the presence of female homoerotic feeling,” are another way of presenting lesbianism in fiction (41). Such tropes as the “nude bathing or swimming scene” – and other uses of water, such as fountains, seas, ponds, streams, etc. – the “caressing or washing of another woman’s hair,” eating “candy, crystallized fruit, or other cloyingly sweet foods,” as well as a “kiss or caress on the shoulder” are all tropes that signify same-sex desire (41-7). Castle notes that recently “some of these” have been catalogued “in passing” by certain critics, but we obviously have yet to reach a full index (40). Therefore, this project will attempt to supplement the registry that has already begun by exploring a very specific topos important to the Modern era, woman and her
intellect. Under this umbrella, the project will perform two tasks: First, it will argue that the Modern turn that accentuates what I call negative valence mimesis is a moment of change that enables the general public to see lesbianism in representations of women that before, perhaps, remained unseen. And, second, that the intersection of thought and resistance to heteronormative structures – such as heterosexual desire/sex, childbirth, marriage, religion, feminine performance – are topoi of lesbianism that lesbian studies should continuously critique in order to index the myriad and creative ways through which fictional representations of women have evaded their proper roles in society.

This project is a feminist and queer transatlantic study of under-researched women writers from the US and the UK that explores the possibilities of lesbianism in novels where the protagonists’ (save in three of the texts) investment in heteronormativity has remained unquestioned. In those texts where the protagonists have been questioned, the analysis of lesbianism will be delved into more deeply in order to illustrate new ways of reading these texts. As Castle points out, prior to the 20th century, “the ‘lesbian novel’ had been a largely masculine and potboiling enterprise”; therefore, I will focus on women writers who “both usurped and deepened the genre” with the arrival of the new century (29). And although Castle is forgiving about much historically “scurrilous appropriations of the lesbian theme,” I am not; I agree that the worst that has been said about lesbianism should be confronted, but I do not agree that it must be given equal time with the best, nor does it necessitate that my personal study bequeath it undue attention (48-9). Perhaps if we had not already catalogued texts
of this sort, I would feel differently; however, we have, and I have had quite
enough of the worst that has been said, thank you very much. It is my attempt to
combat heteronormativity through a more positive approach. As Michael Warner
asserts, “heteronormativity can be overcome only by actively imagining a
necessarily and desirably queer world” (xvi). This is not to say this study will be
all roses and no thorns; a desirably queer world is not about a wish for an utopia.
For this project, it is about rigorously engaging in the lesbianism of literature
while acknowledging how a lesbian reading – a reading for lesbianism – can
continue to both expand and enrich the critical tradition of a text and the
customary interpretation of various characters.

This study will focus most closely on the protagonist of each novel and
lesbianism as an idea that resonates with or around her character and her cerebral
conduct and performance. I will not focus on secondary characters as a rule
unless the protagonist is already under examination and the secondary characters
are rounded sufficiently to merit such focus. Unsurprisingly, this method of
weeding out, concentrating on protagonists rather than the marginal (and often
marginalized) sidekick, features more positive models of lesbians and lesbianism,
although the reader must not mistake “positive” for “good,” or “likable.”

I will not spend time on any author’s sexuality, for with men having written
so much about lesbianism that point has no bearing on the literature for the
purposes of this study. Instead, I follow Doan and Garrity’s lead in their
introduction to Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and English Culture in
restraining a desire to “know for sure” either an authors or character’s sexual
preference (6). Instead, I only endeavor to demonstrate that there “seems to be a possibility (a suggestibility) of sapphism” in each text and “speculate on what that might mean” (6). By taking this route, I align myself with Castle, Doan, and Garrity in an attempt to “interrogat[e] the ‘category itself,’ that is, by focusing less on ‘lesbianism-as-lived-experience’ than on ‘lesbianism-as-theme’ or the ‘idea’ of lesbianism” (Castle qtd in Doan and Garrity 6). With this strategy, then, I will concentrate on a Modern topoi of lesbianism that arises around the time that women begin to take the reins in writing lesbianism. As Castle notes:

The defensive, overwrought mode adopted by Radclyffe Hall in *The Well* was not, aesthetically speaking, a huge success, nor in the end a particularly fruitful model for other women writers. The most intelligent and interesting female writers of the first half of the twentieth century simply went about their business – even when that business included, by the by, an affirmation of lesbian loves. (29-30)

Many authors wrote without positioning lesbianism at the absolute center of their texts. This is not to say that it is not somewhere at their core, but that it is not so overly accentuated, whereby the texts certainly seem less affected than Hall’s.6

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5 This novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, was published in 1928 and almost immediately tried for obscenity. This will be discussed more fully later in the Introduction.

6 In their essay “Modernism Queered,” Jane Garrity and Laura Doan separate modernist texts into “three schematic categories: texts which deal explicitly with the topic of homosexuality […] texts […] which do not overtly advertise themselves as queer books but none the less grapple with homoerotic themes […] and texts which seem to have nothing to do with homosexuality but none the less reveal nascent homosexual possibilities upon analysis” (547-48). Please see full citation in the bibliography.
Castle notes that in these texts we are “struck” by an “absence of fuss” by many women writers of the day, “a refusal” she explains “to overdramatize” (30). This rebuff of sensationalism is one way in which authors begin what critics in lesbian studies continue now to take part: the work of making lesbianism mundane. For as Castle notes, after a “thousand years” of the lesbian idea mulling about in literature, acknowledged by the general public, and recognized as a “serious public discourse” and “legitimate topic for discussion,” lesbianism has indeed become a kind of commonplace (18).

The authors of the following texts whose protagonists intermingle (or are intermingled) with lesbianism represent that sexuality as mundane by not only desensationalizing it, but by widening the representation through their own use and abuse of the sexological views of sapphic women at the time, which display a more complex and diverse spectrum of women and lesbianism than Radclyffe Hall’s. As suggested earlier, this study will especially note how the protagonists of these texts co-opt the world of thought from man’s realm in order to handle their own life struggles. This use of the mind is an especially unique realm to feminists in general and lesbians in particular. In her article “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” Esther Newton notes, “Insofar as first-generation feminists were called sexual deviants, it was because they used their minds at the expense of their reproductive organs” (562). Through this particular topos – thought – one receives in these texts either an education in how to think or how to keep oneself from it. There are deep thinkers, non-thinkers, and tendencies toward willful ignorance. There are protagonists who
show themselves as attentive or inattentive, careful or negligent. The topos of thinking works into the mimesis of lesbianism that pervades these texts, and the mimesis of lesbianism through these authors offers us a more varied spectrum of character typology, gender performance, and desire than that which coalesced in the image of Stephen Gordon of *The Well of Loneliness* fame, and the image that would overshadow many others as lesbianism became more recognizable.7

**La Femme Cérébrale**

*At seventeen I presume that healthy girls are nearly as well able to study, with proper precautions, as men; but before this time over-use, or even a very steady use, of the brain is dangerous to health and to every probability of future womanly usefulness.*

~ S. Weir Mitchell

Criticism of lesbianism in literature has tended to privilege the visual. As the sexologists’ information from Krafft-Ebing to Freud circulated through the general public of both the UK and the US in the first decades of the 20th century, the modern lesbian began taking shape, mostly under the guise of the masculine female invert. And although, as noted by Laura Doan in *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture*, the identity itself had not yet been linked to masculine dress by the general population, it has since become a retrospective indicator in our contemporary search for evidence of lesbianism in

7 It should be said that Hall’s text could be integrated into this project, since Stephen Gordon certainly proves to have a “strong, active mind that symbolize[s] women’s rejection of traditional gender divisions and bourgeois values” (Newton 563). But, as noted before, Hall’s work is purely a marker for this project, and has certainly had more critical work done on her text than many of those handled here.
literature. For good or ill, the visual has remained a gauge by which we continue to read lesbianism in literature.

But, there is a lesbian topos in Modern texts that is just as interesting an indicator as the visual, and just as interconnected: the intellectual. Often, the lesbian image in Modernist texts is a thinker. The thinker is an atypical sort of personality who challenges social conventions and practices, especially regarding women’s social interactions. Thinking requires solitude, which even in the relatively wild and unruly 1920s is not a particularly welcome activity for women. Although women’s attendance at colleges and universities was becoming more routine, their serious thinking or their thinking being taken seriously was another matter. Serious thinking and solitude in which to do it, at this point, continued to be considered a male prerogative. Indeed, in Krafft-Ebing’s book *Psychopalia Sexualis*, there are a few references (since relatively speaking, women’s cases were given exponentially less analysis than men’s) in which the author notes the

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8 In her book *Fashioning Sapphism*, Doan reminds us that the “media circulation of a visible embodiment of a specimen ‘invert,’” such as Radclyffe Hall during the trial of her book in 1928, makes us forget that the lesbian “invert” has not always looked thus: “[T]he author of *The Well of Loneliness* did not invent the mannish lesbian so much as embrace sexological theories of inversion and develop an existing style made possible by the startling degree of toleration and experimentation, of dizzying permutations of sartorial play and display” (xv). It must be noted, however, that medical men, lawyers, and those working in law enforcement had already begun linking sexual inversion with clothing in the late 1800s, as Krafft-Ebing suggests: “Uranism may nearly always be suspected in females wearing their hair short, or who dress in the fashion of men, or pursue the sports and pastimes of their male acquaintances; also in opera singers and actresses, who appear in male attire on the stage by preference” (398).

9 As noted *Clothing Through American History 1900 to the Present*, editors Peterson and Kellogg note that although during WWI in America, women flocked to the work place to fill positions “vacated by men called off to war,” after the war’s end, women continued to work “not out of duty to country but as a means toward independence” (11). “Many young women,” they note, “now elected to work or enroll in college as alternatives to marriage” (11). “By 1920, women made up 47 percent of college enrollments, and the 1930 census reveals that approximately 10 million women had entered the workforce, an increase of 29 percent from the 1910 census” (11). In the UK during the 1920s and 1930s women made up 27 and 26 percent of the student body respectively (Ringer 248). Please see *A History of the University in Europe* for more information.
woman “invert” or “urning” is often intelligent. Writing later, Havelock Ellis’ *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*\(^\text{10}\) states definitively that “inversion is as likely to be accompanied by high intellectual ability in a woman as in a man” (Chapter IV). But a thinker is not always a physically solitary figure either. A thinker often sets herself apart in less obvious ways by resisting access to her mind, keeping a mental distance between herself and others, which ironically makes some of them seem unthinking as well. This project examines a topos of vigorously (un)thinking that happens to be related to characters who resist heteronormativity and thereby admit a discussion of lesbianism. This topos highlights the unconventionality of the characters whose engagement in a vigorous topos of (un)thinking in and of itself sets them off from the typical idea of woman, and hints the reader toward a possibility of lesbianism. I do not assert that only lesbian women think. Rather I suggest that women who find themselves confronted with possibilities of lesbianism must think more intensely about how to negotiate their identities while managing that (un)conscious confrontation.

After WWI, and by the 1920s, it was becoming increasingly complicated for the general population to ignore both feminism and lesbianism, and often the two were intertwined (problematically so, at times, for both ideas). Although the US enfranchised women in 1920 with the 19th Amendment, it would take eight more years for the UK to do so with the Representation of the People Act. Therefore, it is not surprising that with many of the UK authors studied here, feminism becomes a cause célèbre for the protagonists. The US authors, on the

\(^{10}\) This volume was initially published in 1897 under the name *Sexual Inversion*. It later became volume 2 in the series mentioned above.
other hand, show a slightly wider variety with women who pretend not to think at all to women who cannot stop.

**The Project, Specifics**

This project will analyze texts spanning roughly a decade that symbolize the period in which the modern lesbian in the UK and America visibly materialized. The publication of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* will stand as a pivotal moment in the making of a modern literary lesbianism, and therefore, I have sought to use the years immediately prior to and following its 1928 publication and subsequent obscenity trial. I have chosen to study literature between 1925 and 1936, in which the performative mimesis of lesbianism was indeed moving in more concrete directions. In this period, what I call *negative valence* mimesis overcomes *positive valence* mimesis to materialize the lesbian image from the *page* to the *street*, from *fiction* to *fact*. The year 1936, the year of Djuna Barnes publication of *Nightwood*, will stand as the close of this study’s decade. Barnes’ work exemplifies the Modern move toward strangeness and difference by successfully situating *negative valence* mimesis over *positive valence* mimesis, thereby successfully crafting a text with the very essence the Modernist movement strove to exude.

Each chapter of this study focuses on the mimesis of lesbianism and its relationship with woman’s intellect in British and American women’s literature in the late 1920s and 1930s. I have chosen underrepresented and underresearched authors for this project in order to make this study useful to those who want a
narrow slice of Anglophone literature that has not yet reached its academic zenith. Although Djuna Barnes and Nella Larsen on the American side and Sylvia Townsend Warner and Elizabeth Bowen on the British side, for example, have enjoyed renewed interest, they have certainly not yet received the attention seen by the likes of Virginia Woolf and Edith Wharton. Likewise, although film studies has shown much interest in Anita Loos, consideration of her novels in literary studies remains sparse. And, finally, literary criticism on Willa Muir and Olive Moore is nearly nonexistent.

The (re)vision of the representation of women in these new and relatively new texts will seek to demonstrate specific examples of how aesthetic mimesis normative function – along positive valence mimesis – breaks down as negative valence mimesis is emphasized in the Modern depiction of lesbianism. This breakdown leads to fissures or gaps in the performative processes of the artistic heteronormative naturalization of gender, which actively modifies British and American culture. In other words, the work of mimesis in literary representations of women at this time blurs the lines between fiction and reality, since the supposed fictions, which are indeed within fiction, become the real.

Chapter I of Section 1 will discuss the interrelated and complex history of feminism and lesbianism during Modernism in the US and UK, and the movement of that interrelation into literary criticism. This short chapter explains how both factions – feminists and lesbian feminists – struggled with and against each other in literary criticism during feminism’s second wave. Despite having

11 This talk of gaps and fissures is, of course, a reference to Judith Butlers theory of performativity, which will be discussed more fully in Chapter II.
common adversaries as well as many common goals for women in general, mainstream feminism alienated many women, such as women of color and lesbians, because of a basic incomprehension and intolerance for the needs and desires of these groups.

Chapter II of Section 1 will explore mimesis as a concept in conjunction with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity to explain the change in the perception and acknowledgment of erotic desire in the form of lesbianism in the decade surrounding the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*. In this chapter, anti-mimeticism – which is reconfigured as the eclipse of *positive valence* mimesis by *negative valence* mimesis, a theory created for this project – is that which enables the comprehension of erotic desire between women, any women. The fictional tale of Stephen Gordon directly affects the perception of real women in the US and UK. The idea of “woman” is given broader possibilities; she can be perceived *differently*. While the lesbian is in the process of congealing as an identity through *negative valence* mimesis, the identity remains fluid, culminating in the anxiety that any woman might suggest its possibility. Since the identity is not yet visible per se to the general public through sartorial cues, gender performance etc., *who* is lesbian is indeterminable. *What* is lesbian is also indefinite, but cues regarding resistance to heteronormativity through women writer’s narrative decisions regarding their female protagonists can often be read as or into what this project will record as the topoi of lesbianism.
Section 2 will explore four texts written by British women. The protagonists of the British Isles perform as feminists even though they may not name themselves as such. They pride themselves in their intense rationality of thought and striking ability to contemplate and consciously make sense of the world around them. Between focusing on both the narratives’ investment in heteronormativity and the ways in which the protagonists are able to use their intellectual powers, a strong(er) influence of lesbianism should be noted within these mostly assumed to be heterosexual texts and conventional women.

Chapter I will handle the subtle and intense relationship between Sydney Warren and Mrs. Kerr in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Hotel*. Both women are intellectually perceptive, observant, and rely on their mental powers to amuse themselves; they very much live inside their heads. The analysis of this chapter challenges the young girl/older woman dynamic for which the novel has heretofore been known. Without discrediting this frame of critique – the innocent versus the experienced – this chapter suggests that *The Hotel* implies lesbianism more strongly than the current frame allows. Warren, a young intellectual of twenty-two, is still learning the craft of mastery of the mind, while Kerr has mastered it already, but when the two become intimates at the hotel, they are both wrenched from their respective intellectual security and compelled to face their affection for each other.

Chapter II analyzes the fiery intellectualism of Elise and Elizabeth in Willa Muir’s *Imagined Corners*. Through the two women’s desire for intellectual stimulation, they are drawn to each other in variously queer ways that denote
lesbianism. Through such lesbian topoi as feminist acumen on Elise’s part and
the progressive resistance to heteronormative constrictions – especially her new
marriage – on Elizabeth’s part, the text suggests a deeper and queerer connection
between the two women than any critique thus far has admitted.

Chapter III delves into the soul – which is the mind – of Ruth in Olive
Moore’s novel *Spleen*. The picture of Ruth is painted with a fast and furious
narrative style that plays on the relationship between women and hysteria. But, it
is this “hysteria,” exploited by sexologists and other medical men, that illustrates
Ruth’s acute, feminist intellect. Through her various reasoning on social issues,
especially her fervent arguments against women having to both bear childbirth
and maternity, in combination with her choices to live a life resistant to
heteronormative conventions, the little-critiqued text is rife with the topoi of
lesbianism.

Chapter IV explores the fiery character of Sophia Willoughby in Sylvia
Townsend Warner’s *Summer Will Show*. Sophia, a well-bred English matron, is a
feminist before feminism. She walks the reader through various arguments about
women, freedom, and women’s rights (not suffrage, rather human rights). She
finds herself early on in the novel freed from childcare and husband, living in
France on the eve of the French Revolution, and in a lesbian relationship with a
Jewish Lithuanian, Minna. The (usually conceded) lesbian relationship is an
excellent beginning for this study, but analysis of the more mundane decisions the
protagonist makes, her geographical movements, her beliefs in the roles of
women and men, and her defiance of these roles add to a topoi of lesbianism crucial to understanding the novel.

Section 3 will explore protagonists in four American novels by women. It is remarkable that the American novels have a wider variety of how intellect and thinking is used by the protagonists. For example, in certain of the American novels, the active repression of thought is demonstrated more readily than in the British. Although the British characters are often compelled to restrain their speech, some of the American characters tend to repress even their thought. But the American novels also offer variation in their repression, and therefore variation in the topoi of lesbianism one can glean from the texts.

Chapter I of that section will analyze the protagonists Lorelei and Dorothy in Anita Loos’ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. The stereotypes of the gold-digger and the dumb blonde notwithstanding, the novel will be regarded through the kind of non-thinking these characters choose to do. The protagonists withhold from the other characters (and the reader) their shrewd intellect in order to attain their material desires and remain together as a couple. Even when the two women have male suitors, and even in the marriage of Lorelei it is unthinkable that the women prefer any of the men to each other. Through this preference and their choices to care for and remain with each other, the topoi of lesbianism is strengthened yet again.

Chapter II will focus on Helga Crane and Irene Redfield of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing* respectively. Both are personally engaged intellectually for their own purposes, yet when eroticism and other problematic issues are
raised, these “conventional” women repress themselves intellectually so as not to
delve too deeply into the significance of these subjects. They demonstrate a
disdain for heterosexual sex and a penchant for other kinds of erotic outlets that
they find difficult to articulate even to themselves. Unlike other protagonists of
the previous texts, they do attempt to stay in heteronormative boundaries for
propriety’s sake, but their resistance to it is then made all the more apparent.
Their decisions throughout the texts that keep them in heteronormativity are
devastating and ultimately fatal in their consequences.

Chapter III will explore Nora Flood, the other protagonist in Djuna
Barnes’ *Nightwood*. Robin Vote, the character favored by critics, seems a likelier
candidate if one is to discuss non-thinking, for Robin is a somnambule, a woman
in sleep, a dream, a nightmare. But, work on her character is already deep and
broad. Not so for Nora. Nora’s devastatingly powerful relationship with Robin,
mostly couched negatively by critics, will be discussed more positively, and
Nora’s move from objective observer to obsessive thinker and non-thinker will be
explored without suggesting perversity of any kind. In juxtaposition with Robin,
the “invert,” Barnes’ character Nora is nothing like the sexologists’ case studies.
Linking thinking and desire so inextricably, Barnes creates a topos of lesbianism
outside the invert that suggests a love so passionate as to be galvanizing and static
simultaneously. Through Nora, we see a different lesbianism than we see in
Robin.
II

Feminism, Lesbianism and Literary Criticism:
A Commingled and Complicated History

The Commingling

As the modern woman moved herself further and further away from the conventional image and behavior of “woman” through hairstyle, clothing, makeup, lifestyle, and dance, the general population grew anxious about what this woman would mean to society at large, i.e. her reproduction (literally!), and gender role. Add to this anxiety the concern over women’s more abundant educational opportunities and advancement of women’s rights, and one can see how feminists and the newly emerging lesbian image would begin to merge in the popular imagination.

The convergence of the two images was facilitated by sexologists and medical men who increasingly linked homosexuality in women to behavior and dress currently only sanctioned for men, and criticized feminists that pursuing education and other intellectual endeavors would consequently make them dangerously less feminine and unable to complete their “natural” callings of wives and mothers. “[T]he sexually inverted woman,” notes Cheshire Calhoun in her book *Family Outlaws: Rethinking the Connections between Feminism, Lesbianism, and the Family*, who “symbolized the dangers of departing from women’s conventional gender role,” was “sometimes indistinguishable from the feminist” (140):
Because the mark of the sexual invert was her lack of conformity with women’s conventional gender role, the line between the conforming sexual invert and the nonconforming feminist was often blurred. Feminist views and feminist-inspired deviance from gender norms might be both symptom and cause of sexual inversion. Like sexual inverts, feminists threatened to disrespect appropriate gender relations between women and men in marriage. (139-40)

Finding the pseudo-science of sexology helpful to their cause, opponents of the feminist movement began generally describing the factions of feminists as hotbeds of sapphism. In turn, the feminist movement unnerved by this newly emerging figure of the lesbian and concerned that this figure would undermine their long-fought-for and long-term goals, rejected and condemned the lesbian in order to reassure the public of the feminists’ unblighted – and properly heterosexual – womanhood.

**It’s Complicated**

Like the first wave feminist response noted above, perhaps one of the things most depressing to scholars who study the tradition of lesbianism in literature is this tendency (still) to resist acknowledging lesbianism in literature by many critics. One mode of resistance in particular is the impulse (still) to classify women in Modern literature only in proximity to men and (heterosexual) marriage. An adult woman character’s most significant relationships are assumed
to occur with men. If she is a not a suitably married woman or widow, she (still) runs the risk of being labeled a prude, a whore, or a spinster (which rather collapses much heteronormative angst into one identity), or her only desire in the novel is finding a man or (heterosexual) sex. She is not always given her own identity based on her work, her accomplishments, her intellect, her talents, or any other aspect of her life.

These classifications have been useful to feminist critics in the past because they have demonstrated the ways in which patriarchal power has limited and devalued women and women’s experiences. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, used the idea of myth – from Claude Levi-Strauss, informed by Jung’s *archetype*\(^\text{12}\) – to forge her overwhelming view of women’s oppression through these very types of classifications or topoi. The “analysis of myth,” as noted by Elizabeth Fallaize, “provided the original intellectual impulse” for the entirety of *The Second Sex* (87). “‘Myths,’ she notes, ‘occupies nearly two hundred of the thousand or so pages of The Second Sex, and the thinking behind it often drives the argument in other sections’” (87). Working amidst these myths “Images of Women” criticism came onto the literary scene and began, as Toril Moi suggests, rooting out “female stereotypes in the work of male writers and in the critical categories employed by male reviewers commenting on women’s work” (Moi

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\(^{12}\) About Beauvoir’s understanding of myth, Fallaize notes that she drew “quite extensively” on Claude Lévi-Strauss’ “manuscript version of The Elementary Structures of Kinship” for her book, and that Lévi-Strauss “approached the study of myth as a study of deeply rooted patterns in cultural beliefs” (87-8). She further notes that the “sharp distinction which Lévi-Strauss appeared to be making between nature and culture supported her concept of femininity as cultural product” (88). As for archetype, she states that “despite [Beauvoir’s] vigorous rejection of Freud’s thinking on women,” Jungian psychoanalysis, especially his “notion of archetypes” informed her understanding of the term (88). His idea that “certain motifs from myths and legends repeat themselves the world over in identical forms” truly suited her objectives (Jung qtd in Fallaize 88).
These second wave feminists’ studies, such as Mary Ellmann’s *Thinking About Women* (1968)\(^{13}\) and Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970), advance Beauvoir’s position by their own means. Ellmann, for example, according to Toril Moi, hoped to highlight the “insidious effects of thinking by sexual analogy” (39). The male critic, according to Ellmann, is overwhelmed by the female author’s femaleness and therefore cannot differentiate between the author and her work:

> With a kind of inverted fidelity, the discussion of women’s books by men will arrive punctually at the point of preoccupation, which is the fact of femininity. Books by women are treated as though they themselves were women, and criticism embarks, at its happiest, upon an intellectual measuring of busts and hips (Ellmann 29).

After Ellmann, Kate Millett’s acerbic cultural criticism hits hard and fast. Her contention is that the oppressive reflections of women in literary texts are a part of a larger, systemic subjugation of women that pervades every aspect of patriarchal culture. She notes that this type of cultural criticism is a new one indeed:

> I have operated on the premise that there is room for a criticism which takes into account the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived and produced. Criticism which originates from literary history is too limited in scope to do this; criticism

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\(^{13}\) Ellmann’s text was one of literary analysis, and therefore would have less appeal to a general audience than Millett’s scathing review. However, it has become a canonical text in the history of feminist literary studies and especially studies in the representation of women in literature.
which originates in aesthetic considerations, ‘New Criticism,’
ever wished to do so” (xx).

Millett’s caustic analysis takes on such names as D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet, contrasting the authors’ brutal depictions of women with their romanticized visions of men. This text had a massive general appeal to feminists and its innovative approach, although problematic on certain levels, would become a model for future feminist academic work.\(^\text{14}\)

Ellmann and Millett were followed by other iconic feminist works such as Barbara Smith’s *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* (1977), Judith Fetterley’s *The Resisting Reader* (1978),\(^\text{15}\) and Sandra Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979),\(^\text{16}\) that continued dismantling the patriarchal hold

\(^{14}\) It must be mentioned that Millett’s work was contentious from the beginning. It was widely praised, but also widely criticized especially for frequent inaccuracies because of quick or careless handling of primary texts, and her insufficient recognition of previous thinkers. She has also been criticized for not focusing on any women writers. For a thoughtful and succinct summary of Millett’s text, please see Toril Moi’s *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*.

\(^{15}\) *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978) reprimands “classic” American literature as literature for and about men under the guise of being universally American. This dishonest universality is hazardous to women in that, “As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny” (xx). For Fetterly, then, politically speaking, a woman reader must become as her title suggests, a resisting reader by “alter[ing] the way she ‘reads the literature of the past so as to make her not an acquiescent’” (Abrams and Harpham 112). She must resist “the author’s intentions and design in order, by a ‘revisionary rereading,’ to bring to light and to counter the covert sexual biases written into a literary work” (112).

\(^{16}\) *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) also focuses on women’s representation in literature, but analyzes women’s literature only for this task. Like Fetterly, Gilbert and Gubar are interested in (and concerned about) how the male literary tradition influence women’s views of women. In their preface to the first edition, they note one particular concern and explain what would become one of the most important points of their study, that women writers work within a repressive male tradition, although subversively so: “That literary texts are coercive (or at least compellingly persuasive) has been one of our major observations, for just as women have been repeatedly defined by male authors, they seem in reaction to have found it necessary to act out male metaphors in their own texts, as if trying to understand their implications” (xii). They were especially affected by certain
on literary images of women and the work of literary studies itself. Soon feminists on both sides of the Atlantic realized that it would be necessary to include those who had been left out of first wave feminist politics because of race and class:

British feminists had realized increasingly in the seventies that it was not possible to consider gender in isolation from issues of class, but American feminists had perhaps become aware earlier that it was essential not to isolate issues of gender from race, and that lesson was now being learnt in Britain in the eighties, with some equally fiery eruptions. Yet from the early eighties, both feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory were beginning to find their way into the literature departments of the more radical Higher Education institutions in Britain, as had already happened in the States, and were eagerly seized on by students” (134).

Since feminist politics had developed in various and multivalent ways, feminist work in the academy had to attempt an inclusion that first wave feminism had not allowed. One such inclusion in academic feminist criticism was that of race.

Mary Helen Washington edited the anthology *Black-Eyed Susans*, the “first contemporary anthology of black women’s fiction” in 1975 (Carby 9). Although unsettling patterns within these images, which they describe thus: “Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors – such patterns recurred throughout this tradition, along with obsessive depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia” (xi). They describe these patterns and images as evidence of a “common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society” (xi-xii).

This text concentrates mostly on British literature and has become an important work of scholarship in the second wave project of charting a tradition of women’s literature.
she did not particularly brand her work or the fiction she anthologized “feminist,” she obviously took part in the important work of recovering and establishing a tradition. Barbara Smith’s 1977 text, *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* (mentioned earlier) followed with a much more political bite. In this text she argues that a black feminist literary criticism must express “the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers” (Smith qtd in Carby 8). In upholding her argument, according to Hazel V. Carby (author of *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, 1987, an important feminist work in its own right) Smith “indicted a variety of male critics and white feminist critics for their sexist and racist assumptions which prevented the critical recognition of the importance of the work of black women writers” (8). *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982) and *Home Girls* (1983) both edited by Barbara Smith among others, are feminist anthologies whose contributors were women of color who insisted on the need for a methodology in feminist academic work that would go beyond identity politics, a move that had helped to disguise the disparate realities and sexualities of women. They advocated a methodology of *intersectionality* that would allow discussion on the various experiences and realities of all “women” rather than the monochromatic representations of women that were

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17 It should be noted that *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* not only attempted to open up feminist discussion to issues of race and class (among other issues such as language), but also sexuality; therefore, these anthologies can also be counted as contributions to lesbian feminist scholarship.
often painted under the guise of “sisterhood.”\textsuperscript{18} From this time forward, feminist scholarship would be obliged at the very least to acknowledge that oppression of women came about and effected women in incongruent and multifarious ways.

The methodology of intersectionality also helped another group that retained a long and uneasy relationship with feminism proper. First wave feminism in both the States and the UK were either ambivalent about or downright hostile toward the newly emerging lesbian identity. By the second wave, the reception differed little except that lesbians and lesbianism had become well-established identities and sexual practices. Although feminists on the whole may not have been sensitive to lesbian feminists and their work on lesbianism, many feminists counted themselves also as lesbians and began the hard work that had also begun in feminism in general.\textsuperscript{19} As feminists uncovered a lost women’s

\textsuperscript{18} The move toward intersectionality, as described by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in “Mapping the Margins,” is one way in which many feminists, especially women of color, attempted to come to terms with and surpass the issues put forth by identity politics. She notes that the “problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite — that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (357). She notes that separate groups under the umbrella of identity politics (too) often work under the assumption that their purposes do not merge or collide. For example, she states: “Feminist efforts to politicize violence against women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices” (357). Intersectionality would become a useful methodology for feminists in order to deal with the various and variable worlds of those still tenuously described as “women.”

\textsuperscript{19} One academic not mentioned above, but who must be recognized is Jeanette H. Foster, whose 1957 \textit{Sex Variant Women} not only pre-dates all of the feminist and lesbian work noted previously, but her compiled work of the representation of women (specifically lesbian representation) would become indispensable to lesbian feminist literary scholars. Before second wave feminists had even begun their important literary work, Foster had already meticulously documented the representations of “sex variant” women (her word for sexually problematic women) in Western literature over a span of 2600 years. It is without question the very first of its kind in feminist (and lesbian) literary criticism.
literary tradition, lesbians began uncovering lesbian traditions in literature.\textsuperscript{20}

The beginning of this work was complicated because of the resistance to naming anyone – especially in the precarious and newly formed women’s tradition of literature – a lesbian.\textsuperscript{21} And one of the only ways one was open to talking about lesbian literature was through the then en vogue identity politics in which one named the author as such. If the author was a proven lesbian (and proof was required), it may be acceptable to name her work lesbian, but if there were any question about her sexuality, like with Virginia Woolf for example, critics would fall back on the heteronormative view of the author, which discounted her as a writer of lesbian fiction. But as identity politics gave way, lesbian fiction did not have to be written solely by lesbians. In fact, the term “lesbian fiction” itself went through a transformation. Critics began to understand that “lesbians” do not always write about lesbians or lesbianism, and by the same token “straight” women do not always write about straight women or heterosexuality. Add to this conundrum the fact that men write often about lesbians and lesbianism and straight and lesbian women write and crosswrite

\textsuperscript{20}I say lesbian traditions, because white and black lesbian feminists, and other lesbian feminists of color, were working simultaneously to explore their own traditions. Black and other minority women scholars felt slighted by white scholars who had put their effort toward uncovering and creating a tradition of white women writers. For a clear idea of the anger and betrayal felt by these lesbian feminist activists, writers, and scholars, please see \textit{All the Women Are White, All the Men Are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave}; full citation in bibliography.

\textsuperscript{21}One may remember, especially, in the American context, Barbara Smith’s carefully nuanced argument about Toni Morrison’s novel \textit{Sula} (1974) as a lesbian novel, and Morrison’s resistance to this label herself. Please see \textit{Toni Morrison: Conversations} edited by Carolyn C. Denard (39); full citation in bibliography.
about gay men. Therefore, the identity politics that had held authors in strict compliance with their supposed sexual identities had to give way.

Cross-Purposes/Cross-Critique

Feminist politics and critique have pointed out that, even now, our approach to a subject will too often alienate or exclude others. As noted above, during feminism’s second wave, women of color, lesbians, and poor women were left out of the inner circles of consideration because they were minorities in the club. Since then feminism has done its best to be self-aware and inclusive in order to curtail such happenings. But, as feminists themselves know, groups that were once excluded cannot instantly make up the discrepancy. It takes many people many years of academic work to collect primary sources and compile academic critique about that group to rival those of others that were allowed the opportunity to flourish. White feminist scholarship, for example, has grown in leaps and bounds since the 1970s. Innumerable texts by white women have been recovered by second wave feminists and are now enjoying major attention in literary studies. But, texts by and criticism about women of color as well as texts by and about lesbians and lesbianism have moved forward less speedily because of their history of marginal status in the overarching categories of feminisms.

From Stonewall to the 1990s, the critique of lesbian literature and lesbianism in literature was a slow slog, mostly because of the historic

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22 “Lesbian crosswriting,” as defined by Gay Wachman in her 2001 book, “is a literary practice that most often transposes the otherwise unrepresentable lives of invisible, silenced, or simply closeted lesbians into narratives about gay men” (37). Please see full citation in the bibliography.
feminist/lesbian divide. Feminists found that focusing on women was made difficult enough, and remained only on the cusp of acceptable scholarship. They risked any credibility they may have had if they also added queries regarding sexuality or sexual ambiguousness to their textual critique. Therefore, they worked within the homophobic paradigm so as not to undermine the progress that had already been made. Renée Hoogland points out the incongruities between the groups:

The historiographic undertaking [of lesbianism in literature] immediately ran into a problem that proved the lesbian project to be actually quite different from that of mainstream feminism: lesbianism in texts, unlike female authorship, or ‘images of women,’ turned out to be a quality not so easily determined, especially since the designation ‘the love that dare not speak its name’ had, in most cases, to be taken quite literally. (Hoogland Heterosexual 122)

Feminists in contemporary lesbian studies are often at cross-purposes with their heterosexual feminist colleagues and other heterosexual critics in literary studies. For heterosexual critics, feminists and otherwise, on the one hand have been known to ignore, disregard, or react with hostility toward lesbian readings of beloved texts, or to handle them cursorily or with uncommon delicacy.

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23 Dana Alice Heller’s 1995 book suggests this problem in its very title: Cross-Purposes: Lesbians, Feminists, and the Limits of Alliance. Please see the bibliography for full citation.
Historically, literary criticism has been distinctly homophobic. From the New Critics of the early to mid-20th century through the Feminist critics of the 1970s and 80s, one sees mostly an attempt to keep “straight” the plot lines and relationships within Modernist fiction. Indeed, in a 1981 article, Bonnie Zimmerman notes how literary criticism’s heterosexism “serves to obliterate lesbian existence and maintain the lie that women have searched for emotional and sexual fulfillment only through men – or not at all” (453). By the 90s, Queer Theory and Feminist Theory both began more rigorous investigations into how the lesbian is evoked in literature. At this time, it was difficult to assert that a text or characters in a text were lesbian without also proving the lesbianism of the author, or the author’s overt lesbian intentions, or the exact genital connection between the women in the text. Today, however, these are not such stringent requirements. Lesbian theorists have shown what we already know, which is

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24 In her text, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (1996), Marilyn Farwell gives an historical account of the difficulties of definition. She states that the “definition of a lesbian narrative […] has always been in crisis” especially because of the “question that has plagued lesbian literary criticism tradition: where is the ‘lesbian’ in the lesbian narrative?” (6). With that “simple but problematic question,” she notes, a Pandora’s Box of “practical questions” is unleashed. Questions such as, “must the characters be overtly lesbian? Must the author be overtly or covertly lesbian? Must both be true at the same time? Must there be a lesbian theme and must it be politically acceptable? Must the characters or theme be positive instead of negative? […] Does the mere existence or even the centrality of lesbian characters determine that the novel is lesbian when, perhaps, the author is not? How explicit must a text be to be considered lesbian?” (6). Can a “text […] contain a lesbian theme without clearly identifiable lesbian characters or a lesbian author?” Or, is a critic “justified in reading” a work as a “coded lesbian text?” Furthermore, can writing be “relevant for lesbian studies” because an author demonstrates a “nightmarish treatment of the heterosexual family?” (7). Finally, Farwell notes that readers “might become the locus of the lesbian in the lesbian text” because “lesbian readers must rewrite texts, heterosexual or lesbian, as they read” (7). Furthermore, like their straight counterparts, “lesbian writers have not written exclusively on lesbian topics” just as straight authors have not on “straight themes” (6).

25 In her encyclopedic excerpt “Lesbian Sexuality in the Story of Modernism,” Joanne Winning suggests that “in general, any critic coming to analyse themes of sexuality in modernist texts must on some level engage with biographical evidence because so many of the lesbian modernists use
that literature exists independent of its authors and can assert multiple viewpoints disconnected from intentionality.\(^{26}\)

Techniques that contemporary lesbian feminist scholars have found fruitful in discovering lesbianism in literature is to look more closely for significance in thematic dynamics, fragmentation, intertextuality, the unsaid, the unwritten, etc. Terry Castle continues this detective work in her most recent anthology mentioned in the introduction. In it she aims to “shed light on the characteristic motifs – what one might call the erotics – of lesbian desire itself” (41). In order to do this, she explains what and how this works with literature, which illustrates how different contemporary lesbian scholars are looking at literature compared to early lesbian studies:

By \textit{erotics} I don’t mean so much how lesbian lovemaking per se is described; outside the realm of pornography, few authors before the mid-twentieth century are particularly explicit on the subject.

\(^{(41)}\)

their own life material as the central frameworks for their literary experiments” (221). Although I think Winning is correct in that if one is after an holistic view of the writers of Modernisms, one should look at biographical evidence, I disagree that it offers any more than a limited opportunity to approach lesbianism in literature. It is true that Modernists such as Brhyer and Barnes made much use of biographical information in their fiction, but the assumption that one can make one-to-one connections between fiction and biographical history has already proven difficult for Barnes scholars who have drawn parallels too closely between her work and her life. Her “lesbianism,” for example, through this type of analysis becomes difficult to maintain because she herself did not identify as a lesbian. She “just loved Thelma.” Indeed, as Daniela Caselli notes in her book \textit{Improper Modernism}, “Barnes’s photographs, her biographical accounts, her letters and her self-portraits need to be read rather than assumed as the site of authenticity” [emphasis mine] (32). In other words, they must be interpreted. Assuming the reliability of Barnes’ autobiographical writings and applying them to decipher her fiction will not necessarily move us to a more accurate understanding of meaning or significance in that fiction.

\(^{26}\) Indeed, my view on authorial intent walks a fine line between a New Historicist understanding of the inextricable relation between literature and its specific location in time and place, and a Poststructural conviction in the appropriateness of critique that exorcizes, to an extent, the text from intent.
As noted in the introduction, these “erotics” can be found in a number of tropes within literary traditions, sometimes “across centuries” (45). Castle explains her reasoning for continuing to do this work, documenting the lesbian idea – or lesbianism – in literature long after the shiny newness of lesbian criticism and theory has worn off:

“Of the three great forms of human desire – man for woman, man for man, and woman for woman – it is incontrovertibly the case that the third has yet to be treated with the intellectual respect, existential weight, and moral and aesthetic gravitas of the other two” (48).

**Toward Future Lesbian Feminist Criticism**

The exploration of lesbian desires is becoming mainstream (which is not to say embraced, particularly) in literary studies. In fact, it is so mainstream that it has almost become mundane and is often met with a figurative yawn by those outside of the field. But, this yawn, although on the one hand acknowledges its ordinary status, on the other, signals a new expression of antagonism that reminds us there will always be various factions within literary criticism that may not understand or approve of our approach. Castle suggests one of the aims of her book is “in some ways about becoming sagacious and blasé and letting all the old shock and scandal drop away” from the subject of lesbianism (48). As the study of lesbianism in fiction is de-scandalized, its normalization must not suggest irrelevance. It must not be misconstrued as something that “has been done” and
that because it is no longer shockingly different, it must somehow be passé. Regardless of its move into the more ordinary of literary criticism, we have yet much work to do and a long way to go in order to become current in our own tradition.

If we are to continue to struggle against heteronormativity, which is a struggle begun by feminists, civil rights activists, queer activists, and others, we cannot leave the subjects of alternative sexuality and gender performance alone simply because others have come before us and pointed out characters that may be lesbian, bisexual, gay, or otherwise. This assumes the only gay in the village has been appropriately labeled, and we can all get back to “real” analysis. But, in fact, this is exactly where more vigorous analysis should begin. It may be only a passing fancy for some that a character in a text shows indifference to the heterosexual imperative that restrained the lives of the Modern British and American woman, but for others in literary studies today, it is imperative to amass a painstakingly thorough amount of criticism surrounding literature that allows for readings against the heteronormative.

Like the feminist literary critics of the second wave who produced a critical tradition about the representations of women in literature, queer and lesbian critics must meticulously produce and build on literatures that have queerities, penchants for lesbianism, and homoerotic tendencies. And we cannot all look to contemporary literatures to supply that tradition. We must not be

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27 An early criticism of lesbian theory was a conservative reaction against using the term “lesbian” for texts that existed earlier than our contemporary understanding of who or what “lesbian” is. This remains a general (and important) discussion within literary studies regarding how
deterred from scavenging in our larger fields and genres of discipline for the queerness that more than frequently arises, for it will be important to those who come later to have a wider corpus of exhaustively examined texts, lesbian and otherwise. We must not only unearth previously hidden literatures, tropes, and traditions, we must also argue the validity of our readings against a heteronormative tradition of literary interpretation that is often unaware of its own proclivities. Therefore, there are a number of ways we must continue building this literary tradition and its associated tradition of literary criticism. Being aware of and searching for the lesbianism in Western literature is an endeavor that must continue in order to expand and develop this (still) fledgling tradition (48).

As noted earlier, contemporary lesbian literary theory no longer assumes it relevant to discuss the author’s sexuality in order to give oneself leave to discuss the homoerotic/queer/lesbian cues within a given novel. It is also no longer imperative to show evidence of genital sexual contact between characters in order to argue a particular character is working from a non-heteronormative position. Hoogland reminds us of the difficulties feminists encountered at the outset of rediscovering a lesbian literary tradition:

lesbianism in texts, unlike female authorship, or ‘images of women’, turned out to be a quality not so easily determined,

Contemporary critical theory in general can and should be used in textual analysis of earlier texts, but should not impair our work in continuing to carve out our own tradition. Women themselves in earlier times were not seen as “writers” although many did write. To argue, however, that those women should not now be called writers because they would not have been so identified in their own time can be seen as rather nonsensical.

28 This is not to say that the sexuality of the author is not important in its own right. It simply means that there is often no necessary causal connection between the sexuality of the author on the one hand and that of the characters in her text on the other.
especially since the designation ‘the love that dare not speak its name’ had, in most cases, to be taken quite literally (122).

Therefore, most lesbian critics had to learn to read for lesbianism instead of the lesbian; rather than searching for who is lesbian, critics had to begin looking at what is lesbian. Terry Castle notes her own approach to lesbianism in literature as being “less ideologically fraught” and perhaps “less compromising” (6).

Instead of presuming at the outset what lesbianism is – the trying to find writers who somehow fit the bill – I start with the assumption that it is precisely the category itself that is in need of historical examination. How (and when) did it first become possible in modern Western culture to think about erotic desire between women? (5-6).

Although Castle’s investigation is much more immense, handling centuries of Western culture, this project runs parallel in spirit with her idea. The who exactly is lesbian does not concern this study – for I am not particularly concerned with which authors and characters are considered lesbian – but the what is lesbian does. The what is lesbian refers to an investigation into the topoi of resistance in women’s literature – imagery, tone, visualization, plot, language, etc. that timidly avoids or outrightly defies an investment in the heteronormative – and allows the reader to think lesbianism. It sends the reader off the heteronormative track and into the lesser traveled spheres of possibility and plausibility, which is a direction many feminists interested in lesbian critique are headed themselves.
A Sign of the Times: Performative Mimesis of Lesbianism

The chief objection to the sort of relationship which Miss Radclyffe Hall attempts to justify is that it poisons all those other innocent, cheerful affectionate relationships, and leaves no part of life secure from the wandering dragon of lust.

Doubtless W.R. Gordon would be disheartened were he to see how many of us in literary criticism are actively searching out and relishing in the “wandering dragon of lust,” especially between women. Surely, he would find it most unsavory. But his pithy morality rant is more than just the fumings of an exuberant religious zealot; it is also a reflection of the modern condition of the cultural clash of old and new. British society had only just eased itself from the idea of the New Woman into the Modern Woman (and Girl) when *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) came on the scene and inadvertently pushed the woman question into an entirely new realm.29 With the obscenity trial and banning of the

29 *The Well of Loneliness* was published in England in July 1928 by Jonathan Cape. The British Home Secretary unofficially labeled the book obscene in September, and after his offices were raided and 250 copies of the novel had been printed in France were seized, Cape was charged in October for having violated The Obscene Publications Act of 1857. In November 1928, the courts agreed with the Home Secretary and declared the book obscene. In December the appellate court agreed with the lower court’s decision and enacted a ban on the book that would last until 1948.

In the United States, after A.A. Knopf dropped the book, *The Well* had relative difficulty finding a publisher. It was published on December 15, 1928 by the new publishing company run by Pascal Covici and Donald Friede. The obscenity lawsuit brought forward by John Sumner, head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV) made its way through the New York courts between December 1928 and April 1929. “On Friday, January 11, 1929 […] Sumner returned with a summons from Chief Magistrate William McAdoo [and] Friede was ordered to appear in court for the violation of Article 106, Section 1141 of the [New York] penal code” (Taylor 270). On this date 865 copies of the novel were seized at Covici-Friede’s office. On April 19, 1929 the Court of Special Sessions cleared *The Well* of charges of obscenity, and although a lower Customs Court “declared the book obscene in May, the higher court reversed the decision in July 1929” (284). This was the final challenge to the novel in the United States. Please see especially Leslie A. Taylor’s article on the American trial of Radclyffe Hall’s novel. Full citation in bibliography.
novel, the modern “invert.” (the Sapphist, the Tribade, the Masculine Woman, the Lesbian) was given more publicity than anyone could have ever foreseen. The comments by W.R. Gordon that open this chapter stand especially as an embittered wistfulness for women’s “innocence” (ignorance?), a benevolent guise of the patriarch to protect decent women everywhere from the corrupting influence of sexual “experience.” It is not so much Radclyffe Hall’s fictional relationship that seems to bother Mr. Gordon (as a good Christian more than likely Gordon assumes Hall will reap her own reward), rather it is the “poison” that emanates from that relationship that Gordon worries will contaminate all other wholesome relationships between women. From this quote, we can assume that Mr. Gordon believes there are few relationships of Hall’s type outside of fiction. In fact, it juxtaposes Hall’s relation as the one against the many; the rotten apple in the bunch. And this rotten apple surely brings with it an ability to spoil it all for everyone else. The anxiety of Gordon’s short narrative is focused on nothing other than what he considers misrepresentation, and misrepresentation is infectious and dangerous. Gordon fears that properly “innocent” and “affectionate” relationships between women – represented previously by Romantic Friendships and Boston Marriages in 19th century Britain and America

30 The “invert” popularized by Hall’s novel is a narrativized version of the homosexual personality of the same name in Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s Psychopathia Sexualis (1886) and Havelock Ellis’ sympathetic account in Sexual Inversion (1897). It is obvious that Hall relied more on the caricature created by Krafft-Ebing than the considerably gentler representation of Ellis. As noted by Leslie A. Taylor: “The reason Hall’s decision to utilize the far less sympathetic formulations by Krafft-Ebing rather than those of Ellis is unclear. Both texts were published prior to World War I, the time in which Stephen is supposed to have found the text. Also, Hall showed her own positive appraisal of Ellis’s work by including his preface” (Ibid. Fn 5, 252). Please see full citation in bibliography.
– will henceforth be seen like the relation of the toxic and unholy union in The Well of Loneliness.

Unfortunately for him his anxiety is not unfounded, for this is a problem of mimesis that has ever been for those who would protect some section of society against our wayward instincts toward analogy. Plato attempted it by banishing the poets from the city; he differentiated good mimesis from bad and warned against the dangers of the latter.\(^{31}\) Aristotle, on the other hand, theorized and utilized mimesis in order to control its use.\(^{32}\) Along the Platonic vein, W.R. Gordon bemoans the fact that through a fictional text, people will be persuaded to see existing real-life relationships (female couples) differently, and specifically as

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\(^{31}\) Plato believed the poet influenced citizens to feel and act indiscriminately through mimesis. In Book X of the Republic Plato maintains that dramatized narration is a third-remove from truth and is therefore dangerous representation. The painter, for Plato, like the poet is not a maker of anything, but is rather an “imitator of that which others make,” which is a third-remove from truth (Plato). The painting of a bed or table is therefore only an imitation and resides far away from truth and reality. God, the only real truth or reality, gives the artisan the idea for a creation, such as a bed or table. The artisan or craftsman can make the bed or table, and therefore can be called a “maker,” but his creation can only resemble reality, and therefore remains a second-remove from truth or reality. Still Plato attributes value to the artisan because of the practical nature of his creations, but to the painter and poet, he attributes only danger. Poets “play” or “sport” is contagious or in other words mimetic, Plato argues, and nurtures the inferior part of the soul that desires immoderate exhibition of emotion. Therefore, good men might be inclined to unrestrained emotion and pity the protagonist while listening to the poet’s recitation of a tragedy (Plato). Comedy bodes as poorly as tragedy, since good men may be inclined to engage in laughter at something at which they might otherwise be ashamed to laugh in public. Please see full citation in bibliography.

\(^{32}\) Unlike Plato, Aristotle utilized the power of mimesis by regulating its processes and subsequently judging how well the mimesis is accomplished according to these regulations. Aristotle notes that mimesis is a natural part of our existence as human beings and that it is pleasurable because it is instructive, and education is something everyone enjoys (Section I, Part IV). The philosopher then creates criterion for good mimesis through his standardization of good Tragedy and Comedy (Tragedy being, of course, the higher form of art). The epic poet, the Tragedian, is elevated and given adulation according to his adherence to the regulations provided by Aristotle; therefore, Plato’s warning of mimesis’ ability to corrupt is stayed, for mimesis can only be done well or poorly and neither is able to damage the individual. As Christopher Prendergast notes in his book, “Where Plato sees in mimetic fiction mere ‘feigning,’ Aristotle sees ‘figuring.’” Aristotle senses a more “productive” and “creative energies’ in the mimetic project. Aristotle’s “‘imitation of action,’” states Prendergast, “is less a copy than a synthesis” (234). See bibliography for full citation.
lesbians. His argument, which I take to be ultimately a mimetic one – dealing with the creation/signification/recognition of meaning through representation – makes quite extraordinarily progressive insight into the concept: First, his comments suggest that the mimetic model is unfixed, that a “model” itself – which is a contested term in my understanding of mimetic theory – can be radically changed by the mimesis of that model. In other words, it is possible to depose a mimetic archetype.\(^{33}\) And second, they admit mimesis’ deceptive quality that underscores similarity at the expense of dissimilarity or difference.

In his first claim, he concedes that the representation of an erotically/sexually intimate relationship between women has replaced the image of the pure and guiltless one. Before the “lesbian” came on the scene in Hall’s novel, Gordon implies, close female relationships were seen as chaste and beautiful, something to be emulated.\(^{34}\) The pure model – the natural or original relationship between women – has been unseated, even preceded by a subsequent variation on its theme.\(^{35}\)

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\(^{33}\) “Model” is a contested term because I read mimesis theory through a Butlerian lens that suggests we question the hierarchy that the idea of “model” assumes. The normative value judgment placed on a “model” as an “original” or worse, “natural” thing and consequently that which is seen otherwise or after as “copies” or “unnatural” underestimates my understanding of the fluidity and flexibility of mimetic processes themselves.

\(^{34}\) As will be discussed later, the subject of the intimate or ‘romantic friendship’ of women never had an entirely strife-free existence; its detractors tended to criticize the relationships by an especial relation to the possibility of sexual indiscretions.

\(^{35}\) Yes, this may seem logically incongruous, but it is a common observation in both contemporary mimesis theory and Judith Butler’s theory of performativity. Because of their iterable natures, both mimesis and performativity disarrange the genealogy that societies use to explain such things as gender and sexuality. The original is meant to hold value, while subsequent references through models, etc. that suggest the “original” are less valuable. Because performativity itself and the performative aspect of mimesis focus on the constructedness of even the very “model,” these theories democratize the process.
writ larger than life by the moral hysteria of the trial henceforth becomes the
standard (the model) by which all other intimate female relationships will be read,
and will overshadow any other readings.

W.R. Gordon’s second point regards the normative function of mimesis.
He laments the fact that we are at the mercy of a mimesis in which we highlight
similarity so much so that when something so captures the public’s attention,
especially the recognition of a different type of sexuality, the normative powers of
mimesis send us toward other things in order to make visible similarities. In other
words Gordon asserts that intimate relationships between women are not like the
lesbian relationship(s) in Hall’s novel, but will be forever condemned to look like
it because of our persistent desire toward analogy. These two points of
argumentation suggest how literary representations can demand “real” world
effects. For this is one of those rare moments in which we see the rupture created
by the recognition of difference in the repetitive (performative) process of
mimetic similarity. The difference of Hall’s proclaimed sexuality has turned the
mimetic vision of women’s friendship into a vision that is unstable and unsure of
what it sees. If, as Gordon suggests, all women couples would henceforth be
looked at askance as lesbian couples, the unnatural copy – that relationship that
he assumes to be the perverted replica of its model – has overtaken the natural
original and actually transformed the norm of that mimetic image. The norm’s
need for constant correlation to naturalize itself is the undoing of the mimetic
representation of the “straight,” asexual, female duo.

36 Performativity, Judith Butler’s theory of the constructedness of reality, will be discussed
subsequently.
Performativity

Judith Butler’s theory of performativity is a theory of subjectivity formation that questions the common assumption that gender is an expression of an inner essence, and suggests that rather than an inner essence that guides its gender to reflect itself, gender reflects the expectation of gender made manifest through sources of power through discourse that naturalize bodies and genders. Performativity, then, reveals the subject’s necessity for repetitive acts or performances; since an inherent essence does not drive the gender performance, the way in which an identity is materialized is through “repetition and [...] ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler GT preface xiv-xv). These important aspects of Butler’s theory effectively demonstrate the unnatural, constructed, and contrived character of gender, and further illustrates the detachment of bodies from their relationships with behavior, look, dress, mannerisms that we have previously seen as gender.

Butler’s theory is influenced by feminism, deconstruction, and poststructuralism in general, and although there are a number of philosophers in these camps that Butler makes use of in her theory, I will only refer to three in particular that are necessary to understand the intricacies of her concept: Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. Simone de Beauvoir’s idea of becoming in her groundbreaking text The Second Sex (1949) is a foundational one for performativity, for Beauvoir popularizes on a massive scale the argument surrounding the constructedness of gender. Her famous statement, “One is not
born, but rather becomes, a woman,” is an idea that Butler will use in arguing that gender is a repetitive construction through heteronormativity (Beauvoir 267).

Butler, of course, goes further than Beauvoir when she argues that the famous feminist does not take the construction of gender far enough by questioning the originality of such concepts as sex and the body as well:

Beauvoir’s theory implied seemingly radical consequences, ones that she herself did not entertain. For instance, if sex and gender are radically distinct, then it does not follow that to be a given sex is to become a given gender; in other words, ‘woman’ need not be the cultural construction of the female body, and ‘man’ need not interpret male bodies. This radical formulation of the sex/gender distinction suggests that sexed bodies can be the occasion for a number of different gender, and further, that gender itself need not be restricted to the usual two. (Butler GT 142-3)

Derrida’s concept of iterability – a term that suggests both repetition and alterity – is one that performativity cannot do without. In fact Butler notes herself in her book Bodies That Matter (1993) that,

performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that ‘performance’ is not a singular ‘act’ or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual
reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the
force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and
even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production,
but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (95).

And finally, Butler’s use of Foucaultian power – especially his theories of
the nature and locations of power and power relations – is mandatory for a full
understanding of performativity. The nature of power, according to Foucault,
does not fit the top-down model we often imagine. It is unstable and decentered:

[…] power must be understood in the first instance as the
multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which
they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the
process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations,
transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which
these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a
system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions
which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in
which they take effect, whose general design or institutional
crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the
formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. Power’s
condition of possibility, or in any case the viewpoint which permits
one to understand its exercise, even in its more ‘peripheral’ effects,
and which also makes it possible to use its mechanisms as a grid of
intelligibility of the social order, must not be sought in the primary
existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable (HS 92-3)

**Positive and Negative Valence Mimesis**

Mimesis as a product is produced by mimesis as a process in which two opposing sides of mimesis, what I call its *positive* and *negative* valences, exist in an uneasy, unstable, and incessant relationship. The *positive valence* of mimesis is that which reflects, reproduces, represents, repeats, mirrors in some way the *norm* of the thing; it is that which works toward comparison, similarity, and likeness. The *negative valence* of mimesis is that which refuses to enact the norm through analogous means, and rather draws attention to difference rather than similarity, contrast over comparison, and disparateness over likeness. Through the shifting relations between these two valences, a product of mimesis is performatively produced that either adheres to a recognizable norm or makes that norm less identifiable or different from our expectations of that norm. This idea of the shifting recognizability of a norm and the difference that can be produced is analogous to Butler’s idea of the possibility for change in the “gaps

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37 My assertion means that I do not hold to the idea that mimesis is always connected to or associated with realism. The reflection, reproduction, representation, repetition, and mirroring then, is not a simplistic one that simply echoes “the thing.” The *normative* part of mimesis that may reflect some “thing” is always already accompanied by the *non-normative*, which reflects something else; this process demonstrates mimesis’ slipperiness and suggests we will never find just one “thing” in mimesis and therefore cannot naively substitute mimesis for what might be better termed “copy” or “imitation.”
and fissures” that “open up” through “that which escapes being fixed by the norm,” as stated by Gill Jagger in her book *Judith butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* (57).

Modernism relies on artistic mimesis’ negative valence, what others have called its anti-representationalism or anti-mimeticism. This indicates a context in which difference is emphasized at least as much if not more so than similarity within the concept. This emphasis on difference can be attributed to the Modern attempt to make art new and/or strange, to defamiliarize the taken-for-granted. In this form of mimesis, then, the difference manifests itself through its ahistoricity. It suggests to the audience that it holds no genealogical ties prior to its showing up; its presence is in the present. This is very much unlike positive valence mimesis, which relies on similarity or likeness, in which it is quite important for the reader or audience to recognize a lineage or find a genealogy of that which is re-presented.

Performativity is the tie that binds mimesis’ contradictory natures. For performativity explains the conservative process of naturalization that aligns itself

38 On the modernist opposition to representation in his book *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, Stephen Halliwell states: “Modernism, with its abrupt turn away from existing styles of representation in all the arts, certainly delivered an unprecedentedly sharp jolt to the terms of the disputes which had been conducted around mimesis since the Renaissance: ‘all forms of imitation are to be despised,’ as one of the futurist manifestos stridently proclaimed (aiming, it goes without saying, both at the idea of representation and at the emulation of older art)” (367-70).

39 Scholars in contemporary mimesis theory agree that the concept of mimesis incorporates similarity and difference, although many of them take for granted the idea that an author can choose to be “anti-mimetic,” which is both redundant to my view of mimesis – because it seems that the term “anti-mimetic” simply means different – and furthermore assumes that we have control over how to dissociate the valences from each other. Informed by my Foucaultian and Butlerian underpinnings, my theory of mimesis limits the control of an author over how the valences work in mimesis, and therefore cannot assume an author can always successfully dissociate the two.
along the positive valence of mimesis; it suggests the genealogy and fixity of that which is repeated. However, it also draws attention to the need of the positive valence to repeat in order to sustain itself, which exposes its negative valence, its present-ness, its precariousness of variability, its need for continuously re-doing itself in order to create the illusion of its being. If we assume that the process of positive valence mimesis is a performative one, one that replicates a norm such as recognizable femininity, for example, it can only replicate that norm as long as the genealogical citations or illusions remain intact. Further, this means that the reader will be able to readily identify the representation of femininity within the text. However, if the process becomes too closely aligned along the negative valence and yet appropriates and transmits the illusion of genealogy and fixity from the positive valence, the materialization of something less recognizable and even drastically different from the norm becomes possible.

Although the norm will always attempt to replicate itself, the processes of repetition can never be exact; indeed alterity is a part of the very process of repetition.\textsuperscript{40} Therefore repetition is always at odds with itself, duplicating itself and duplicating slightly differently. Most of the time this alterity is so subtle as to neither raise undue notice nor have any real affect on what is represented to the subject as the norm, but when it does, it manifests that Butlerian “gap” or “fissure” (noted earlier) in the processes of the repetition of that norm. In her theory it is what allows subversion and agency within repressive heteronormativity.

\textsuperscript{40} As noted earlier, the iterability of performativity reminds us of the repetition of norms.
In theories of artistic mimesis, whether one leans in the Platonic or Aristotelian direction: whether one thinks that art is merely a reflection of a more truthful reality, or that it is a self-contained cosmos of human epistemological and ontological plausibility – there is one thing all can agree on and that is we cannot think mimesis “without some reference to human psychology or culture” (Potolsky 4). This means that the interpretation of mimesis is forever engaged with our understanding of humanity. In handling mimesis, the realms of art and life intersect illuminating the “impossibility of disentangling the aesthetic, social and psychological meanings of mimesis” (3). And sometimes, these realms (aesthetic, social, and psychological) are so entangled that the hypothetical boundary between art and life vanishes and art’s affects materialize on a grand scale in life, for all to see.

The Gap, the Fissure: Transatlantic Parallels

This study will explore a specific gap or fissure brought about by the reiterative process of the literary representation of women. Like Western societies in general, our texts are instruments within heteronormativity, or what Vicki Bell calls “the hegemonic heterosexual project”: a project that strives to

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41 Perhaps one reason difference is such a fruitful path for literary critics who search for new and different representations of humanity is because literature is a site of irony. John Freccero, in his 1991 criticism of Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, states: “Literary mimesis always contains within it the potentiality for irony, inasmuch as it simultaneously affirms and denies its identity with the reality it seeks to represent – sameness insofar as it is an imitation, and difference insofar as it is, after all, a *text* (74). I disagree with the notion that simply because something is a text that it self-evidently offers up its difference in the mimetic process; furthermore, I do not particularly think it is *reality* that mimesis seeks to “imitate,” but rather mimesis seeks to create and re-create norms. Therefore, what I take from Freccero’s idea is that literary criticism is an important venue in which to play with and argue against norms, be them real or imagined.
maintain heterosexuality as the norm, thereby attributing it hierarchical power (103). In *Feminist Imagination: Genealogies in Feminist Theory*, Bell argues that “subjects are produced that are engaged in a repeated endeavor to imitate the idealizations of that project” (103). In literary mimesis it is no different; the repetitions or citations of that idealization – of heteronormativity, especially through norms of sex, gender, and desire – performatively construct meaning through discourse to bring about that which it names. Therefore, the only chance of change is the gap created by an imbalance of negative and positive valences of that mimesis.

One such incident happened, as noted above, when the representation of women and their bonds of friendship in a literary text performatively changed how the public looked at these bonds outside the literary context. In this case the representative norm of the intimate female bond was repeated in such a way as to override not only the fictional one found in the literature of the day, but the one seen on a daily basis in ordinary people’s lives. The relationship between Stephen Gordon and Mary Llewellyn overshadowed the innocence of their precursors, the “romantic friendships” of the Victorians and the “Boston marriages” of the Americans, and confirmed what many had long suspected: that these relationships

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42 According to Moya Lloyd in her book *Judith Butler* (2007), *heteronormativity* can be interpreted as the “institutions, modes of understanding, norms and discourses that treat heterosexuality as natural to humanity” (27). The term was coined by Michael Warner in his essay “Fear of a Queer Planet” (1991). As I note in my previous project, it is comparable to Judith Butler’s *heterosexual matrix* and *heterosexual hegemony* respectively found in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter.*
– horror of horrors – might well be sexual after all.\textsuperscript{43}

Although this representation of women’s relations was not entirely new,\textsuperscript{44} the London obscenity trial soon after the book’s publication exponentially increased interest in the novel in the UK and America. In fact the obscenity trial, garnered so much attention that it was difficult not to see what was becoming clear to the public at large. The cult of visuality that had become \textit{de rigueur} for the time and certainly followed the fashionable set of which Hall and her partner Una Troubridge belonged would help the public visualize, indeed materialize the representation of female couples. Although in \textit{Fashioning Sapphism} Laura Doan rightly argues that neither Hall’s nor Troubridge’s fashion choices would have tipped off the person on the street to their sexuality, what they did do is reflect cutting-edge modernity.\textsuperscript{45} And this modernity was the context in which the

\textsuperscript{43} As noted earlier, this is not to say that romantic friendships and Boston marriages were not under suspicion before this time. On the contrary, they were always seen a bit askance, although they had many loyal defenders of both sexes. Lisa Moore notes in her book \textit{Dangerous Intimacies: Toward a Sapphic History of the British Novel}, that romantic friendship was “invoked to render relationships between women transparent and accessible to the purposes of bourgeois patriarchy – heterosexual companionate marriage, class and colonial relations, the disciplinary rule of law – it surfaces again and again as an ambiguous term that raises anxieties in the act of attempting to contain them. At this crucial juncture in the emergence of modern notions of sexual identity and the self, women’s texts (often novels) and women themselves are linked in the representation of romantic friendship. Both are seen as dangerous and hard to read…” (Moore qtd in Oulton 108). Please see full citation in bibliography.

\textsuperscript{44} Indeed, Terry Castle’s nearly 1,100 page book, \textit{The Literature of Lesbianism}, marks with vast evidence how entirely not new it was. Please see bibliography for details.

\textsuperscript{45} Doan argues that fashion and sexuality had yet to have the connection it has for the late 20\textsuperscript{th} and early 21\textsuperscript{st} century audience. Hall and Troubridge, she notes, dressed \textit{en vogue}, but did not cross-dress as some critics have claimed, nor, she argues, would an early 20\textsuperscript{th} century audience have identified them as such. The “mannish” style of dress and hair they appropriated were worn more than any other reason because they were moneyed and modern. Please see chapters three and four of Doan’s book for an excellent analysis and debunking of the correlation between fashion and lesbianism in the 1920s.
representation of the chaste female couple of yore was overshadowed by that of the lesbian couple: the new overtook the old; the different overtook the same.

As noted by Diane Warren in her book *Djuna Barnes’ Consuming Fiction*, Modernism was the “context in which the delineation of identity, and the relationship between the individual and the wider world was being interrogated from literary, philosophical, sexological and psychoanalytic perspectives” (xii). For scholars interested in lesbianism, Modernism is of distinct importance, since it is around this time that, thanks to modern medicine, the lesbian not only began to be seen, but began to see herself. “Sapphism,” argues Doan and Garrity, “as an “identity category that developed from the turn of the century onward […] played a constitutive role in the construction of a specifically modern understanding of female sexuality” (4). The “delineation of identity,” then, that Warren suggests above exactly correlates with this moment where lesbianism began to be identified as another erotic possibility.

This is not to say that an “identity” was in any way obvious, only that its thinkability, in Castle’s terms, was made manifest. This signifies that a gap had surely erupted in the norm, a fissure had surely fractured in repetition, and perceptions of a model, “woman,” and representations of “women” were altered and comprehended anew.

“The Lady in the Looking-Glass,” A Case Study

When the narrator in Virginia Woolf’s “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection,” recommends that “People should not leave looking-glasses hanging
in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing to some hideous crime” (221), s/he evokes assumptions about reflections that tell us much about how the Modern mind viewed the aesthetic concept of mimesis. The implication of this statement is that mirroring poses risks of exposure, a kind of exposure that is uncontrollable and uncontainable: It can exploit one’s personal assets and fiscal intentions (cheque books), or purloin and profess one’s guilty thoughts or actions without consent (confessional letter). All of these sentiments suggest that mirroring unveils that which we want concealed, furthermore suggesting that in the wrong hands, mirroring can be a dangerous business.

The modernist notion of “the thing itself” – Virginia Woolf’s term – or the Modernist version of “the real,” then, is hung out in stark brightness through the mimetic process. In other words, the mirror exposes not just the reflected image (the thing), but the kernel or essence of that image. Which is to say that the mirror brings forth that which is beyond the image, revealing an internal animation within the image invisible to the naked eye. On the one hand, Woolf seems to pursue the most superficial of the Platonic stances on mimesis: the argument that appearances are not the real but merely the shadows of reality. This could be described as modernist anti-mimeticism, the modern turn away from mimesis as imitatio. After all the picture the mirror supplies – perhaps a commentary on the limitations of art – is a “fixed” reflection that slices and cuts

46 Woolf uses the term throughout her journals, diaries and fiction. Specifically, in To the Lighthouse, Lily Briscoe strives for, and longs to hold, that which evades her: “the thing itself before it has been made anything” (TL 193).
into stillness the picture it presents (221). The picture through the mirror is
placed in opposition to the dynamic life that surrounds it, for the narrator likens
the room to a “human being” where “[n]othing stay[s] the same for two seconds
together”: there are “shy creatures” magically presenting themselves, “curtains
[are] blowing, petals [are] falling,” “nocturnal creatures” are “pirouetting across
the floor,” “stepping delicately,” with “spread tails” and “pecking beaks” (221).
In essence, the narrator witnesses “things that never happen […] when someone is
looking” (221).

On the other hand, the mirror-picture begins to come into a different life as
the narrator studies more and more the reflection provided through the mirror.
Indeed, in the beginning of her musings, the narrator suggests a dynamic room
with a violently stable and immobile reflection within the mirror, the mirror’s
reflection holding “reality unescapably” (221). Yet, soon the mirror’s reflection
is the more dynamic as it becomes the conduit of the narrator’s vision through the
imagination. When left alone as the sole vision of interpretation, as it is
throughout most of the “reflection,” the mirror evokes bit by bit a lively, playful,
and idealistic view of its picture. This is where the commentary of the modernist
anti-mimeticism takes a turn. The picture becomes whimsical, playing fancifully
with the viewer. No longer does the mirror’s reflection “lay still” or cease “to
breathe” (222). The reflection comes alive in its interpretation of Isabella, the
subject of its mimesis. And, Isabella proceeds from simply picking flowers to
picking “something light and fantastic and leafy and trailing” (222). She is
compared to “the fantastic and the tremulous convolvulus rather than the upright
aster, the starched zinnia, or her own burning roses alight like lamps on the
straight posts of their rose trees” (222). The mimetic representation of Isabella
becomes excessive, creative, and artistic rather than a simple reflection of
“reality.” The narrator is drawn to speak of Isabella in flamboyance, perhaps in a
tradition well-known to the artist, speaking of women in artistic flower imagery,
but reigns herself in by and by in order to keep herself on task in her search for a
more “real” accounting of Isabella. In fact, the narrator must remind herself that
her comparisons between Isabella and flora are “worse than idle and superficial,”
for the similes come “between one’s eyes and the truth” (222). Therefore, the
narrator dispenses with the florid language in an attempt to get at the truth of
Isabella. This time the narrator begins not with flowers but with facts: Isabella is
a rich spinster who has “known many people and had many friends,” she wears a
“mask-like indifference” on her face, and she travels (222-4). Yet even as we
receive these “facts,” the narrator becomes engaged again in fanciful creativity
through the use of the mirror. As a shadow falls over the looking glass, the
“reflections” of the narrator end “violently” (223). A shadow falls across the
mirror, monstrously dimming the narrator’s vision, disorienting the narrator’s
ability to create. It “blott[s] out everything” and alters the picture “entirely”; it is
“unrecognisable and irrational,” and “entirely out of focus” (223).

However, after this mental and visual distraction to the narrator’s and the
mirror’s reflection, soon and “by degrees” the picture arranges itself once again,
enfolding the new material (the letters) that had been forced into the picture: “The
man had brought the post” (223). Through the mirror, the narrator’s imagination
soon integrates the letters fully into the reflection and proceeds once again with her contemplation of Isabella; the letters begin to aid in the creation of “truth” about her. The narrator has already fancied that written correspondence would be a key to finding the real Isabella, but now with the postman having come, the letters stand deliciously present to the narrator’s mind. Surely the narrator will find the truth of Isabella through these letters lying idly on the table rather than rifling through the letters in her drawers (an earlier strategy).

At this point the narrator has created an entire reality of Isabella through not only the picture in the looking glass, but what is not visually produced by that picture. For, as we recall, Isabella cannot be seen in the mirror; it reflects only down the grass pathway she had walked half an hour prior (222). In other words, Woolf has moved the narrator from one plane to another in her views of mimesis. At first the narrator sees the “true” picture of the table and the outdoors in the “long glass that h[angs] outside in the hall” (221). From the depths of the sofa in the Platonic cave-room, the narrator suggests a stable and fixed (perhaps truer) picture of life. However, when unencumbered by distractions the narrator animates the static picture that had begun in the glass. The image of Isabella, the “truth” of the image, becomes creative, productive, performative. The mimetic process, which is supposed to be inert imitation, has become active. Through the mirror, and most notably through what is not in the mirror, the narrator develops the “truth” about Isabella.

Isabella remains in the garden, yet the narrator fancies her in the mirror in the future sabotaging the narrator’s aim to find the truth about her. Horror of
horrors, Isabella will read the letters and tear them up in her “determination to conceal that which she did not wish to be known” (223). The narrator becomes more resolute in her intentions, insisting that Isabella will not escape her scrutiny, and pledging to find her truth by “standing in her shoes” as it were (224). As the narrator begins her dream anew, the subject of her scrutiny suddenly appears: Isabella’s reflection. The abrupt and visual materialization of the image upon whom the narrator has mused jostles the narrator, makes her “start” (225). However, as Isabella’s image looms larger in the frame as she approaches the hall, the narrator comments on how the mirror enfolds the newest image into the picture. The “letters and the table and the grass walk and the sunflowers which had been waiting in the looking-glass separated and opened out so that she might be received among them” (225). The mirror begins its work on Isabella, attempting to “fix” her image and therefore give the “truth” the narrator has sought. And the narrator notes that Isabella stood “naked” in the “pitiless light” of the looking-glass, showing “nothing.” “Isabella,” the narrator suggests, “was perfectly empty” (225):

She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody.

As for her letters, they were all bills. Look, as she stood there, old and angular, veined and lined, with her high nose and her wrinkled neck, she did not even trouble to open them (225).

The representation of Isabella in Woolf’s short vignette is evidence of the modern perception of mimesis. The picture of Isabella, as shown by the narrator, is never and only one thing. Although the narrator assumes the fixedness of
Isabella’s image, mimesis opens it up and transforms it again and again. Isabella is indeed the image of the rich spinster with many friends and passionate correspondences, but she is also the naked, empty old woman with no friends, no relationships, and no correspondences. The picture is at once a stark, “pitiless” depiction of Isabella and an idealistic one. Isabella is shown both “realistically” and “romantically.” Together, Woolf employs each of the mimetic traditions in order to address the “anti-mimetic” sentiment or negative valence mimesis of the Moderns. For negative valence mimesis was not a turning away from mimesis, but a re-interpretation of mimesis, allowing the productive use of difference within the mimetic process.

In the end, the harsh picture we see of Isabella as a spinster is no less real than the idealistic one, and in true anti-mimetic fashion Woolf leaves us with both. It could be the one… or it could be the other. It is left for us, not to weep over the newer version of the story or to judge the pictures’ efficacies but to allow that image alongside the other(s) within the possibilities of mimesis.
SECTION 2
BRITISH WOMEN WRITERS AND THEIR THINKING

This section will explore four British novels: The Hotel by Elizabeth Bowen, Imagined Corners by Willa Muir, Spleen by Olive Moore, and Summer Will Show by Sylvia Townsend Warner (one Irish, one Scottish, and two English authors respectively). The analysis will revolve around the “thinking” woman and how that particular type is integrated within the situation of lesbianism in the UK. These women are often seen as strange or mysterious by other characters in the text, or they may find themselves strange and mysterious. They often sound like feminists. They weigh their options as women; they compare their lot outright to the lot of men. They question the status quo. In general, these women are rather extraordinary and show it through their propensity to think things through. They are also often surrounded by foils, conventional women who find them queer and wonder what they think about or why they think the way they do. Overall, these women prove themselves to be acute observers of inequality between the sexes. The thinking woman alone does not always undermine the conventionality of heteronormative fiction, but the thinking woman along with other topoi of lesbianism, such as the (co)overt subterfuge of the heteronormative narrative, assist in creating texts infused with lesbianism.
“Well, Sydney — what have I done?”

Warren, Kerr, and Devastating Lesbianisms in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Hotel*

In *English Literature of the 1920s*, David Ayers asserts that unlike Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well*, Elizabeth Bowen’s 1927 novel — *The Hotel*, which preceded *The Well* —

had attempted a treatment of lesbianism which was a good deal more subtle and unlikely to attract the attention of the law. *The Hotel* shows how the new post-war knowingness about sexuality and marriage can still create only the most slender opportunities for the recognition of lesbian desire. (144)

In response to the above statement, I suggest, first, that next to Hall’s novel, any other would seem subtle. And second, although Ayers is one of the most recent (and few) critics to fully engage in *The Hotel*’s lesbianism, his assumption that lesbianism was only available in “slender opportunities” between the wars will be refuted in this study. Because a lesbian topos may be subtle does not mean it is also timid. Some writers in this project may show a sense of subtlety, but rather than a refusal of plain speaking, it is related more to their shift in the placement of that topos. As noted in the preliminary chapters, the artists within the 1920s and 1930s era handled their writing of lesbianism by disarming its shock value. Therefore, it could be that authors such as Bowen simply do not overwork the
theme, preferring to handle it alongside and equal to other of life’s joys and
trepidations.

In *The Hotel*, there are at least four characters who will be discussed in
lesbian terms: Emily Fitzgerald, Eleanor Pym, Sydney Warren, and Mrs. Kerr.
What they all have in common is their propensity to think more than talk and are
therefore viewed by others as strange or queer. I will argue that this strangeness
or queerness is exactly that. Their lesbianism asserts itself through a topos of
thoughtfulness, which was still a relatively new realm for women.

Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Hotel* is framed by a tragedy exterior to the action
of the protagonist, Sydney. The novel begins with the quarrel between Emily
Fitzgerald and Eleanor Pym, two women who are intimately connected. The
intimacy of the women is associated with their ability to think, for Miss Pym in
the opening of the novel after their quarrel, is “frightened by interior quietness
and by the thought that she had for once in her life stopped thinking and might
never begin again” (Bowen 5). Enclosed by this framework is the relationship of
the other two thinkers, Sydney and Mrs. Kerr, juxtaposed against the less
thoughtful women at the hotel.

**Contemplacency: The Threat of Thoughtlessness**

As noted above, Eleanor Pym’s and Emily Fitzgerald’s relationship in
Bowen’s *The Hotel* is the framing device of the novella. It is within this frame
that Sydney Warren and Mrs. Kerr thoughtfully handle the more profound aspects
of the novel, but the two characters who initiate the action do so by demonstrating the threat of thoughtlessness on thinking women.

Emily Fitzgerald, in the road outside the hotel, stands suspended by indecision, staring “purposelessly up and down” and “picking at the fingers of her gloves” (Bowen TH 5). She has just quarreled with Eleanor Pym and is standing in thoughtless indecision about what she should do. Positioned in the road, she is “frightened by an interior quietness” that suggests she has “for once in her life stopped thinking and might never begin again” (5). Thinking in this passage is suggested as an activity not only integral to the wellbeing of Fitzgerald, but something in which Fitzgerald cannot engage without Pym. It is an activity that the two do together… as one.

Alone, this passage might simply display a malfunction in an otherwise excellent female friendship; indeed, however, that the novel opens with Fitzgerald’s and Pym’s quarrel and closes with their reunion, perhaps bequeaths the relationship with more important stuff than it is otherwise given credit. To Maude Ellmann, in her book Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page, for example, sandwiching the action of the novel between the “rift” and “reconciliation” between “two middle-aged spinsters” means that “all the intrigues between men and women take place within the fracture opened up between these female friends” (74-5). Although quick to note the importance of the framing device, Ellmann is slow to give it a significance of its own. The significance, if there is any, will surround the “intrigues between men and
women” – rather than those between women and women – regardless of the frame.

She does find it “striking”; however, that the novel “should begin with women looking for women, not for men,” and that “love between women dominates the action, while heterosexual attachments fizzle out on contact with reality,” but she does not step any further into what importance these relationships might carry toward the lesbian sensibility of certain characters, especially Pym and Fitzgerald, and their places in the overall sense of the novel’s unconventionality (74).

As one may recall, this opening scene is indeed “women looking for women”: After their argument, Eleanor Pym has warily descended the staircase looking for and rather hoping not to find Emily Fitzgerald. She is relieved to find that Emily has indeed vacated the hotel – and at that moment stands in front of the hotel uncertain of her escape – yet she loiters in the hotel as Emily loiters outside it, corresponding to each other’s pursuit of and disregard for each other. In the meantime, Mrs. Kerr has come downstairs looking for the young Sydney Warren to escort her to the tennis courts.

Without Fitzgerald, Pym lingers in the lounge unable to think about anything in particular. She watches the clock, reads announcements on the notice board, skims the letter rack, and ultimately her mind remains occupied with trifles crowding out the previous row (Bowen 5-6). Presently, she is invited – perhaps not so much invited but permitted – to walk to the tennis courts with the beautiful Mrs. Kerr. At this unforeseen turn of events, we see telltale signs of lesbianism
that can inform us about Fitzgerald’s and Pym’s relationship. Pym experiences a “queer little thrill” at the thought of publicly walking with Kerr. She holds the door for her companion with “gratitude, almost with reverence,” and wonders whether her name and Kerr’s could “henceforward, begin to be coupled” (6-7). But upon walking out the door, Pym is confronted with the visibly agitated Fitzgerald who has not yet made her getaway. Although Pym finds it an “outrage” to see Fitzgerald in such a state: “She might have crept out here to bleed,” she flinches and feels “giddy” at Fitzgerald’s presence (7).

It is not difficult to see the underlying lesbian plot(s) working subtly in this women-seeking-women scene opener of the novel. It establishes at the least the incredibly intimate bond between two women, Pym and Fitzgerald, and alludes to another between Kerr and Warren. Between the first pair, one witnesses the inability to function on one’s own. Although Pym heroically stabilizes herself – or is indeed stabilized by the captivating Mrs. Kerr – long enough for the walk to the tennis courts, she is finally unnerved by Kerr’s complete withdrawal (once she spies Sydney) leaving her in acute isolation amidst the energetic and healthy athletic set. Already forgotten by Kerr, Pym panics and abruptly makes her escape.

The reader is given an inkling of both the relationship between Pym and Fitzgerald, and what the relationship between the two means. For Pym, against her better judgment, revisits the quarrel during her walk with Kerr. As she struggles self-consciously to make conversation with Kerr, she is led inevitably to the memory of how effortless are her meaningful conversations with Fitzgerald.
Their talk is fluid and easy; they move seamlessly from subject to subject talking “all day long, climbing the hills or sitting among [the] warm rocks” (8). Unlike her experience with Kerr where Pym strains to bring the other woman into the conversation, loses her own thoughts, and allows conversation to lag, with Fitzgerald exchanging ideas is a real meeting of the minds. The talk between Pym and Fitzgerald is “tireless analysis” in which they pin down “the most slippery, ethical subtleties” (8). To Pym, their dialogue is a “gentle process” akin to “breathing,” and their talk is “so true” [emphasis in original] (8).

This capricious pitting of Kerr against Fitzgerald as the rightful companion of Pym makes more tangible Pym’s lesbian proclivities. Between Pym’s obvious aggravation about her argument with Fitzgerald – she is described as “nearly crying” by Kerr when relating to Sydney Warren the scene of encountering Pym in the lounge (11) – her elation at being with Kerr, and fantasy daydream that she and Kerr might be more intimately “coupled,” all offer evidence of the various stages of a dramatic romantic fight. Although obviously ruffled by the quarrel, Pym’s fortuitous encounter with Kerr, the most desired person at the hotel, gains her the advantage over the lone Fitzgerald. In her uncaring guise Pym demonstrates her specific desire for Fitzgerald, and in her desire for the unreachable Kerr, she displays how she is affected by women more generally speaking.

More than anything, however, Pym yearns for the thoughtfulness she and Fitzgerald share. Although Kerr coaxes out more transparently her lesbian
inclinations for the reader, it is Fitzgerald and the mindful connection they share that Eleanor desires.

**Something Within: Lesbian Allusions**

The topos of the lesbian mind in *The Hotel*, it seems, has something *in* it that other women in the novel do not. At one point a hotel guest concludes that there is something “*in*” Sydney, which is rather queer and sets her apart from the other women of her age [emphasis in original] (13). It is also said of Mrs. Kerr that there is something within: During a particular afternoon in the hotel drawing room, where, because of poor weather, seven female guests have gathered to work, play bridge, and converse, they also draw conclusions about the curious Mrs. Kerr. For the most part they do not understand the woman of leisure. One confused speaker explains: “She doesn’t sketch, or one would understand her staring like that at the view” (51). Another offers: “She may think,” but is countered by: “She must think a good deal” (51). For clarification, another states, “You mean she has something on her mind?” and is answered by a definitive voice, “I should rather say she had something *in* her mind all the time at the back of it” [emphasis in original] (51-2). She continues:

One is never comfortable in talking to her, though she is, I am sure, brilliant. I have said myself over and over again, when I’ve been with her: ‘That woman has something at the back of her mind’ (52).

At this summation, a last voice asks, “I wonder *what*” (52).
It is telling that the voices of these women illustrate the discrepancy between the rigorously minded lesbians of the novel and their less mentally demanding counterparts. These seven women cannot comprehend why Kerr would want to think so much, and are flummoxed about what it is she might want to think at all. Aunt Tessa, for one, exemplifies how these women think of thinking. The daily menu sent to her room by the manager of the hotel gives her “something to think about during the morning” (16). For her, to be offered from an outside source about that which one should think is helpful. It is a relief not to be obliged to come up with thoughts on her own, for this one thought had kept her occupied since arriving at the hotel: “She wished so much that she could make up her mind about this…” (16). What is more, it is a relief not to be left to oneself too much to think within oneself. Indeed, the other women at the hotel, although more healthy and energetic than Tessa, note this very problem of keeping oneself from engaging in thoughts from within.

One woman, exasperated by hearsay of Mrs. Kerr’s predilection for being alone, expresses her own profound loneliness during the winter when she must spend time with herself. She describes closing the drawing room door as “shutting oneself in with nobody” (53). She further describes spending time by herself with the drawing room door open and hearing “four different clocks ticking […] in different parts of the flat” (she “counted them”) eerily makes her

47 A note on the plot: Aunt Tessa is spending an extra five percent to receive the menu for the day every morning. This is a service provided for her specific dietary needs; if she finds something unsatisfactory on the menu, she may request something else of her choosing. Apparently she likes to have something to think about, but is also undecided about whether keeping this service is an inconvenience to the staff.
feel “as if [she] didn’t exist” (53). As the storyteller shivers in “retrospection,”
the other women look on in agreement: apparently the scheduled congregating
and constant companionship of a holiday is an escape from something “terrible”
(53). Unlike Mrs. Kerr and Sydney Warren who are often alone and arguably
within themselves, these women’s aversion to solitude suggests the
unpleasantness living within oneself can be for the non-thinker.

Perhaps one of the most telling moments between those who live within theirselves and those who do not, is when Sydney Warren, in her vigilant
perspicacity studies Eleanor Pym as she enters the dining hall late for lunch on the
day of her quarrel with Fitzgerald. This scene foreshadows the ravages of passion
between women, something that Sydney will experience herself in the future.

Sydney, leaning her cheek on her hand, turned from the door for a
minute or two to study Miss Pym. She had never seen what she
still called to herself a ‘grown-up person’ so visibly ravaged by
emotion. The emotional range of her elders seemed to Sydney
narrow and stereotyped; they reacted without variation to stimuli
from without. But Miss Pym gave an impression, somehow, of
having been attacked from within (21).

Pym is “scarlet-eyed” and obviously out-of-sorts, not to mention that Warren is
aware of what happened that morning between the two. Therefore, Warren must
know that Pym’s overwrought emotions are due to the rift between her and her
dear Fitzgerald. Sydney’s quick eye also gives us an insight into her own
“queerness” and penchant for women. For, we see more foreshadowing of the
kind of “attack” against which Sydney will be made to defend herself. The attack from within, from the heart, references Pym’s relationship with Fitzgerald – the depths that can be touched by love between women – prefiguring the struggle that Sydney must make as well before the book is out. This scene will not be lost on Sydney, which chronologically occurs immediately after and juxtaposed against her conclusions regarding men and women being compelled to be together for life. This will be discussed more carefully in a moment.

**Something There: Lesbian Allusions**

The women at *The Hotel* believe in the importance of *something* being either *there* or not. Aunt Tess, the talkative ladies in the drawing room, and the lesbian figures of the novel all believe in this *something*. The only differences are in the definitions of the *something* in question. For example, Aunt Tessa believes strongly that “one had to have Something in one’s life” (16). The *something* for her is permanence. She is a “lonely woman” whose health is precarious and she has yet to reconcile herself to any particular complaint; she wants something that will “settle down with her like an old family servant, so that they might get to know each other and understand each other’s ways” (16).

But, for Pym, as for the other lesbian characters, their attraction for each other leads back to the topos of the mind. For it is what happens through the interaction of the characters and the thoughtfulness of their minds that bring them together and/or drive them apart. It is the “something” that happens between them that matters.
Of course, between Fitzgerald and Pym, Warren and Kerr, and the rest of the women at the hotel, there is an importance assigned to whether or not “something” is “there”. But that which is “there” differs between the lesbian characters and the other women of the novel. For the lesbian characters, the quality that is or is not “there” is that “something” which intimately attaches one mind to another. This is that which causes Pym and Fitzgerald such agony. That morning, in the stark light of day, they had “seen each other crudely illuminated” and “vulgar” [emphasis in the original] (8). With this clarity of vision, Pym – for it is Pym from whose consciousness we receive the information – senses something “intolerable” about Fitzgerald (8). It is at this point that Pym questions if there had been anything “there” between them in the first place (8). Yet, while laboring in her conversation with Kerr, Pym yearns for the fluid exchange of ideas she and Fitzgerald enjoy.

Pym would have liked to have had something “there” between herself and Mrs. Kerr. Her lesbianism is shown through her elation at being given the opportunity to walk with Kerr, as noted above. And especially in the way she engages in fantasy about being coupled with Kerr, although clearly not willing to give up Fitzgerald no matter how angry. This is also emphasized when her failure to fully engage Kerr so frustrates Pym that she heads in the wrong direction and Kerr guides her back to the path toward the tennis club with a touch of her arm. At this touch, Pym is “elated” and “deprecating”; gallantly plunging into the overgrowth to make way for her companion (9).
But for the other women at the hotel there is not a “something” they require to bring together two people romantically, but simply a (male) body is “someone” to be “there.” This is no meeting-of-the-minds; however, it is simply the desire for a presence, a physical presence that need not be mentally present. After all, during an afternoon of sewing and bridge in the hotel drawing room, the women all agree that husbands are “someone there,” [emphasis in original] although, unfortunately, they also concede that the “best type of man is no companion” (54).

Without ever having been married, this conclusion is also reached by the thoughtful twenty-two year old Sydney Warren whose queer astuteness deduces this dissatisfying association. Sitting with Aunt Tessa at lunch and thinking, per usual, Warren watches the hotel guests interact with each other. Their table is perfectly situated to capture both entrance and room; therefore, throughout the social ritual of lunch Sydney observes women and men, wives and husbands, coming and going, sitting together, interacting with and ignoring each other. She is especially interested in the disinterestedness and irritation of those constrained to be mostly together:

Men came in without their wives and did not always look up when these entered. Women appearing before their husbands remained alert, gazed into an opposite space resentfully, and ate with an air of temporizing off the tips of their forks. When the husbands did come in it seemed a long time before there was something to say (18).
She notes that “[d]uring intervals between the courses women reft from intimate conversation looked across at each other’s tables yearningly” (18). And ultimately concludes that it “seemed odder than ever […] that men and women should be expected to pair off for life” (18).

For the practically minded Warren, this short survey of sociological interaction is enough to confirm her prior beliefs of the imprudence of clumping women and men together, for it seems “odder” now than it had been before. In fact, Warren finds this heterosexual coupling only to have someone there… well… queer. With that said, however, Warren thinks nothing odd about an intimacy between women. In an air of egalitarianism she sensibly argues to Mrs. Kerr one evening overlooking the garden from Kerr’s hotel: “I mean, you and I are supposed to assume, or to seem everywhere to assume, that that man down in the garden could be more to either of us than the other” (60). We see Sydney here already circumnavigating compulsory heterosexuality and grappling with lesbian desire, both negotiations obviously taking up space in Sydney’s vibrant mind. She certainly thinks that there is something there between herself and Mrs. Kerr.

Sydney and Mrs. Kerr: Thoughtful Attraction

Most of the criticism on The Hotel tends to focus on the protagonist and her love interest in platonic terms, pitting the innocent Sydney against and the

48 A note on the plot: The man in the garden is Reverend James Milton, who fancies Sydney and with whom Sydney agrees briefly to become engaged after having been hurt by Mrs. Kerr.
experienced Mrs. Kerr (53). Oftentimes exploration of the relationship is couched as well in generational differences between the two: Kerr represents the old Victorian reserve, while Sydney is a modern. In line with the first vein of criticism, Hermione Lee’s biography Elizabeth Bowen describes The Hotel as “establish[ing] some key Bowen subjects” such as the “spiritually corrupting effect of an older woman,” a theme which she also suggests as “the power wielded manipulatively by an older woman against an inexperienced girl” (58, 60). As noted by Terry Castle, the “seductive older woman […] who preys emotionally on a younger one” is a “stock character in early-twentieth-century British and American women’s fiction” (24). That this type of character exists is true, but Kerr is not particularly one of them. First of all, Kerr is not really a stock character. She is a rounded one, although she remains much of an enigma to the other hotel guests as well as the reader. I suggest that if critics work only under the topos of innocence vs. experience they undercut the lesbianism in the book, for “innocence” can be read purely as “young” and “experience” can be replaced by “mature,” and the sexual allusions of the terms can then be ignored altogether. In this case the plot becomes a fairytale myth in which the resolution

49 As stated in Susan Osborn’s article “Reconsidering Elizabeth Bowen,” Osborn asserts that after William Heath’s full-length study of Bowen in 1961, scholars began reading Bowen as a “novelist of manners,” using Heath’s critique of “innocence versus experience” as a fundamental theme (187).

50 According to Renée C. Hoogland, this character belongs to “‘telling’ lesbian images” that she names the “unequal couple” (123). She describes them thus: “Here an obvious, sometimes exaggerated inequality (usually in age, but also in terms of power, wealth, knowledge) serves as a sign of illicit desire between two female characters. Often a tutor-pupil relationship, the younger woman’s desire for an enigmatic older Lady was, during the earlier decades of this century, described in fairly undisguised terms, as in Bowen’s The Hotel” (123). In her article “A Bequest of Her Own: The Reinvention of Elizabeth Bowen,” Heather Bryant Jordan reiterates Hoogland’s (and Castle’s) assertion, that Bowen’s texts such as The Hotel are filled with these couples that are “often seen as older tutors taking younger, more impressionable women, under their wings” (58).
is predetermined: the innocent falls victim to the experienced, and the loss will be on the side of the innocent and the experienced will relish the conquest. No sexual aspect need be discussed in the allegory, because, well, the two characters are women.  

If Kerr is only ever touted as the “evil” stock character – the *femme fatale* to Sydney’s ingénue – lesbianism so prevalent in the text is negated from the start. One assumes Mrs. Kerr is simply amusing herself with the part she plays in the hard-knock education of young Warren, that Kerr wagers no personal investment in the younger woman. However, there is ample evidence that, although Kerr can certainly be seen as a shrewd and even perhaps manipulative character, in the end it is she who loses much more than the young innocent. Mrs. Kerr *does* hurt Sydney, but I want to suggest a twist to the femme fatale myth in that Kerr ultimately hurts herself much worse. Her intellect rejects an unconventional loving (and lesbian) relationship with another woman, but it is her heart that pays the price.

We know young Sydney Warren and Mrs. Kerr have struck up an extraordinarily intimate relationship. Everyone in the hotel is aware of their familiar attachment to each other, and has begun to always expect the two together. From the opening of the novel the reader is made aware that there is something special between the intelligent and sulky twenty-two year old woman.  

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51 “At the very least,” notes Heather Bryant Jordan, the “sexual dimensions” in the criticism of these of Bowen’s couplings, “have been minimized” (58). She further argues: “Friendships between women, more than between men, are an essentially important element in all Bowen’s fiction” (58).

52 Maud Ellmann’s book on Elizabeth Bowen (to be discussed later) does name Kerr a *femme fatale* (75).
university student on holiday with her Aunt Tessa, and the beautiful, brilliant, and aloof widow on holiday alone. With Mrs. Kerr’s expectant opening lines, calling “Sydney… Sydney,” into the empty air of the hotel lounge expecting the young woman to materialize at her request, the reader understands somewhat the dynamic between them (8).

The two women are alike in that none of the guests at the hotel understand them, and find them unnatural because of their proclivity for seclusion and thoughtfulness, and their inability to act exactly as women should. The younger woman is a budding intellectual whose thoughts keep her mostly to herself. Often when she is asked what she has been up to for such long periods of time she simply replies “thinking” (55). When she is with others, she regularly becomes impatient to get away and “enjoy her own thoughts” (41). Another guest of the same age finds her “queer” and “rather interesting,” and wonders “what she could possibly be thinking so hard about all the time” (31). She also finds Warren’s “remoteness intrigue[ing]” (31). She is described as “unnatural” and “queer” here, “perverse” there (93, 33, 108). About her, some wonder why she “can’t […] be more of a woman?” (152). She is asked whether she “isn’t inclined to be intolerant” of women, suggesting that she does not belong under the label (11).

Mrs. Kerr, as noted earlier, is also seen as queer, and although a thinker downplays her own acuity. When her motivations are questioned or someone attempts a deeper understanding of her, she impatiently or flippantly mutes her own intellectual prowess. She is cognizant that she is a queerly distant and indifferent woman. There are a number of areas in the novel that describe how
‘unnatural’ she is.\textsuperscript{53} We gather that although she has a son, she is not a maternal woman, per se. When discussing her son Ronald who is at Oxford, the matrons of the hotel all wonder why she “doesn’t make a home for him” (54); Sydney thinks that for Kerr the motherly “conventions don’t seem to fit” (63). When Kerr learns of her son Ronald’s forthcoming visit, Sydney finds her disingenuous as she goes through the motions of the proper motherly reactions.\textsuperscript{54} In a conversation with Milton regarding Kerr’s and Warren’s rift halfway through the novel, Kerr suggests she had been “impatient and clumsy” with the younger woman, although Milton avows he can not “believe that [she has] ever been clumsy (137).\textsuperscript{55} In irritation with Ronald’s anger toward something she has said, she snaps: “Don’t be chilly with me – I didn’t mean that. I’m frivolous, you see, and I can’t express myself” (96). Of course, as we have seen Mrs. Kerr in numerous situations, we know that she can indeed express herself, that she is a meticulously precise person in every situation. In another scene, she suggests to Sydney the possibility of a romance between the young woman and Ronald with “naïveté,” and insists that she hasn’t a “grasp of abstractions, and life”; that she is “flippant and difficult” (115, 116).

\textsuperscript{53} Kerr herself states to her son Ronald, quite “alarmed” at his having suggested as a woman she could “canal […] natural forces,” that she does not feel “as if [she] had got any natural forces” (95).

\textsuperscript{54} Regarding Ronald’s visit, Kerr responds to the quizzical young woman: “Sydney, you really are too clever sometimes to understand me. Can’t I be glad?” (62). But to this, Sydney feels herself “beaten back by something that in spite of nature’s whole precedent she knew for a falsity; an imposture her immaturity sensed but could not challenge” (62-3).

\textsuperscript{55} This rift will be discussed in detail later.
In her book *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow across the Page* (2003), Maud Ellmann asserts that the 1994 book *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing* by Renée C. Hoogland “rather overdoes her excavation of lesbian motifs in Bowen.56 In *The Hotel*, for example, she insists that “in spite of innuendoes of lesbian desire, “outing the heroine is not the point, for Bowen is more concerned with number than with gender” (70).57 Of course “outing” the heroine is not necessarily the point of mundane lesbianism in fiction anyway. Unlike *The Well of Loneliness*, as previously noted by Castle, when women take over the writing of lesbianism in the early 20th century, the subject is often presented less sensationally. However, this is not to say that one cannot follow the lesbian topos of these texts. The lesbianism presents itself through the frame of Pym’s and Fitzgerald’s own loving relationship, through Warren’s and Kerr’s strangeness having to do with both their thoughtfulness and their intimacy. The topos of lesbianism in *The Hotel* I think, is just as important a topos if not more so as, for example, “number” in Bowen, as Ellmann has suggested. The lesbianism between Warren and Kerr is much more dynamic and intelligible than any other relationship in the novel, and is in no way overshadowed or concealed by another. Even when Warren allows herself to become engaged to Reverend James Milton,

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56 Although critical of Hoogland, Ellmann does not disregard lesbianism altogether. She seems more sympathetic to Patricia Juliana Smith’s *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women’s Fiction*, which she argues has a “lighter touch” although “a similar approach” to Hoogland (Fn 45, page 37).

57 For context, I will give the quotation in full here. Ellmann continues: “Sydney longs to share a universe of two with Mrs. Kerr, but the arrival of a third person, in the form of Mrs. Kerr’s son Ronald, shatters the dyad, and Sydney has to go hunting for a fourth to avenge herself against the second for favouring the third” (70).
readers can see Warren merely retreating toward conventionality, although her thoughtful unconventionality will never allow her to stay there.\textsuperscript{58}

The reader is immediately aware of Warren’s and Kerr’s interest in one another, as are the other characters in the book. In an early scene in the novel, as Eleanor Pym and Mrs. Kerr approach the tennis courts, Pym feels a distinct “drawing away” of the other woman and knows she will soon be abandoned by the elegant Mrs. Kerr, who has forgotten her completely and is impatiently seeking someone at the courts:

through the wire-netting; her eyes went from court to court, then turned dissatisfied to question the pavilion, then the benches underneath the wall where players sat in groups or couples, waiting for their courts (9).

Finally, Kerr’s eyes rest “in passivity as after a home-coming” on the face of Sydney. Her young friend likewise is “half risen,” “galvanized by awareness,” and “staring” at Kerr.

Sydney Warren is a thoughtful woman, distinct from her young counterparts at the hotel, “queer” and “unnatural” in many ways (33, 114). Although she is quite intimate with Mrs. Kerr, we notice that she must continuously negotiate her space in Kerr’s realm, for the more mature woman unfailingly keeps Sydney – and everyone else, including her son – at a distance and a bit off-balance. For example, although Sydney is apparently quite a good

\textsuperscript{58} I do agree with Ellmann here that Kerr’s rejection of Warren leads to Warren’s relationship with Milton. But, I suggest it is not to “avenge” per se, Warren is certainly not well-versed enough in the ways of vengeance just yet.
tennis player, when Mrs. Kerr shows up at the tennis courts, Sydney’s tennis game goes bad – a usual course of events apparently when Mrs. Kerr is present – for Sydney knows that if Mrs. Kerr watches her, “her play would all go to pieces” (12). To Sydney, Mrs. Kerr’s “scrutiny” is “like a live wire […] incessantly tugging at [her] consciousness” (12). And, as predicted, Sydney plays very “badly” (12).

That Mrs. Kerr witnesses yet another poor showing at tennis is a larger disappointment to Sydney than one would expect, but it is because Kerr does not particularly remember Warren’s tennis game after the fact, which leads the younger woman to suspect that it is not only her tennis Kerr forgets, but her very person:

If she did not exist for Mrs. Kerr as a tennis player, in this most ordinary, popular of her aspects, had she reason to feel she existed at all? It became no longer a question of – What did Mrs. Kerr think of her? – but rather – Did Mrs. Kerr ever think of her? (14)

For Sydney, the idea that she would not be “kept in mind” is “like an extinction,” and confirmation of how important the young woman views cerebral occupation (14). It also metaphorically sums up the power relations between the two women: Mrs. Kerr mostly indifferent and inaccessible; Sydney intimate and hungry for knowledge and acknowledgment.
Non-Speaking Lesbianism

As a sign of the times it is not surprising that the characters in The Hotel are reticent about the subject of lesbianism, and rather unable to describe what they suspect of Warren and Kerr. Since lesbianism had not yet completely coalesced into an homologous idea, there is much hemming and hawing, piqued interest, silences, halted speech, unarticulated ideas, unspoken words. For example, Veronica, another young woman at the hotel, wonders about Sydney and her peculiar relationship with Kerr: “A queer girl this […] to sit brooding cheerlessly on a parapet because a middle-aged woman hadn’t asked her to go for a drive” (33). Although Veronica has no explicit understanding of this perplexing relationship, she intuits that Sydney’s “curious ties” with the older woman make it unnecessary to pity Sydney for the lack of eligible men at the hotel (31).

Another example of this kind of half-understanding occurs in the same scene described earlier where the matrons of the hotel gather together on a rainy afternoon. There is a telling conversation between them regarding the younger and older woman. As Sydney’s Aunt Tessa joins the group and broaches the subject of her niece, the women bring the conversation around to the relationship between Sydney and Kerr.

“She is very much… absorbed, isn’t she, by Mrs. Kerr?”

“I have known other cases,” said somebody else […] “of these very violent friendships. One didn’t feel those others were quite healthy.”
“I should discourage any daughter of mine from a friendship with an older woman. It is never the best women who have these strong influences. I would far rather she lost her head about a man.”

“Sydney hasn’t lost her head,’ said little Tessa with dignity.

“Oh, but, Mrs. Bellamy – I was talking about the other cases.

“And how few men there are out here – can one wonder the girls are eccentric? They say it’s the same at all these places – not a man to be had. I can’t think why people go on bringing their daughters out.” (52-53)

As the subterranean subject of lesbianism is cautiously explored under the guise of unhealthy female relationships and the lack of good men, the women warily suggest the theme that has been used so often in Bowen’s work, that a woman like Mrs. Kerr goes on holiday only to snag young women in her clutches. This is not stated, but inferred and discussed only in raised eyebrows, muted sounds, and half sentences:

“One wonders, indeed, why some types of women ever come out here.”

Mrs. Kerr? Oh, do you think - ?

“Mmm-mmm.”

“But she may believe in the sun,” said Tessa; “many people believe in the sun. Of course it’s always been known of, but quite recently a doctor at Baden –“
“She is not a sick woman,” pronounced the lady of the *broderi anglaise*.

“N-no?” said Tessa, petering out. “But I’m sure,” she resumed, after a pause for considering, “that she has interests. I would say she was quite independent. Sydney tells me she likes to be a great deal alone” (53).

We cannot be certain what exactly it is that they suspect of Mrs. Kerr, but the tone of the moment and the tacit agreement regarding something that shall remain nameless suggests a delicate topic like desire or sex. It is possible, then, I suggest that these women indeed see her as a *femme fatale* figure who holidays by preying on the young women around her. Surprisingly, this same topic appears during a conversation with Kerr’s son Ronald and the reverend James Milton later in the novel:

‘An hotel, you know, is a great place for friendships.’

‘Mustn’t that be,’ said Ronald, ‘what people come out for?’

‘Perhaps some – ‘.

‘But are there really people who would do that? Asked Ronald sharply, in a tone of revulsion […]. ‘You mean women?’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ (111).

As with the previous conversation, this one also exudes a tone of caution toward something of a sexual nature between women, especially regarding women who
go on holiday to find intimate relationships with other women. It seems more credible that Mrs. Kerr is in fact a *femme fatale* after all. However, as noted earlier, if so, this is the one occasion where she catches her foot in the door, so to speak. Although she has been often indifferent to Sydney, her heart trips her up in the end when she realizes how much more Sydney has meant to her.

In all, Kerr thrives on her unconventionality as a mother and even as a woman without concern about what others might think. But, in her relationship with Sydney, she miscalculates tremendously how unconventionally she herself can think. Their final meeting alone for tea is the pivotal moment in which Kerr must finally own up to the fact that she has known more than she has revealed. She senses that she must confront the lesbian tension between herself and Sydney. In this scene, the two women have met after having been much apart since Ronald’s appearance. This disruption in their friendship is described by another hotel guest as Kerr having given Sydney the “go-by” (101-2). Therefore, the meeting, although an attempt at reuniting with one another, is rather strained and awkward. It is here that Kerr is at her best (or worst) – her most outrageously detached – and demonstrates her immense intellectual powers.

Mrs. Kerr expertly manipulates Sydney, skillfully oscillating between intimacy and indifference: for example, although all morning Kerr had given Sydney only “a quarter of her attention and a little less than her quarter-face” (112), once they are seated at the small pastry shop, Kerr hands over her handbag

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59 These two conversations have never before been referred to by literary critics in order to explicate the lesbianism in this text. I believe these two conversations add a great amount of credibility to the argument that this text is focused more directly on lesbianism than critics have thus far allowed.
for Sydney “to dispose of,” an action that reveals their intimacy, and as Sydney goes inside to order for them, Kerr lets fly a more “personal” smile that “implicitly” promises “that the coming back [will] be memorable,” making the going away from Kerr an “agony” (112-13). Upon Sydney’s return, the two women finally have it out. For whatever reason, Kerr feigns a desire for Sydney to wed, which sets off an angry maelstrom from the younger woman. The two then verbally spar, demonstrating Kerr’s coldness and Sydney’s developing ability to mask her feelings: Kerr calls it a “veneer,” and raises “an eyebrow infinitesimally” when she meets “something hard” in Sydney’s eyes while being looked at “impersonally, as though [she] were a picture” (114-15).

The final blow comes when Kerr admits the fact that she has “accepted too much” from Sydney, without reciprocating:

“I begin now to guess you’ve expected much more of me, and that I’ve been taking and taking without so much as a glance ahead or a single suspicion of what you would want to have back. I’m afraid we’ve gone wrong through your not understanding. You see, I’m so fond of you, but –”

“But?”

“Well, simply but! I mean, there is nothing else there. It has always seemed to me simple to like people and right to be liked, but I never can feel that much more is involved – is it? I have a horror, I think, of not being, and of my friends not being, quite perfectly balanced.” (117)
At this admission – that there is nothing there – Sydney is quite literally stunned. She leaves Mrs. Kerr, not to renew their friendship. It is also the moment where the reader understands what Sydney has spent so much time thinking about, that she is a woman who loves women – at least she loves Mrs. Kerr – and in a world of conventional thinking, she does not exist or belong. At that moment she cannot imagine how to distance herself from Mrs. Kerr or “imagine where, having escaped, she would find a mood, room, place, even country, to offer her sanctuary” (118).

This moment of self-understanding is the impetus that drives the practical Warren into the brief and absurd engagement with Milton. Although she makes it perfectly clear that she does not love him, in fact showing herself “appalled at the misapprehension” when he asks her just that, it is within this convenient heterosexual veneer in which she chooses to take refuge from her lovesickness and disillusionment (124).

Warren’s and Kerr’s final scene alone suggests that the younger woman has surely learned a thing or two from the elder. She remains distant with her friend, smiles “conventionally,” and is wholly unresponsive and sorrowfully indifferent to Kerr’s attempts to bring her back into an intimacy. Although Kerr has feigned indifference toward Sydney, has argued against unconventionality, and resigned herself to the fact that “one’s idea of a person […] refuses to take certain possibilities” (136), it is when Sydney walks toward the door to leave Kerr

60 During their argument at tea when Kerr admits to a rather dim and dishonest wish that Sydney and Ronald would have made a go of it, Kerr says: “I’ve never professed that anything could transcend the conventions; you have” (116).
for the last time that the woman of experience finally realizes what Sydney has meant to her.

It is Mrs. Kerr who finally realizes what she has lost in Sydney, that her indifference to Sydney’s affections has nurtured an indifference in Sydney as well; her aloofness and power overshadow her own emerging feelings toward the younger woman, and only after Warren’s affections are squelched through self-preservation does the older woman realize how much stronger her own feelings are than she could have ever allowed herself to predict. As the temporary rift between the two women solidifies into a permanent chasm culminating in the wounded younger woman literally standing at the door behind which she may disappear forever, Kerr is overwhelmed by Warren’s remoteness and feels keenly a desire to not only absolve herself of blame, but to appear once again in the young woman’s eyes as before. In defensive defiance, Kerr makes a power play: “‘Well, Sydney – what have I done?’” (169). This bold challenge to reverse her power hierarchy with Warren is apparent; it is a final desperate effort not only to ignore how she has undervalued her friend, but to plant a seed of doubt in Sydney’s mind about leaving Kerr for good. Will she categorically reject her? Kerr trusts that her appeal for and influence over Sydney might be greater than Sydney’s resolve to withdraw from the friendship that has become injurious to her.

In a final appeal to the younger woman’s desire for her intimacy, Kerr holds out her hand to Sydney, a gesture like many before that had previously been enough to assuage Sydney’s uncertainty or disappointment (169). But this time,
instead of clasping the hand, Sydney, instead, turns and leaves the room, ending
the friendship, the *relationship*, at the sound of a “latch click” (169). With
Sydney’s exit, Kerr falls into a swoon, “repeating” Sydney’s name in “a tone of
desolation and loneliness,” her eyes “fixed on the door as though under their long,
strange, relentless compulsion it must open again to deliver up Sydney” (169).
This scene echoes the beginning of the novel when we first meet Kerr calling
expectantly for Sydney in the lounge of the hotel. In that scene she is sure her
summons will make the younger woman appear; in the final scene, however, the
recurring murmur of Warren’s name is one of uncertainty and despair.

Bowen “goes to inordinate lengths to prevent her characters from getting
married” states Ellman, who suggests Patricia Juliana Smith has “pointed this out”
before her (75). This is true enough since many of Bowen’s male suitors in other
texts are killed off. But in *The Hotel*, as Ellman notes, “the slaughter of the
suitors is accomplished without violence, but the eligible men back off with their
tails between their legs, leaving operatic passion to the women” (75). Indeed,
according to Ellman – foiled marriages notwithstanding – “Bowen’s adolescents
are stuck between generations, unwilling to imitate their mothers but unable to
imagine other destinies…” (70).

I suggest Smith and Ellman are right to a degree, except *The Hotel* goes
even further than killing off its male suitors and certainly demonstrates an
understanding of “other destinies.” For, at the end of the novel, not only does the

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61 As noted by Ellman, “Gerald Lesworth in *The Last September* is shot dead by a rebel bullet; Max Ebhart in *The House in Paris* stabs himself to death; Robert Kelway in *The Heat of the Day* jumps or falls off Stella’s roof” (75).
text place a “reunion between women [Pym and Fitzgerald] at the terminus traditionally accorded to the wedding ceremony” (75), but immediately before this conclusion, it is not Warren and Milton who leave in the carriage of the soon-to-be newlyweds. It is Milton and Ronald. They both sit in the carriage (Mrs. Kerr has insisted that Ronald attend the forsaken Milton on his journey), “avoiding one another’s eye” while a “bunch of flowers” hurled at Ronald by someone in the crowd strikes Milton “on the side of the head and drop[s] just under the wheel” (173). If nothing else, the anticlimactic and heartbreakingly embarrassed send-off makes it abundantly clear that heterosexual marriage and liaisons are not in any way a part of this novel. Bowen does not just sabotage heterosexual marriage, she explicitly mocks it.

**In the End**

It is true that Elizabeth Bowen’s works often focus on the struggle between the idealism of youth and the skepticism of harsh reality in the adult world, for as Bowen states herself: “… it is not only our fate, but our business to lose innocence, and once we have lost that it is futile to attempt a picnic in Eden” (*Collected Impressions*). The pure, young heroine is often left disillusioned by the experiences into which she has been unwittingly placed, by the people with whom she has unfortunately become friends, acquaintances, lovers. Often this disillusionment stretches into a projected hopelessness for the heroine.

In *The Hotel*, however, there seems to be a slight variance regarding who is ultimately left hopeless. Sydney, to be sure, suffers disillusionment at the hand
of her mature friend, ending the book as an older but wiser young woman herself. But, we have a feeling that Sydney will come out all right, that this experience, although painful and possibly scarring, will be overcome, indeed is already being overcome. On the other hand, as the book comes to a close, it is Mrs. Kerr and not Sydney who seems to suffer a sense of loss and despair, a hopelessness that seems to assert itself beyond the timeline of the novel, a hopelessness that is usually consigned to the innocent in Bowen’s fiction.  

Interestingly enough, for a novel not always viewed as “lesbian,” there seems to be more evidence of homoerotic dynamics than anything else. The main plot, revolving around the relationship between Sydney Warren and Mrs. Kerr, is framed in the opening and closing of the novel, by the fervent relationship between Miss Pym and Miss Fitzgerald – two women in their thirties (roughly the same age as Mrs. Kerr) – and is also reflected loosely in the dynamic between little Cordelia Barry and Sydney. The Hotel begins with an argument between Pym and Fitzgerald, who symbolize what the matrons of the hotel will later describe as “cases” of “violent friendships” between women that are not “quite healthy” (53).

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62 For example, the harshness throughout The Death of the Heart toward young Portia portends the bleak future for this Bowen protagonist.
II

“I am like a match; I must have a box to strike on”

Elizabeths on Fire in Willa Muir’s *Imagined Corners*

In his article “Scottish Utopian Fiction and the Invocation of God,” Timothy C. Baker notes that “religious themes have long been central to the Scottish literary tradition” (94). He then names Willa Muir’s *Imagined Corners* as an example of the many Scottish novels that “engage explicitly with religious themes […] against the backdrop of the individual or localized community” (94). The novel certainly does use religion as a topic, as illustrated by the vigorous banter on the subject between the two most important characters of the novel, Elizabeth and Elise. However, religion is mimaically represented as the passé traditions of a static, oppressive, and small community, while the energy of the mind is represented as sparking excitement and passion. Muir’s novel absolutely places the active modern critical awareness of Elise up against the passive, stodgy religious customs of Calderwick, with the young but mentally dexterous Elizabeth place-holdered somewhere in the middle. In the end, the novel is a feminist endorsement of the rigorous thoughtfulness of the two women and their intellectual – and amorous – convergence over the heteronormative traditions of the small town and the church.

Elise (short for Elizabeth) Shand-Mütze, the 39 year-old widow and sister-in-law to 22 year-old Elizabeth Ramsay Shand, demonstrates the thoughtful politicization of feminism in the British modern novel by women. Unlike the
American novels in this study, the British novels are more ideologically explicit in their handleings of feminism. Where Nella Larsen’s two novels hardly touch the topic, and Djuna Barnes refuses pretty much an argument about anything, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Olive Moore, Willa Muir, and to some extent Elizabeth Bowen engage fully in feminist argumentation. Perhaps what I find most fascinating in these novels is that the characters could be sapphic exemplars, but it is not the sapphic on which the texts focus per se; it is the general communal repression they feel as women under patriarchal control.

Both Elise and Elizabeth find themselves attracted to one another because of their vibrant minds. Elizabeth has attended university, and Elise at nearly twice Elizabeth’s age has been schooled by the sadder-but-wiser experiences of her youth (specifically, the young-village-woman-runs-off-with-a-married-man experience), and the highly educated men with whom she has been involved. Both women are sparked by how surprisingly and intellectually interesting each finds the other, and both engage in feminist rhetoric that inevitably not only guides their lives, but brings them together.

One of Elizabeth’s struggles when Elise comes on the scene, is for her own identity, for Elizabeth is barely coming-of-age as a married woman. Indeed, she is attempting to learn how to be a “wife,” which she intuitively

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63 Elise’s relationships have been with academics: the married man with whom she ran off was a foreigner and “head of the modern languages department at Calderwick Academy,” and her recently passed husband, Dr. Karl Mütze, was also a professor (26).

64 Elizabeth Shand is a newlywed and has recently moved to the home village (Calderwick) of her playboy husband, Hector, and his considerably older brother, John Shand. Their sister, Elise, known as ‘Elizabeth’ back in her Calderwick days and “Lizzie” by her adoring older brother John, returns to visit Calderwick after having run away with a married man twenty years prior.
understands is not a natural occurrence but a performative one, one that must be both constructed and maintained. In her essay about the author in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, Margery Palmer McCulloch suggests this aspect of the storyline is given a feminist twist by Muir:

The plot provides an interesting variation on the nineteenth-century novel of female development in that its heroine Elizabeth, a young, inexperienced university graduate, finds that her journey to self-discovery begins after marriage, as opposed to ending in marriage. It is therefore […] truly a transformation of the *Bildungsroman* form for female purposes…” (McCulloch 92).

This feminist perspective can be seen, for example, after one of Elizabeth’s many fights with husband Hector; the young woman struggles with feelings of disorientation and ontological uncertainty (Muir 64). To quell the impending feelings of desperation and sustain a feeling of control and stability, she lights upon a ritual of naming herself that has comforted her much in the past. As a child, when the “world stretched out on all sides into dark impersonal nothingness and she herself was a terrifying anonymity,” she took “refuge” in illustrating her body and soul connection: “I’m me, she thought; me, me; here behind my eyes” (64). Yet, this child’s game does not help her, as the terror of her anonymity grows. She attributes an “overwhelming importance” to the change of her name, and ends the terror only after summoning her original name, “Elizabeth Ramsay” (64). But, this has its own dilemma: a split between the
woman who identifies herself as one name and the married woman who now lives under another:

Elizabeth Ramsay she was, but also Elizabeth Shand, and the more years she traversed the more inalterably would she become Elizabeth Shand. Those years of the future stretched endlessly before her; with that queer lucidity which is seldom found in daytime thinking she could see them as a perspective of fields, each one separated by a fence from its neighbour. Over you go, said a voice, and over she went, then into the next and the next and the next. But this was no longer time or space, it was eternity; there was no end, no goal; perhaps a higher fence marked the boundary between life and death, but in the fields beyond it she was still Elizabeth Shand. She was beginning to be terrified again and opened her eyes. Mrs. Shand, she said to herself. It was appalling, and she had never realized it before” (64-5).

We are not told what it is exactly that Elizabeth finds appalling, but we can deduce it is her sudden realization of a loss – of identity and name – with her recent nuptials. Nevertheless, Elizabeth concludes that she must lose herself after all; she must give up “the old Elizabeth Ramsay” and “become Elizabeth Shand” (66). She must engage in activities in which she can act “just like a wife” (69). Embracing her new and married name, Elizabeth hopes to become comfortable in the conventional role of a “wife” that Calderwick – and Hector – require of her. If she will only submit to the identity, surely she will embody it soon enough.
Little does she know, however, that embracing that new name – a name already possessed by her sister-in-law – will make it impossible for her to represent herself as a conventional wife in the tiny community, neither will it bring her and Hector Shand closer together. On the contrary, it will create a vast chasm between wife and husband and align Elizabeth with another Shand entirely by novel’s end.

Elise, the prior owner of the name, on the other hand, illustrates immediately her more mature understanding of what is in a name when she is told that her new sister-in-law now possesses hers, that she is now “Elizabeth Shand” as well. At this news from John, Elise is incensed:

“I think you’ll like your namesake,” John put in. “I’ve seen her smoking a cigarette.”

Elizabeth Mütze stood still.

“My namesake?”

“Hector’s wife. Her name is Elizabeth. Elizabeth Shand.”

“How dare she?” said Elizabeth Mütze (162).

Although humorous, Elise’s dry response comments on her attachment even now to the name that still signifies her in this communal setting. How dare this new Elizabeth who may have already proven her silliness in having married a man such as Elise’s half-brother Hector, take on the name of that younger Elise who

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65 It might be important here to note a plot point. From almost the opening of the novel, which begins with Elizabeth and Hector having just moved to Calderwick after getting married in the very near past, the couple have serious marital issues. Their wedded bliss is no bliss for long. Hector all but reincarnates his drunken, promiscuous father. Incrementally he begins to neglect Elizabeth until he finally abandons her at the novel’s close.
challenged so scandalously Calderwick’s oppressive environment. It can also be seen as a true question rather than a droll offhand remark. Elise may be covertly voicing a question of the novel itself: will this younger Elizabeth be able to walk the unconventional footsteps that Elise herself has trod? Does she dare? Furthermore, it foreshadows a curious fusion between the two women, a doubling and/or re-doing by one for the other. Elizabeth notes herself before meeting Elise: “… it gives me the queerest feeling. It’s like seeing yourself in a mirror for the first time” (78).

This is not all that is queer here. Indeed, Muir’s play with doubling creates an instantaneous intimacy between the two characters and displays that intimacy to the reader:

Elizabeth’s confused emotions are counterpointed by the creation of her namesake Lizzie, half-sister to her husband, who had shocked Calderwick twenty years previously by eloping to Europe with a married man. She has now returned as Elise, the elegant widow of a German professor, in the hope of measuring the distance she has traveled in the intervening years. The dramatic interplay of these three Elizabeths allows an acute probing of a woman’s sense of self at different stages of her life […].

(McCulloch 92)

The doubling of identity and the themes of time and memory display certain modern inclinations in the novel associated with Muir’s interest and “awareness” of the theories of time (Bergson) and psychoanalysis (Jung), suggests Margery
Palmer McCulloch in her essay on the author in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* (92). “*Imagined Corners,*” she notes, “is notable for its intellectual speculation and scientific and psychological imagery, its exploration of the operation of time and memory in human lives and its ironic narrative style” (92). And yet, Muir also takes part in a modern tendency that accepts a certain exceptionalism about lesbianism. Through her modernist intellectual investigations, Muir magnifies twofold the similarities of the two women and their difference from conventional “woman.” *Negative valence* mimesis peeks out from behind *positive valence* mimesis in order for the reader to intuit that these women who in one sense perform femininity properly – especially visually perform femininity in manner and dress as narrated in the novel – also perform *excessively* their intellect and *improperly* their desire. The *mannish* woman, the pictorial invert of Stephen Gordon fame is nowhere to be found; in her place are these two women *visibly* conventional, but fiercely intellectual, independent of mind, and passionately accessible to each other.

In this case, lesbianism is neither intermingled with “boyishness” or “masculinity,” a “characteristic” that sexologists like the British Havelock Ellis assume is the “commonest […] of the sexually inverted woman,” nor is it associated with masculine dress, which Ellis suggests “[sexually inverted women] have a “pronounced tendency” to adopt (*Studies*, Chapter IV, “Sexual Inversion in Women”). In *Imagined Corners,* the possibility of lesbianism is made less spectacular than that of *inversion;* it is remarkable only because it is cued by the sharp and fiery feminist intellect, but mundane in that it is a non-visual indicator.
Mind over Matter

English feminist Stella Browne touches on what seems to be a particular anxiety surrounding lesbianism in the modern period, an especial concern that the invert will be more accepted by the world outside of domesticity than more conventional women. In her 1923 “Studies in Feminine Inversion,” she first states that already “women’s lives and work will tend […] to favour the frigid, and next to the frigid, the inverted types” (611). But beyond this, Browne elucidates on how the intellectualism of lesbianism may be a cause of concern:

I think it is perhaps not wholly uncalled-for, to underline very strongly my opinion that the homosexual impulse is not in any way superior to the normal; it has a fully equal right to existence and expression, it is no worse, no lower; but no better. [author’s italics]

(611)

Browne places society’s repression of women’s “physical expression” at the “root of […] what is most trivial and unsatisfactory in women’s intellectual output” (611). If all women were able to sexually express themselves – no matter whether in a “normal or abnormal” way – she proposes, they would perform better intellectually. Up against the stereotype of the invert’s intellectual prowess, then, one can see why Browne has suggested such a leveling factor to sexual proclivities.

Muir does not seem to discriminate between women’s desires and their intellect, but she does suggest that those who are more intellectually robust are also those who – desiring like intelligence – can transcend oppressive rules of
conventional religion and men to such an extent as to desire outside the heterosexual norm.

Elise’s thought, for example, is what keeps her vibrant and alive, and her investment in modern intellectualism surfaces as she argues for rational thought as opposed to religious dogma. In a discussion with her brother John, she tells him that she believes everyone should think for themselves rather than get their thoughts “ready-made” from some source (216). She suggests that life is only worth living if one gleans truth oneself rather than relying on authority and tradition, noting that searching for oneself is a “balancing trick that needs courage,” but is a far cry better than “walking along a chalk-line like a hen” (216). Although John prefers the chalk-line, Elise reminds him that he “mustn’t draw lines” for her (216). And then she notes with some explanation that she “could never have stayed in Calderwick” (216):

‘I realized that clearly in church this morning,’ said Elise. ‘You know it’s much more difficult for a thinking girl to swallow tradition than for a thinking boy. Tradition supports his dignity and undermines hers. I can remember how insulted I was when I was told that woman was made from a rib of man, and that Eve was the first sinner, and that the pains of childbirth are a punishment to women…. It took me a long time to get over that…. It’s damnable the way a girl’s self-confidence is slugged on the head from the beginning’ (216-17).
The representation of Elise as a cogent thinker whose thoughtfulness is recognizably feminist is already a consequence of *negative valence* mimesis beginning to overtake its *positive valence*. As noted by Kirsty Allen in her introduction to a 1996 collection of Muir’s work,

Elise is an instinctive feminist with the intelligence and the courage to recognise and release herself from the shackles of the patriarchal Presbyterian culture of her Calderwick childhood. She has sacrificed neither her femaleness nor her freedom to the emotional and physical hardships which have been the product of her convictions, and has consequently developed an indomitable and exquisite awareness of herself and her world (Allen).

This way of representing Elise, by Muir, already begins the reader on the hunt for the significance of her feminist-leaning mind. Although Allen suggests Elise still performs femininity in an appropriate manner in many ways, the narrative’s focus on her mind so clearly above other stereotypically feminine traits such as submission, perhaps, or purity, give the reader an inkling that Elise is a different kind of woman. Negative valence mimesis peeks out from the shadows of positive valence mimesis to question axiomatic analogy. This seems not so different than a reader recognizing the notorious Stephen Gordon as a different kind of woman, although with Elise the reader does not have to interpret the “mannish” sartorial vision.

Elise is not only tantalizingly intelligent, but before the open of the text’s action, she is already a single woman again, a widow. It is noteworthy that Elise
returns to Calderwick as a mature woman to face her childhood home both without being coupled, and without being a matron. As noted by McCullogh:

All the principal female characters are childless and the one mother in the novel is presented caustically. In addition, the presentation of the lives of several minor unmarried female characters demonstrates the damage done to ‘superfluous women’ in a society where […] marriage and motherhood is considered the essential female role. (92)

For Elizabeth, Muir creates a feminist in Elise that shines a bright light and broadens a horizon past the provincial town.

**Against the Heteronormative Grain**

The constant strain in Elizabeth’s and Hector’s relationship culminates in an argument that seals their fragmentation. Hector is not known for his intellect, indeed even Elizabeth at one point notes to Aunt Janet⁶⁶ that she is the one who is

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⁶⁶ Aunt Janet is certainly an interesting character in this novel. Although it is not appropriate to explore her at this time for this study, it must be said that there is fodder enough for a queer or lesbian reading of this character. Aunt Janet is a spinster who is compelled to take over motherly duties in the house of her brother. Her sister-in-law dies shortly after the birth of her youngest son, Hector, and Janet takes on the raising of him, her youngest nephew. Although she adores Hector, she has a gross repugnance of male sexuality: “Janet could never rid herself of the knowledge that the Shand men were sexually unbridled; even her own brother had given her a queer feeling: she could not look at him without remembering how often he was reported to lie with women in the town” (40). The text indeed goes on to state generally that it was “indeed difficult to think of anything but bodily appetites when one met Charlie Shand” (40). The sister’s disgust with male sexuality, although a topos often found in the mythology of the spinster, I assert, does not particularly mean she is disgusted with sex altogether, but a particular kind of sex, either sex that involves men in general or her brother in particular. Either way, it is noted that “atmosphere in which Hector Shand grew up was, one might say, heavily charged with sex between the two poles of Janet’s anxious abhorrence of the subject and Charlie Shand’s open devotion to it” (40).
“supposed to have brains” and has a “knack of passing examinations,” while
Hector has not (49); she reads “all kinds of books” while Hector “never opens a
book if he can help it” (49). These comparisons are meant by Elizabeth to
illustrate to Aunt Janet that Hector’s mental capacity has no bearing on the
success of their relationship; however, their most volatile dispute occurs when
Elizabeth feels like Hector would like her to “stultify” herself (94). Her most
vicious defense emerges when he demands that she curb her intellect. It is at this
point that she calls him “a stupid fool”: “How dared he dictate to her what she
was to think? Stupid, sulky fool!” (93-4).

Through feminist acumen, Elizabeth realizes that her intellect and
conventional wifeliness are mutually exclusive traits that cannot be merged. She
has thus far attempted to become a wife, to be sure, but her attempts have not
transformed her into one. For example, in returning from a night out with friends,
she continues to enjoy herself until she is dragged into a fight with Hector and
realizes she has not acclimated herself to her home again “and all that it
connoted” (93). She realizes: “At the moment she was not a wife” (93).

Janet’s abhorrence of male sexuality, in the tradition of the spinster, can lead critics with a wink
and a nod to assume Janet is rather titillated than disgusted by the sexuality she so loathes. Even
in the novel, Elise mocks Janet’s over-deliberation on the subject: “I remember thinking,” she
laughs, “that for Aunt Janet the world was nothing but one enormous fig-leaf! And I thought of
pointing out to her that one is entitled to the fig-leaf only _after_ eating the apple from the tree – not
before” (161). In other words, Janet’s preoccupation with sex is only the rightful place of those
who have actually _had_ sex. The allusion to the Christian Garden of Eden myth suggests that it is
only through eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil that the fig-leaf becomes
necessary. The insinuation of shame and an always already assumption of sexual discontent
linked with a relationship between sexual abhorrence/obsession with gender and family that
culminate into this character called Aunt Janet would surely be an interesting and new line of
inquiry for this novel.
Likewise, during a visit from her sister-in-law, Mabel, who shamelessly flirts with Hector and vice versa, Elizabeth withdraws from the two, finding that she cannot participate in their vapid banter. After Mabel has left, Elizabeth ponders over her reactions. She is “puzzled by the fact that she had felt like a wet blanket” during the visit, and surprised to find she was “outraged” by their “childishness” (85). She then wonders if this feeling of dissatisfaction is a “part of the process of becoming a wife,” which is rather a distasteful prospect (85). And, later in the novel she makes one last attempt at wifeliness, but her discernment that becoming a wife is necessarily contrived and that she must lose herself to become one impedes her will to embrace the role completely. Meanwhile, as she seems to be unable to become a wife to Hector, she becomes closer and closer a wife to another Shand… Elise.

As Elizabeth and Elise become more enamored of each other through intensive conversation, Elizabeth finds herself satiated in every aspect of her life. Her anxiety regarding the negligent Hector fades away as Elise’s presence in Calderwick becomes secure and satisfying knowledge. After a particularly enjoyable walk and discussion in which Elise declares, “You and I, Elizabeth, would make one damned fine woman between us,” Elizabeth returns to her empty home untroubled by Hector’s now-frequent absence (246). Sitting by the fire, she muses over her conversation with Elise and how charming she finds her (251).

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67 Mabel is John Shand’s wife, brother to Elise and half-brother to Hector. Mabel is nearly twenty years younger than John, twenty-three and forty-two respectively. Therefore, she is closer in age to Hector’s twenty-six and Elizabeth’s twenty-two. John and Mabel have been married for two years, and Mabel finds herself bored with the older man; therefore, Hector is a convenient distraction.
As her thoughts fill with the older woman, she ceases to think of her charm and waywardness, but instead basks in the knowledge that “Elise is here, in Calderwick,” and as she ponders this fact she grows “drowsy and contented” (251). It is telling that when her friend Emily Scrymgeour bursts into the room, Elizabeth feels as though she has been “caught in private drug-taking” (251).

The description of Elizabeth’s satisfaction resembles so closely what could be described as the afterglow of a sexual act, and the reader has no choice but to allow the comparison between the intellectual and the sexual since the two are much thrown together throughout the novel. Earlier on, for example, after having met Elise for the first time, Elizabeth wants only to spend time with Elise at the party, regardless that her husband Hector rather scandalously dances and flirts with her sister-in-law Mabel. At the end of the evening, as she amorously lies in Hector’s arms, she disengages from the situation, revisiting her conversations with Elise:

> Her body craved his embraces, but when he was in her bed she felt that a great part of herself withdrew from the physical contact. Her mind, too, was in a ferment, as if her encounter with Elise had roused a long-dormant faculty. (172)

As Elizabeth’s feelings are conveyed to the reader, sexual terminology becomes interchangeable between Elizabeth and Hector and Elizabeth and Elise. About Elise, her mind is in a “ferment,” her faculty is “roused,” her remembrance of their deliberations are “brilliant and exhaustive,” and finally it is Elizabeth’s

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68 Elizabeth believes Elise is “wayward” especially because of her indifference to religion.
distracted *esprit d’escalier*\(^{69}\) that explains a consequent “conjugal embarrassment” with Hector: “Her mind kept flying away from Hector, and even from herself” (173).

Even as Elizabeth does engage sexually with Hector, she is described as disassociated from the event. It is “no longer Elizabeth who put her arm round Hector’s neck, it was a wife embracing a husband,” the text notes (173).

Elizabeth has completely disengaged herself from the occasion, which ironically is the only time she attains the title of “wife.” The implication of this event, then, suggests that Elizabeth can only achieve the title of “wife” in the proper sense when she is intellectually sluggish, disinterested, and only partially interactive.

As noted by Kirsty Allen in her introduction to a collection of Muir’s work, “The institution of marriage is rendered virtually meaningless and moribund by the force of […] strident and assertive individualism” as demonstrated by the feminist impulses of Elizabeth and Elise in *Imagined Corners*. “Muir,” she goes on to say, “paints an overwhelmingly pessimistic picture of the relationship between men and women” (Allen). In this moment of “wifeliness,” while sleeping with her husband but thinking of Elise, we indeed glimpse this pessimism between men and women revealed in the strong intimation of mind over (hetero)sex. It is truly mind over matter for Elizabeth, or more accurately mind is *the* matter for

\(^{69}\) *L’esprit d’escalier*, otherwise translated as *staircase wit*, is a term that illustrates the disappointment of having missed an opportunity to respond cleverly within the realtime of a conversation. It is literally not having thought of your witty response or brilliant comeback until at the bottom of the stairs after having already left the salon or party (125). Please see the *World Dictionary of Foreign Expressions* in the bibliography.
Elizabeth; Elise has taken over the most vital and part of Elizabeth, taking her matter, her desire, with it.

But, there has been innuendo about Elizabeth’s interest in Elise even before this scene. Indeed, earlier in the novel as Hector has taken to his debauchery, the text explains that women in Calderwick are “not so well provided for as husbands” (118). In other words, the feminist-minded narrator subtly mocks the religiously-minded provincial town that makes allowances for its husbands to “drift,” while making clear that if a “wife” were to engage likewise, it would be rather a struggle against the “whole social current” of the place (118).

Still, the text suggests – with some foresight – “It is difficult to see what current could have carried Elizabeth away had she too been minded to drift,” for “[t]here was no easy drift to which Elizabeth might commit herself except the traditional stream of respectable wifehood” (118). And yet, we have already witnessed Elizabeth’s incapacity (even with her quasi-religiousness) to accept the current of wifehood in concert with her thoughtful identity; therefore, when Elise is introduced into the picture, the reader is aware immediately the “current” that may in fact carry Elizabeth away. For, at the beginning of the evening, the narrator notes presciently:

Had it been a man whose arrival she was expecting with so much interest she would have been embarrassed by that interest; had it been a man who now came into the room she would have been afraid of her own emotion; but since Elise was a woman Elizabeth
did not know that she actually fell in love with her at first sight

(165).

Although Elizabeth’s intellect does not immediately register Elise as a threat to her traditional role play of dutiful wife, it is immediately piqued as her mental torpor since relocating to Calderwick is replaced by a wonderful vitality:

With the thought of Elise an infiltration of colour, of warmth, irradiated the landscape again. It did not occur to Elizabeth that her attachment to Elise could infringe upon her loyalty to Hector…

(222).

Mimetic lesbianism in this novel takes on a decidedly intellectual turn as the conversion of Elizabeth to the Noble Wife is stymied by a “feeling that something within her was struggling into consciousness, some recognition of an incompatibility too fundamental for compromise” (123). Although she is determined to be that wife, and the text warns us at one point that Elizabeth is “not far from the final dogma that woman exists for the sake of man” (127), her conversations with Elise open a “world of escape from Calderwick, a world sparkling with interest” that reveal to her that she has been “stagnating in mind if not in heart ever since coming to Calderwick” (171). From the first evening they meet, Elizabeth compares Elise to Hector and finds him “shallow and commonplace” (173).

“It was the thought of Elise that gave poignancy to this contempt. It was because of Elise that she was ashamed of Hector. It was through Elise’s eyes that she now looked at herself and her
husband and despised herself for having fallen in love with a man who had neither wit nor brains, a man whose sole social accomplishment, flirtation, was crude both in its technique and in its objects” (173).

Ultimately, Elizabeth finds herself caught between two worlds, “stretched as if on the rack” (175). The first is a world where Hector thrives and is at ease – although as readers we are quite unsure if this world, in fact, exists – and the other is “the world of thought, of ideas, spreading into vast impersonal abstractions” (175). The latter is the world of Elise, and the world for which Elizabeth longs, but it is also a world where “Hector ha[s] no part” (175). A world with Hector is an unthinking one ruled by religious heteronormativity, while a world with Elise is an intellectual and secular one challenged by feminist and possible lesbian inquiry.

Elise is also doing her own meditation on Elizabeth. As she observes and ponders the naïve, young, but intellectually promising young woman, she finds her,

the most interesting woman [she’s] met for years. She had just discovered it, to her own surprise, as if Elizabeth had gone on growing within her since they last met” (218).

Further, she exclaims to herself: “But how alive she is! She goes on living in me and excites me to rhapsodizing about choruses…” (218). Surprised and stimulated, Elise notes that Elizabeth’s eyes are “intensely alive,” and the “expression in them […] completely alter[s] the whole face”; furthermore, when
Elizabeth blushes at Elise’s gaze, the older woman is “shocked,” and seemingly titillated (167). Elise sees in Elizabeth a reflection of the struggle she herself had with Calderwick and its small-mindedness. But with Elizabeth, the battle is even more severe because religious dogma is still the prism through which she continues to wrestle with her role as wife and in her thinking about sex. The narrator explains:

Elizabeth was a victim of her upbringing as well as of her temperament. From her earliest years she had been subjected to the subtle pressure of the suggestion that a husband is the sole justification of a woman’s existence, that a woman who cannot attract and keep a husband is a failure. That some such theory should emerge in a society which regarded the sexual act as sinful was inevitable; one cannot train women in chastity and then expect them to people the world unless the sinfulness of sex is counterbalanced by the desirability of marriage. In Elizabeth’s case temperament had modified tradition so far as to set romantic love as well as marriage on the other end of the lever depressed by sex: marriage alone without love would not maintain the equilibrium. One might admit that the odds were heavily weighted against her (120).

The feminist analysis of Elizabeth’s character is one that surely coincides with Elise’s own. Because of this fact, Elise chooses to intervene in the marriage on Elizabeth’s behalf. She has acted as the younger woman’s confidante, has
witnessed firsthand Elizabeth’s struggle with heteronormativity, and has foreseen the potential devastation of this promising intellect; therefore, she has no choice but to facilitate Hector’s literal departure: “‘Don’t you worry about Elizabeth,’ said Elise. ‘I’m going to look after her’” (256).

Elise chooses to intervene because of the compassion she feels toward Elizabeth and her ignorance: “Her vision of life was almost sublime in credulity…. One ought to do something about it” (257). As the younger woman’s confidante she knows Elizabeth’s naïveté and the struggles she is experiencing as wife – and by extension her understanding of sex – which compels Elise’s assistance. Noted by Allen, Elizabeth Shand not only “appears initially to be a victim of the culture in which she has been reared,” but she also has an “underdeveloped sense of self [that] has caused her to confuse lust for love in her relationship with Hector” (Introduction).

Elise attempts to relieve Elizabeth’s confusion about marriage and sex. She explains to the devastated Elizabeth that there is a rich field of humanity, but we must often clear the stones in our own little patch. She suggests that Elizabeth should “regard Hector as something that had to be cleared out of [her] patch” (277), in order for her to grow in her own fertile field. As for sex, Elise notes:

_of course you loved him; of course he loved you; but it was only nature, it wasn’t anything more…. You fell in love with his body_
and pretended to love his mind, or his spirit, or whatever you call it. On the whole, that’s better than falling in love with a man’s mind and pretending to love his body […]. But you can’t expect, brought up as you have been, to find that the first man who attracts you is your mate for life. That’s nothing to be ashamed of…. And I think that you are ashamed to admit to yourself that you hung your dreams round the neck of a man who didn’t want them. (277)

To this, Elizabeth argues that she has failed as a wife and all the religious connotations she has brought to the word. She has failed both herself and Hector by despising and scorning him at times – and as readers we know these moments were when she compared him to Elise – but Elise suggests, “You have learned something. You can’t live with a man you don’t respect” (277).

**Striking Off Together**

The next scene is on a train with two women bound for the south of Italy. Just as Elise had been “astonished” by her own desire to take Elizabeth home with her (257), she continues to be surprised and satisfied by the young woman beside her (279). Elise is yet unsure of her full intentions in having taken Elizabeth, and unsure also of what will become of it, but she is stimulated by her choice:

Here she was, returning with a brand-new daughter, or sister, or wife, or whatever it was, having carried her off like a second
Lochinvar.\textsuperscript{71} She had not anticipated that when she went up to Calderwick (279).

No other text in this period, save Rosamond Lehmann’s \textit{Dusty Answer}, notes so casually the possibility, the naturalness of the possibility of overt lesbian relations. It is so satisfactory an ending for Elise – who is the center of consciousness here – that she refuses to label her relationship. She does not question the validity of her relationship with Elizabeth nor does she struggle, as Stephen Gordon in \textit{The Well}, with how the outside world might want to define it. Indeed, she names the possibilities herself, ultimately discounting the naming by ending the short interior monologue with “or whatever it was” as a definition. Attributing the label of “wife” on equal footing with “daughter” and “sister,” and subsequently discarding them all by “or whatever it was” reinforces the title of “wife” as equivalent with the others. And, because Elise will not define exactly the nature of “whatever it is,” she allows its probability. Since the labels of “lesbian,” “sapphist,” “mannish woman,” etc., were not particularly used on a consistent basis as yet, the decision for Muir to discard all labels altogether is a sign that any of the labels could be interchanged. So, one would not have to look

\textsuperscript{71} Lochinvar here refers to Sir Walter Scott’s titular poem. Brave and bold Lochinvar is a young knight who has long courted the maiden Ellen. Her father disapproves of the match and (seemingly) is able to coerce the young Ellen to marry another. At this news, Lochinvar travels on horseback nonstop to reach his beloved’s castle. In a sign of reconciliation, Lochinvar, alone and armed only with his “broadsword,” asks only to drink one cup of wine and lead one dance with his “lost love” before her nuptials. As the guests and family of Ellen look on, they are increasingly impressed with Lochinvar’s “stately” form and stalwart air. The bride-maidens even conclude that the family should have coupled their “fair cousin” with Lochinvar. As the two would-be lovers dance, they conspire to runaway together; Lochinvar leads Ellen to the door of the great hall, and knowing his charger awaits just outside, they make their escape. Although Ellen’s and the bridegroom’s families make haste to follow, the two lovers are never found.
for “lesbian,” for the connotations of lesbianism can also be seen in the “daughter,” “mother,” “sister,” as equally as in “whatever it was.”

As the two intelligent feminists – one home-grown and one yet-to-be – make their way toward a new life together, lesbianism in Muir’s representation of women is further suggested in a question asked by a friend Elise has run into on the train: “Well, my dear Elise, you have run away with her, you say? Have you then given up men?” (281). As for Elizabeth, although she has chastised herself throughout the novel for not remembering to be a good wife, even resolving herself early in the novel that “must learn to be a wife” (66). With the ending as such, perhaps she finally will.

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72 As noted in Terry Castle’s oft-cited text, the mother/daughter and sororal topoi have long been indicators of lesbian desire, and therefore are quite easily recognizable cues used by Muir.
Unwomanliness of Mind and Maternity in Olive Moore’s *Spleen*

*I have no sense of hero-worship. I respect all men who are master of their jobs; I say men, meaning men. I don’t believe in women. They seem able to do everything but think.*

~ Olive Moore

It should be no surprise that thinking women often denigrate the sexist model of “woman” that requires her to be thoughtless altogether, as seen in the above quote by Olive Moore, this section’s subject. Although many would argue that Moore’s animus seems directed at women themselves, I suggest that thoughtful women like Moore seem more or less always more skeptical in what the cultural construction of the unfortunate word “woman” means. Therefore, when she says, “I don’t believe in women” the superficial significance of her comment assumes she has no faith in “women” because they “get away” with not thinking (Moore “Auto” 130); however, a closer critique of her statement reveals a question of whether the reality of this throng called “women,” the collective group of unthinkers does, in fact, exist. She displays obvious disdain for the idea of “women,” most likely because she does not consider herself one. The follow-up lines to the epigraph above distinctly place the author outside the confines of the collective label of “women,” for she immediately follows the

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73 See Moore’s reprinted autobiographical sketch from 1933 in *Spleen* (130); full details in bibliography.

74 The quote in its entirety is as follows: “I have no sense of hero-worship. I respect all men who are master of their jobs; I say men, meaning men. I don’t believe in women. They seem able to do everything but think. Yet they get away with it” (130).
quote with another that states, “I believe only in the conscious artist” (130). This rather collapses the force of her previous comments: the artist becomes an androgynous third gender elevated above both women and men, and Moore pries herself loose from the despised category of “women.” This transforms the original comment by deflating men’s importance, and asserting that women are not obliged to linger under the category of “women” if they but think.

Therefore, this chapter will discuss the cerebral character of the novel, Ruth, and how her thinking affects the ways she interacts with women and the maternal, which in this context work as the topoi of lesbianism. I will first direct my argument toward the title of the book and its use by medical men in gendering the neurological problem of *hysteria* approaching the early 20th century. This, placed up against the French use of the word, *ennui*, will explore Ruth’s feminist consciousness and resistance to conventional womanhood and maternity. I will then discuss Ruth’s penchant toward women, especially her dear friends Dora and later Donna Lisetta through the biblical story of Ruth, her namesake. Together, these topoi will create an image of Ruth as feminist and lesbian that hitherto has not been observed in this novel.

**Hysteria Versus Ennui**

Although the title suggests exactly otherwise, Olive Moore’s little studied novel is ironically a remarkable incursion into the thinking woman’s psyche. Unlike *The Hotel*, where we are only allowed fragmentary access to Warren’s and Kerr’s minds, this novel floods us with the entirety of the feminist contemplations
of a single character. The book is a narrative explanation for the protagonist’s (Ruth) move from London (and husband and a devoted friend) to a remote Italian island with her newborn child twenty-two years prior, and the reason for her brief return in the present time. It is told in mostly stream of consciousness style with Ruth as its third-person center of consciousness.

As noted above, the title of Moore’s novel, *Spleen*, is provocative to say the least. This is because feminist literary criticism points out that the physical organ, the spleen, has been used as a stand-in throughout the ages for a malediction to emotional health. Although Moore’s book centers around a very mindful, intelligent, and thinking woman, the title plays ironically against this by raising the age-old idea of the spleen’s connection to hysteria and hysteria’s connection to the womb; therefore, the protagonist’s excessive thoughtfulness butts up against the supposed irrationality of women in this state. As noted in her study on hysteria, *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, Elaine Showalter states:

> By the end of the seventeenth century, melancholy and hysteria had been joined by new fashionable diseases: the spleen, vapours, and hypochondria; these disorders were also differentiated by gender. Spleen and vapours were seen as akin to hysteria, female maladies that came from the poisonous fumes of a disordered womb. (293)

By the 18th century, “there was a gender split in the representation of the body,” says Showalter, “the nervous system was seen as feminine and the musculature as masculine” (293). Those in medicine, then, attempting to keep firm these gender
distinctions, gave a separate name to the nervous disorders in men: hypochondria (293). Showalter notes that the largest player in this division within even human ailments was the fear of the “feminizing label of hysteria,” which “obviously affected diagnosis (293).

The 19th century continued the split from the 18th century, but doctors took it a step further, suggesting that women who presented with symptoms of hypochondriasis “must be ‘masculine Amazonian women’” (Feuchtersleben qtd in Showalter 293-4). The term neurothenia or neurasthenia – a “condition of nervous exhaustion, and ‘impoverishment of nervous force’” – became the term for a man’s disease in 1873, coined by George M. Beard in the United States. It was apparently “linked with the nation’s nervous modernity,” and often held up as a “badge of distinction and racial superiority” by the rigorous working man (Beard qtd in Showalter 294). But, the masculine label would not hold for long. In the United States “equal numbers of male and female patients were reported in the medical journals,” even though the “cases were differentiated in terms of both gender and class” (296). Unsurprisingly, attending college was a supposed cause for the disorder in middle-class women (296).

In England, apparently, staving off feminization of the term failed. Neurasthenia “quickly lost its sheltering power for men and became a female

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75 The Viennese doctor Ernst von Feuchtersleben made this statement in 1824.

76 Indeed, one cannot underestimate the racial and class discrimination that is also apparent within these sexist medical theories of the time. Critically, Showalter notes that George M. Beard “believed that neurasthenia was caused by industrialized urban societies, competitive business and social environments, and the luxuries, demands, and excesses of life on the fast track. […] To be stressed was ‘one of the cardinal traits of evolutionary progress marking the increased supremacy of brain force over the more retarded social classes and barbarous peoples’ (Beard qtd in Showalter 294).
malady like hysteria” (296-7). “Havelock Ellis,” Showalter explains, “estimated that there were fourteen neurasthenic women for every neurasthenic man” (297). Henry Maudsley of England, concurrently with the notorious S. Weir Mitchell and Edward Clarke in the United States began to draw on:

new theories of the conservation of energy to argue that mental and physical energy were finite and competing. Women’s energy, post-Darwinian scientists believed, was naturally intended for reproductive specialization. Thus women were heavily handicapped, even developmentally arrested, in intellectual competition with men. Nervous disorder would come when women defied their ‘nature’ and sought to rival men through education and work, rather than to serve them and the race through maternity. (296-97)

By the mid-19th century, many doctors still believed hysteria was caused by the womb, argues Helen King in her historical study of hysteria Once upon a Text, and many did not (13). Regardless of the division in agreement, however, hysteria became a malady of the whole person, and that person was gendered female (13). As modernity affected women’s social and economic roles, the medical community prescribed clear and separate gender behaviors in order to remain “womanly” for one’s own good, as the only remedy for hysteria.

At this point, it should be noted, then, that Moore’s title is said to have been inspired by Charles Baudelaire’s poem sequence “Spleen et Idéal” in his Les Fleurs du Mal (Bristow 131), in which case rather than invoking hysteria, the title
invokes something else. As explained by translator Keith Waldrup, spleen, as used by Baudelaire, is “disgust with life,” or “ennui of all things,” which is the “natural state” of life (xx). Baudelaire’s understanding of ennui is synonymous with the English term melancholy, and by the 18th century, both male hypochondria and the female hysteria were related as forms of melancholy (King 13). Prior to this, however, melancholy’s history had been relegated as a male illness. While, as noted earlier, the history of hysteria was gendered female and arose from the “displacement of the uterus and the accumulation of putrid humors,” melancholy was a “prestigious disorder of upper-class and intellectual men” (Showalter 292-3). “Schiesari explains,” remarks Patrice Petro in her book Aftershocks of the New: Feminism and Film History:

that the discourse of melancholy and historical ennui, a specific representational form of male creativity familiar to philosophy and literature, was ‘inaugurated by the Renaissance, refined by the Enlightenment, flaunted by Romanticism, fetishized by the Decadents, and theorized by Freud, before its current resurgence.’ (Schiesari qtd in Petro 3)

But, modernity changed our view of melancholy. Hysteria remained present and gendered, but modernity forced an egalitarian element upon melancholy:

“The modernist aesthetic” used “boredom […] as] an attack on the mundane aspects of fragmentation and redundancy…. It became a


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democratic affliction that affected everyone,… […] it was a problem of the monotony of production itself.” (Petro 85-6)

“Melancholia,” as noted by Esther Sánchez-Pardo in her 2003 book, can be “read as a mourner’s response to loss that is not socially acceptable or socially understood, and it is therefore hard to tolerate or explain” (215).

And this sentiment is what is difficult to explain in Moore’s novel. The intersection of these two diverse but uncannily similar illnesses fused into the title of Moore’s novel provokes its own “disorder” in how we might read the text. Therefore, one reason I want to address the significance of the title at this time is to offer a preemptive defense of the protagonist and her feminist response to women’s role in society, and specifically in response to maternity. I do not know why Moore is a “scandalously underread English modernist” (Doan and Garrity 3), but it may have to do with the fact that the title of this work alone more or less screams hysteria – less so melancholia – to feminists who might rather leave be the centuries-long fight against the sexist malady in literature.

**Spleen and Its Malcontent**

This experimental novel is immediately unsettling to the reader. We are thrown *in medias res* into the action of the story, for on the very first page we move from present to past with little transition and with no real understanding of its significance. On the second page we are flung back into the present, spoken directly to by a cheeky narrator, and released back into the story of the past. Once the novel stands still for longer than a moment, we begin receiving the back story
of Ruth, an English woman living in Italy. It is at this point that the title of the novel bears down on the reader. For when the novel settles in for a time to tell Ruth’s story, it is one of anxiety, anger, and resolve.

We find that Ruth is in the early stages of pregnancy, and her response to this news is unconventional, to say the least. Ruth herself is even “shocked at the horror that [has come] over her” at the news (Moore Spleen 19). The subsequent pages that give the account of Ruth’s emotional highs and lows, from despair to serenity to despair, could be seen as hysterical, but I suggest rather than hysteria, Ruth is rather more prone to the melancholy of modernity. And her melancholy is of a specific type. It is a feminist melancholy, for Ruth rails against the inequities between women and men, displaying deep dismay with the ways in which women are corralled and tempered and used to corral and temper each other; she is especially horrified by how maternity is forced upon women.

Far from the picture of the hysterical woman given us from the medical men of the era, Ruth is a model of rationality. Her arguments are sound and just. Granted, Moore’s stylistic choices are unsettling: we fly back and forth in time without transition or explanation; point of view is often through free interior discourse and focalization by Ruth, the main character; and we are given feminist arguments against fundamental misogyny in society via stream of consciousness. These choices tend to accelerate the pace of the story and lure the reader into a more tense engagement with the text. It is this, perhaps, that might compel a reader to use the term “hysterical” to describe Ruth, especially in the text’s first half. But, to describe Ruth’s excitability and/or emotional intemperance, brought
on by the situation of her pregnancy, in this way would be a mistake. Ruth, although her thinking is fast and her emotions high and strong, is never irrational. She rationally presents arguments against women’s subjugation to family, home, and maternity. The only irrational thought she has in the entire novel is the hope that she will bring into the world something different than other mothers, that she will not simply be another woman exploited to perpetuate the human race.

“… for in her case it did not seem to be nature”

Ruth’s intellectual struggle becomes apparent quite early, for her resistance to convention is a rational resistance that returns again and again to basic tenets of heteronormativity. In essence, Ruth does not want a child. Period. Pregnant Ruth feels “like a woman possessed,” or, rather, the text notes, “She was a woman possessed, and she was horrified at the possession” [italics mine] (19). The woman who loves her, Dora, mistakes Ruth’s “strained and frightened face,” and “eyes red from secret crying” for fear of the pain related to childbirth (20). But Ruth explains to the reader that she has no concern for physical pain; in fact, if “her child were presented to her in her sleep, as it were, painless, immediate, she would not want it” (20).

She struggles with her feelings, painfully conscious of the fact that she is “not usual” if by being usual one must love one’s child; she also argues that in her case, loving a child is not in her nature (21, 20). She knows intrinsically that “not wanting the child now she would not want it later” (21). And yet the imperatives

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Moore Spleen 20
of heteronormative maternity are so strong that she cannot simply say she does not want a child, she must lash out again and again at the rationale of motherly love in an attempt to understand herself. One mode of argumentation she uses is a logical appeal, an improvisation on the famous Aristotelian syllogism: “All women do.” She states. “I am a woman. Therefore I do” (21). However, she is unsatisfied with this logic and tacks on the addendum, “And if I do not?” to the syllogism in resistance to a supposed womanly emotion she does not feel and assumes has been fashioned for the sole purpose of keeping women in their place. She walks through the syllogism again when exploring why anyone would have children at all, and ends a similar syllogism with another addendum: “All women do. I am a woman. Therefore I must. “To what purpose?” (22).

For Ruth, motherhood is a counterfeit connection forged by society, between woman and child, without reason. When she asks herself rhetorically why women must have children at all, she answers herself with: “But I am not to ask the reason because women have ignored the question, smiled, turned aside and talked of love” (22). She cannot accept completely that “women went through it all without question;” therefore she realizes that it is not that women

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79 A syllogism is a logical appeal made up of a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. For example:

All men are mortal,
Socrates is a man,
therefore: Socrates is mortal.

This is otherwise represented with variables as shown below:

All $M$ is $P$,
$S$ is $M$

\[ S \text{ is } P. \]

For more on Aristotle’s syllogism, please see Günther Patzig’s Aristotle’s Theory of the Syllogism; full citation in the bibliography.
have not questioned it, but that society – in need of its “Paternal estate” – has ignored her (26). “They like to pretend,” she reasons, that there are “only a few unnatural and unbalanced women who feel as I feel” (26). “They like pretending, she continues, “that all women are born mothers. They like pretending that because women have to be mothers, born or not” (26). Moore here permits Ruth to question what Simone de Beauvoir would later categorize as “myth”: a “panoply of historical and social factors […]” that have a “very particular part to play in persuading women of the naturalness of their fate” (Fallaize 88).

With this feminist insight, Ruth’s ennui is tangible and profound. She alludes to women’s inability to release themselves from the curse of the body by casting their fate as “[n]ature’s oven for nature’s bun” (24). Like any good feminist, she notes the eternally inequitable dichotomy of soul over body, mind over matter, and its preference of men.⁸⁰ In a bitter renunciation of sexist modern society, Ruth’s allusion to Plato’s Symposium glibly illustrates the hypocrisy of degrading the woman as body while simultaneously filching the vocabulary of woman’s procreation – pregnancy – and elevating the term only when used in conjunction with men:

Some there are, she quote[s] to Dora, whose souls are more pregnant than their bodies. No. Socrates. And no one has ever thought of applying it to women. Why? Because the soul Dora is

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⁸⁰ As noted by Rosalynn Voaden in her book God’s Words, Women’s Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries: “Classical theories of medicine and classical philosophy conspired in the development of an understanding of the nature and role of women vis-à-vis men which parallels the body/soul dichotomy. Under the dualistic scheme of things, women were equated with the body, with material concerns and fleshly obsessions, while men represented the rational soul, the mind and the spirit” (20-21). Please see the bibliography for full citation.
man’s prerogative, and woman is but the eternal oven in which to
bake the eternal bun. (24)\textsuperscript{81}

Why, Ruth wonders, does not woman question her lot in what is quite literally for
her a reproductive machine? Because, she answers herself – again referencing
classical philosophy – men are the ones who question; they are “the active and not
the passive instruments of nature” (25).\textsuperscript{82} With these caustic citations, Ruth
exhibits a feminist understanding of Western philosophy in which women are
aligned with “the senses and passivity” while men are aligned with “intellectual
activity”; these associations, as noted by Rosalynn Voaden in her 1999 book,

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\textsuperscript{81} Plato’s \textit{Symposium} places Socrates in conversation with a number of people, but for this
particular point, it is a dialogue with the prophetess of Mantinea, Diotima. According to
translator Benjamin Jowett, Diotima has taught Socrates about “the art and mystery of love.” She
taught him that “love is another aspect of philosophy,” for the “same want in the human soul
which is satisfied in the vulgar by the procreation of children, may become the highest aspiration
of intellectual desire” (Introduction). A lengthy portion of William Cobb’s translation is noted
here for the reader to have a better grasp of the larger context of male “pregnancy” in the
symposium:

> “Whenever someone who has been pregnant in his soul with these things from
> youth, and who is reaching adulthood and coming into his prime, desires to give birth and
> produce offspring, he goes around, I believe, searching for something beautiful, with
> which he can produce offspring. He can never produce offspring with something that is
> ugly. Hence, since he is pregnant with these things, he eagerly embraces beautiful bodies
> rather than ugly ones, and should he happen upon someone who has a beautiful, well-
> bred, and naturally gifted soul as well, he embraces the combination with great
> enthusiasm and immediately engages in many conversations with this man about virtue,
> about what a good man should be like, and what he should make it his business to do;
> thus, he sets out to educate him. When he attaches himself to someone beautiful, I
> believe, and associates with him, he gives birth and brings forth what he was pregnant
> with before, both while in that person’s presence and while remembering him when he’s
> absent. Together with him he nurtures the offspring produced, so that such men have
> much more to share with each other and a stronger friendship than that which comes from
> rearing children, since they share in the rearing of children who are more beautiful and
> more immortal.
>
> Everyone would prefer to bring forth this sort of children rather than human
> offspring […]. Many shrines have been dedicated to men because of this sort of children,
> but none at all because of their human offspring.” (in Cobb 46-7). Please see full citation
> in the bibliography.

\textsuperscript{82} Rosalynn Voaden notes that “generally it was held that the male sperm imparts movement, force
and spirit to the raw and imperfect matter supplied by the mother” (20).
resurface “continually in discussions of gender in Western civilization,” and are present “even today” (21).

But the harsh critique only further increases Ruth’s melancholy. The purpose of women, she concludes, is to make possible the “[h]undreds of thousands of buns daily” who then plod irrationally and relentlessly toward the same cycle: “Birth. Adolescence. Marriage. Birth. Old Age. Death.” (Moore Spleen 24). Ruth repeats the cycle in her head, finding it increasingly incoherent and morbid, and although she outwardly stays her revulsion (in front of Dora, especially), inwardly she continues her insurrection to the very idea of childbirth: “If mentally she was calmer it was because it is physically impossible for any emotion, no matter of what intensity, to be maintained at boiling pitch for more than a relatively short period of time” (27).

Indeed, she continues her revolt by disassociating her identity entirely from the class of “women.” At one point she tells her husband, “I think I carry my womb in my forehead” (24). This statement, although echoing the malady of hysteria historically connected to the wandering womb, evokes Ruth’s intellectual identity by placing that which in the medical world is the symbol of womanly difference into a rational space. It also alludes to the birth of Athena, the goddess of wisdom who sprang fully formed from the forehead of Zeus. With this observation, Ruth demands for herself intellectuality in and of itself, and intellectual creativity, “pregnancy,” and “birth” as much as any man.

Although up to this point she has done her best to ignore the physical reality of her pregnancy, it soon becomes apparent that “it” is “not happening in
her forehead at all,” and is instead “happening very much where it was meant to happen” (27). At this inevitability, Ruth finds herself morbidly despondent until she experiences a “conversion” (28). She has the power of creation; against this, even the gods cannot compete. She becomes “excited and very happy” with this newly understood power of creation; she insists that woman has “power of life, of creation, of death” (28). Drunk with her power and renewed conviction, she insists: “I will create. Only of course something new. Something different. Something beyond and above it all. Something worth having” (29).

Observing Ruth’s emotional highs and lows with curiosity, her doctor finds it “one of the most interesting manifestations of induced and sustained hysteria during pregnancy he had ever come across,” and declares further that “hysteria in such cases is so nearly allied to madness that it is a great pity, a great pity” (29). But, Ruth’s hopes for something new is neither hysteria nor madness, rather it is the general hope of modernity that acts as an antidote to the monotonous – and sexist – cycle of life that she has come to resent. Rather than hysteria, Ruth indeed is rationally brawling with a melancholic world in which the conveyer belt of reproduction has ceased to produce hope in its production. Therefore, when Ruth states,

No, she intended no replica of herself or Stephen. That would indeed be a shocking waste of her new-found and terrible power, laughed Ruth. Something new. Something quite different. Something worth having. Something beyond and above it all. Something free that would defy the dreary inevitable round of

she clarifies her disillusionment with heteronormative life, especially the heterosexual imperative for women that produces children. She rejects the desire for children to be created in their parent’s images, to walk in their parents’ footsteps; she describes this desire as the “monstrous fetish of the Family which women had […] created for themselves” (46). The cycle of life, she feels is entirely inadequate and a personal affront.

Although Ruth does admit there is a growth in her womb, which is not in her forehead, she is still determined to nourish and perfect it through her mind (32). She thinks using her will, her rational mind as a conduit, will ensure the creation of something new and strange. In this light, then, she becomes increasingly interested in this new and different thing she is creating, and muses about how without question she will not reproduce the “Hungerford nose” or the “Stanner eye.” She insists that hers will be a challenge of tradition in the largest sense, and after having expounded on the eye and nose sufficiently, she prophesies to herself regarding Stephen’s family: “You will not like it” (40). Although the “you” in this sentence is without a clear referent, it implies the Hungerfords and the Stanners, and since Ruth is well aware “she did not belong”

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83 “The monstrous conceit that birth was limited to the reproduction of imperfections hallowed by their association with oneself! Where was man’s humility, his sense of the ridiculous?” (46).

84 Hungerford is Ruth’s married name, and Stanner is the maiden name of her mother-in-law (38-9).
and “did not desire to belong” with these people, she knows “it” – her new and different thing – never will (32). Her creation will inherit at least one thing from her, she is certain, and that is being separate from that family lineage: “You will not like it, and it will understand you as little as I do” (40).

In perfecting this new being, Ruth smiles “at the thought of what they would think of it,” placing herself in the lineage of mythological cross-breeders whose offspring, creatures such as the minotaur and centaur, must have surprised a husband, family, or friends at first sight (32).85 When she indeed gives birth, she is told “it” is a boy and she is “startled,” “delighted,” and “astonished” at its “winsome and minute perfection” (48). However, when she finds out that “it” (Richard) is born physically and mentally incapacitated it is undeniable that he has lived up to Ruth’s prophesy; he will never understand the family that Ruth herself does not comprehend, and he has more than likely caused some surprise in the family ranks.

Ruth is no less surprised than anyone else at the “impassive” creature whose feet are “formless pads of waxen flesh,” and who stares with “vacant fixity” at her upon her insistence to inspect the child (49). Her shock at having created this being comes sure and swift: “She was sobered and appalled. It was terrible to her. It was as though in a drunken stupor one man had hit another, and they came and said to him: he is dead” (49). She immediately takes responsibility of the sole creation of her child. She tells Stephen “the truth,” which is what she

85 The minotaur were half-man, half-bull creations; the centaurs, half-man, half-horse.
supposes is “part of the expiation, and his due”: “I did this, she said. It is my
fault. I willed it. I am responsible” (63).

**Motherhood Rejected, Womanhood Refused**

Ruth’s twenty-two years on the island of Foria are spent in a “wilful half-
repentent” [sic] state. “Indeed,” assert Doan and Garrity in their introduction to
*Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and English Culture*, “it is Ruth’s guilt
over her revulsion to maternity that leads her to believe that her son’s deformities
are the result of her own reluctance to reproduce” (3). Ruth certainly has a sense
of guilt associated with Richard, but that guilt is more complex than a simple
“reluctance.” In true modernist fashion, she is adamantly opposed to
reproduction. As artists and writers of the time are making it *new*, Ruth has
similar aspirations: “I will create. Only of course, something new. Something
different. Something beyond and above it all. Something worth having” (29).
The birth she aspires to is an intellectual birth, a birth both willed by her rational
mind and a rational request to nature. Although she utilizes mythology and
enjoys especially the ritual that pregnant Greek women used to lie at the altar of
Apollo hoping to “imprint the divine image on the life within them” (30), Ruth
suggests this ritual is only symbolic for her because “the thought” is “never absent
from her mind” (30). Therefore, again, this birth for Ruth is truly closer to male
pregnancy as conceived by the Greeks than female pregnancy.

Content that something new will manifest itself, Ruth makes “no actual
demands” about her desires; there is “nothing shaped or definite about her plea.
There was no I want this and must have that, with a clear mental image of what it was she desired and expected to receive” (30-1). She yearns for that something built into modern age, a new earthly ontology, a new way of being in a world that will not succumb to the decrepitness of its age. She laments “with distaste […] mankind being born into a world not new and having to adapt itself to theories and habits made to fit it by others. How old, how nearly rotten with age seemed man’s world” (58). In this setting, Ruth explains, “[n]ew life” appears and the “worn-out world close[s] in” (58). In this way, the world compels children (the new) to follow its old, incoherently gendered paths:

The worn-out world closes in on the new life. And by the time the new life has freed itself (if it ever really does) it has acquired the prison garb and the prison habits. So that it cannot be free. It can never be free. The new thing will continue living its second nature. Always on its acquired habits (59).

If this is what happens to “new life,” it is no wonder Ruth attempts to produce something entirely different. It is clear, especially that the “new” and “different” for Ruth would be free of gender constraints. She confides in Dora early on:

*But you see I do not care for men, Dora. I do not care for women.*

*Why can one not have something else, something different,*

*something new, something more worth having if one has to go through all this?”* [original italics] (18)

Overwhelmingly unhappy with women’s social roles, Ruth is dissatisfied with only a choice of two, for a child born under this rubric must be one or the
other. And the worn-out world is that of strict gender prescriptions, to which Ruth has never quite lived up. She has proven not to be a very maternal nor particularly feminine woman throughout her life. The island native consciousness describes her as one of “these cold foreign women who look one steadily in the face and make no distinction in their talk. Men in petticoats, poor godless creatures” (13). At another point she is known as the “englishwoman who was never seen to handle her own child, but gave it to others to wash and feed and showed distaste when they caressed it” (14). It is also noted by Uller, the artist who spends two months on the island, that Ruth is:

so evidently […] not what is called a maternal woman. She showed little affection for the child, though attentive to it in that she would sit beside it for hours on end and was restless until she knew with whom it was and where. (65)

In Tuscany, on her way back to England, she is described as striding “with Amazon stride through the streets” (113). When she returns to London to settle the family accounts, she is described by her dead husband’s lawyer, Mr. Nathaniel Strathwick, as a “[h]ard […] [d]etermined sort of woman. Difficult type of woman to deal with. Not what one could call a womanly woman” (116). There is something about her he cannot quite remember, but it is “something queer” […] about the young person his late client had married” (116). She is also referred to as a “different” kind of person while socializing with the elite of London. Young and modern Joan Agnew proclaims to Ruth, “But you […] You’re different. You’re so original, you know. You’re marvelous. And without trying…” (123).
But, Ruth finds her newly valuable difference disconcerting:

You, you’re different! How often had that been held against her?

How she herself had reproached this very difference, this difficulty to take for granted, to produce appropriate emotions on their appropriate occasions… (125).

In her twenty-two year self-imposed ruminations about life, she knows she is unable to fit into the proper mold of a woman. She states more than once that to be a woman one must at least in part have the ability to produce “appropriate emotions” when necessary. Her intimate friend, Dora (who will be discussed later) is the epitome of a woman to Ruth; her ability to call up proper feminine emotions on cue is one of her maddeningly precise performances of womanhood. But Ruth has not only disliked these performances, she has been unable and/or unwilling to participate, especially if societal pressures require she bend to emotion when she is only ever driven by her intellect.

Indeed, however, one thing she does understand is that her “difference” has made her lonely, “lonely,” in fact, “as an invert” (125). Doan and Garrity explain that “Moore borrows from the language of sexology to convey Ruth’s predicament” (3). “Throughout the novel,” they state:

Moore provides us with ample clues to mark Ruth as sexually deviant: she identifies with her father and values the intellect above all else; she detests her female corporeality; and she exhibits no heterosexual desire or impulses (3).
To be sure, Ruth does have opportunity for heterosexual relations, but she deliberately leaves her husband and then absolutely cannot bring herself to sleep with Uller. In fact, when she speaks of her opportunity with the latter in retrospect, she describes herself as “a nun about to break her vows and unable to do so” (Moore *Spleen* 98).

The difference Ruth personifies in contradiction with societal norms can be found to complement the difference on the part of the modern woman at the time. Joan Agnew, of course, is a character modeled on the new modern woman, and to that modern woman Ruth reacts positively at first:

Ruth liked her. She was shocked and impressed and amazed.

This, then, was the modern girl the newspapers spoke so much about. Keen-eyed, fleshless, arrogant. She liked it. It was new to her. It had promise. Everywhere there was fear, a sense of danger, a sense of despair, a smell of decay: but the young women had a certain hard fleshless courage. They had promise. It was new to her and interesting” (123).

Doan and Garrity, in fact, argue that “Moore’s articulation of her sexual “difference” suggests that the invert is a kind of prototype for the new woman” (3). Ruth attributes “this loneliness of hers among her fellow-creatures; her desolate belief only in the few and fear of the many; her lack of hope; her sense of the purposelessness of it all” to a “form of mental inversion” (Moore *Spleen* 125-6). “Here,” remark Doan and Garrity,
“inversion” is not a physical malady, but a condition of being modern. Moore links lesbianism with modernity in order to break the stranglehold that heterosexist cultural standards have on women’s lives, but in doing so she inevitably reproduces the pathologizing language of inversion (4).

In spite of the negative connotations of Moore’s language, Doan and Garrity suggest that she “fundamentally conveys” […] that to be modern is in effect to be a lesbian” (4). And although they think the verbiage and its unpleasant undertones are “highly problematic,” they insist that “it does provide us with some historical parameters from which to speculate upon the uneasy relationship between sapphism and the modern” (4).

Ruth’s enthusiastic response to Joan and the modern woman is tempered after spending time with the young person. After this engagement, Ruth is less keen on the modern woman’s consciousness. After having reflected on her own struggle with “difference,” she is bewildered and indignant that in the new generation of women one was “expected to be different” (Moore Spleen 126). Being different, or what they “called being different,” for them “had an especial social value,” and “acted on others as a charm” (126). Her most vehement response, however, is saved for “emancipated” women who “want no children”; who also want to “keep their figures and their jobs,” as well as own the newly affordable “motor-cars” (126). These facts are incoherent to Ruth. She finds them “monstrous,” and “mean” (126). Although it seems as if Ruth is hypocritically criticizing the modern woman – after all, Ruth did not want and
never has wanted her own son – it is actually a deeper and more meaningful
condemnation about modernity in general and its effects on women. As Ruth had
questioned her own resistance to maternity over two decades prior while
struggling with her sexual and social difference as an unmotherly, unfeminine
woman, she scrutinized that resistance because of her mother’s own experience
with pregnancy. Ruth looks for a reason,

for the sudden and bewildering revulsion which had taken
possession of her like some deadly disease, a form of emotional
galloping consumption that ravished her physically and mentally
(23).

It becomes important to Ruth that her resistance is justified against the bar set by
her mother. Her mother “never wanted her,” she tells her friend Dora (23). For
her mother had not been married to her father and therefore her mother’s horror at
pregnancy was a “very sound reason”; one that was “real to her and terrible”
(23).Against this, Ruth feels the need to measure her own feelings. “She had
had such good cause to dread the coming of her child,” Ruth explains, and
hazards “[w]hat then would she think of me […] who can find no reason?” (23).

It is this standard through which Ruth eyes the modern woman. I suggest
it is not particularly that Ruth thinks it monstrous of women not to want children;
it is rather that she is mystified that the modern woman is not actively engaged in

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86 For sake of the plot, it may be important for the reader to know that Ruth’s mother dies in an
attempted abortion, and Ruth is born prematurely. Ruth relates it this way: “Never wanted her!
No, and not only had not wanted her but had dreaded the very thought of her and had tried to end
it all and could not and with the shock had died and she had been born barely at her seventh
month” (Moore Spleen 23).
any real struggle against societal pressures and norms. If difference, both sexual and gendered, is now only a charming affect that women aspire to master, modernity’s bleakness seems even more bleak. When Ruth notes that the modern woman’s affect replaces the honest stare in society’s face, and names it “mean,” it seems to be a commentary on both the smallness of their aspirations, and their lack of intellectual rigor and discrimination. While Ruth has lived for twenty-two years with her difference staring at her in the face through the eyes of her mute son, the modern woman is content to consume, to work, to avoid childbearing with less thought than can be put toward where she might entertain herself that evening. At one point Ruth wonders which is “the more culpable, physical or mental insentience? To be unable to understand or to refuse?” (127).

By the end of the novel, however, Ruth seems to have let go that bitterness and more. After having observed and struggled with her re-introduction to London, her life-long musings culminating in this return to the past, she finally simply stops, and the text tells us: “She no longer reproached herself” (128).

“… and the name of the other Ruth”87

Ruth’s difference, as mentioned in the section above, is that which keeps her distant from the general populace. However, regardless of her bitterness toward her own maternal experiences, and her resentment toward women’s societal role in general, she is closest to two women in the novel who bear witness to a topos of lesbianism that is very convincing. This is the age old story of

87 This is taken from the book of Ruth 1.4.
women who desire to be near one another, take care of one another, live with one another although there are no blood ties or familial obligations to compel them. This is the story of Ruth.

Of course one cannot overlook Ruth’s name. Her first name is never followed by a last. We know her father’s name, and at one point in the novel both her husband’s last name and her husband’s mother’s maiden name are mentioned, but her name always appears independent of these; it is always and only “Ruth.” This singularly named person alludes to the story of Ruth in the Bible and the homoerotic undertones that have transformed that biblical book into a lesbian-friendly text. In “Finding a Home for Ruth: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Otherness,” Kwok Pui-lon states that lesbian readers do a “radical debunking of the ideology of patriarchal household [sic]” because they “focus on the love between Naomi and Ruth instead of the liaison between Ruth and Boaz” (143). Pui-lon notes further that specifically the, story provides important role models for female friendship for Jewish lesbians: committed relationship across the boundaries of age, nationality, and religion; commitment to maintaining familial connections and raising children together. (143)

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88 A summary of the book of Ruth may be helpful here: Naomi, her husband, and their two sons move to Moab because of a famine in their land. Naomi’s husband dies, and her sons take wives, Orpah and Ruth. When Naomi’s sons also die she decides to return to her own land and encourages her daughters-in-law to return also to their mother’s homes. Although they both refuse, Orpah eventually returns, but Ruth insists on staying with the older woman: “Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1.16). Naomi allows Ruth to stay with her, brokers a marriage for the protection of both women between her and Boaz, an ancestor of Naomi’s. Ruth then has a son proclaimed by neighbors as “a son born to Naomi,” who is also then nursed by Naomi and not Ruth (4.16-17).
In reading *Spleen* one can find similar connections between Ruth and two women in the novel that are important in establishing its lesbian propensities. At the earliest point of the novel, Ruth’s closest friend is Dora, an older girl from school who took the younger girl under her wing:

During her single term at school there was a girl who was very kind to her, came to her rescue on more than one occasion, took her under her protection for she was older than Ruth […]. It was a curious protective friendship this of the older girl for Ruth, the more so because nothing could have been more simple or unexciting than the quiet Dalby household. (35)

As Ruth cleaves to her mother-in-law Naomi in the biblical text after her husband dies, Ruth cleaves to her friend Dora after her father dies and during her subsequent pregnancy:

Whereas after her father’s death when Ruth for the first time in her life was seriously ill and lost masses of her shadowy and beautiful hair, Dora taking charge of her again as if she had been a child, carried her off to her lovely home […] where Ruth was never to forget the summer noons through which in her convalescence, drowsing on cushions on the floor of the boat, she seemed to glide over the lake with its hundred turnings, its dragon-fly murmurings, its pale enchanted willows mirrored in the glazed water. (35)

Ruth ruminates at times about Dora’s unremitting devotion. While struggling with pregnancy, she occasionally interrupts her own anxieties to
examine Dora’s fondness and commitment to her. Although at this point she has
now married and is living under Stephen’s roof, Dora remains a constant fixture
in her daily life. She wonders about “Dora’s need to protect and dominate” the
things around her… including herself; she tries again and again to “fathom
whatever bound Dora to her with such an urge, such an intensity; almost with the
implacability of enmity (42).

Dora’s love and loyalty to Ruth is intimated as lesbian love, which is
further supported by Ruth’s observation that Dora is the kind of woman who
“would make [a] splendid” mother if one could get round the fact that she holds
“contempt of men and marriage” (20). In an effort to calm Ruth during one
conversation about her pregnancy, Dora piously reminds Ruth that “this is what
woman is made for,” to which Ruth retorts “– Was made for” (26). The irony, of
course, being that Ruth who rejects maternity finds herself pregnant while Dora, a
woman who accepts the status quo, has no intention of taking part at all in that
which woman is/was “made for”; she rejects it outright and chooses rather to be
the overseer and confidante of the woman she loves.

Dora’s “pale protecting eyes” out of which she looks at Ruth, “lovesick,”
attests to the verity of her love for the younger woman (7-8). Unquestionably,
Dora adores her friend. Ruth is “Dear, dear beloved Ruth,” and “Ruth. Dearest
Ruth” (24, 8); she holds a “gentle detachment,” beneath a “dear eagerness” that
“one could not help loving her for, and instantly” (20). The elder woman thinks
the experience of childbirth “should have glorified” Ruth instead of leaving her
“face like a tragic mask,” which causes much anxiety for the “unhappy Dora” (20).

Ruth acknowledges the intensity of Dora’s feelings toward her, but rather than active reciprocation, she is content to observe and examine the other woman’s curious attachment. Although we are led to understand that Ruth also cares for Dora, she remains a rather safe distance away from actually partaking in an affair of the heart. It is her mind that takes precedence over any sympathetic, emotional, and nurturing characteristic attributed to women, and which Dora represents. Ruth finds it unbearable that the “head” of woman in society is displaced by the “ever enlarging heart,” the “fatty ever-noble heart swollen with appropriate emotions” (59). And Dora so suitably embodies the decapitated, “neck downward” truth of woman’s existence that Ruth can be nothing but awed by how well she does it, and bitter at its having to be done at all (59).

Dora, to be sure, plays a more active role than her Naomi counterpart, and Ruth is a more passive character than her biblical namesake at this point, but after giving birth Moore’s Ruth leaves her beloved Dora (and husband) to take up in a far off land and to be cared for by yet another woman who loves her, Donna Lisetta.

Overwhelmed by travel and fatigue, Ruth lands on the island, a foreign country whose language is unknown to her. As she is shuffled amid the multitude of foreign figures (blots), they merge into a confusing uniformity until one blot is differentiated from the others. Above the din of the masses, this “detached” blot
pacifies Ruth with sounds distinct from the chaotic tangle of noise threatening to wreck her.

They were soft, reassuring sounds; gentle, caressing sounds; restful as hands trailing in cold water. Cool, cool, cool, and kingcups, and cool beads of water on grass, lush, tangled grass, odorous earth-hair to lay a forehead on. Such had been her first and vague impression of Donna Lisetta, and in all the twenty-two years of her life on this strange dark-hearted island, it had remained and strengthened. (10)

Donna Lisetta’s voice “calm[s] the panic that possess[es]” Ruth and the latter is placed safely into a carriage (10). As the baby’s nurse also attempts to get into the carriage, Ruth shocks the Italian crowd by waving the girl and the baby away, and submitting immediately to sobs that wrack her entire body. The text notes that “the elegant foreign lady would have sat there all day and blubbered while [the crowd] stood around” watching her, but for Donna Lisetta stepping in yet again, climbing into the carriage with Ruth and “taking charge of her head by resting it on her shoulder” (11). Ruth then falls “soundly asleep on Donna Lisetta’s strong black-silk bosom” (11).

The inverted roles notwithstanding, it is surprising how the story fits rather interestingly with the biblical one. Ruth now resides in a foreign land – the village of Foria – and takes up house with Donna Lisetta who also takes in Ruth’s son: “the bundle of white clothes that rarely cried and remained motionless for hours on end” (15). Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Ruth does not wash, feed, or
handle her own child. Therefore, much as Ruth in the Bible hands over the son she has borne to Naomi, Ruth hands her son over to Donna Lisetta (and other people of the village).

As far as how Donna Lisetta feels about Ruth, we know that after taking her in, she is very happy with her charge: she accepts “her new lodger without question and [is] immensely proud of her” (15). When Ruth cuts her “elegant mountain of hair” to the neck, and her “shorn tails of hair” curl “like altar candles in June,” Lisetta calls her “a little angel” (15). The text explains:

Lisetta liked having her about; liked looking at her; liked looking up at her. Found her pleasure in serving her. Why or how she could not say: her need was stronger than any reason she could give for it. Her mad one had become indispensable to her.89 (82)

Perhaps at first Ruth is taken in for her societal value, for it is suggested that social status is raised by having a son in America who sent home money to his island family, and Lisetta is aware that “[h]aving a mad foreign woman in the house was equivalent to having three sons in the americas: three sons doing well” (81). However, Ruth and Donna Lisetta do build a life together that is constructed around their daily routine. After the day’s activities, they spend each evening together drinking coffee while Ruth reads the newspaper out loud to Lisetta as she sews or embroiders (54). Ruth enjoys the animated Lisetta who she approvingly

89 The adjective “mad” is used by the locals early to describe Ruth after she first comes to the island and both publicly rejects her infant and collapses emotionally in front of the throngs of people. This will be her legacy even twenty-two years later.
describes as one of the few people on the island who “laughs from the heart and not the teeth” (83).

Their amiability toward each other is only upset once, when Lisetta’s sister-in-law Giulia (who is also provided lodging by Lisetta) breaches decorum by leading tourists to the house in order to gawk at Ruth on the veranda (82). It is the only time “in their years together” that Ruth speaks “angrily” to her caretaker:

But she was not a tourist attraction. She was not one of the sights of the island. And having been turned into one she would leave the island as soon as her packing was finished. (82)

But, like so many years before, Lisetta calms her troubled charge with soothing words and now pet names: “Her nurslng, her turtle dove, the english [sic] signora had been offended. She knew who was to blame” (82). Lisetta’s protective shield encapsulates her dear Ruth as she turns on Giulia with such vengeance that the latter is shocked as the argument commences:

She had accused Lisetta of putting a strange woman before her own flesh and blood; of being more fond of her than of her own family. Which was probably much more true than ever Giulia in her anger realized, and certainly was not the safe appeal the widow had hoped. (82)

The narrator then notes that “Perhaps Lisetta would as soon have turned her own daughters out of doors as seen Ruth go. Doubtless a judicious blending of affection and interest: but on the whole affection uppermost” (82). It is made
clear that whatever the reason for Lisetta’s fondness for Ruth, the bond between them is stronger than the bond between herself and her own family by blood.

Lesbian topoi is pervasive in the mimesis of this Modern protagonist. Through feminist logic, Ruth rejects patriarchal reasoning on women, motherhood, and womanhood, and although we cannot argue definitively about Ruth’s sexual intimacies with any other character, her conclusions about societal rules and gender boundaries offer a way of thinking in harmony with lesbianism.

**Something Different**

The selection of this novel for this project demonstrates a remarkable variation on the topos of the thinking woman in both *The Hotel* and *Imagined Corners*. This novel offers us a woman who actively works against heteronormativity by choosing to distance herself from any direct interaction with it. Like Sydney Warren who breaks off her engagement, Ruth rejects marriage outright, although Ruth is already married and rejects it even more clearly by leaving her husband. On a more hostile level, Ruth rejects patriarchy by leaving England altogether for the south of Italy. Although one could argue that she can never escape patriarchy completely, her move to a foreign land, her rejection of conventional motherhood and womanhood, and the islanders’ inability to uncomplicatedly place her under the stereotypical label of “woman” allow her independence and freedom that she would have otherwise not experienced.

Like Elizabeth and her relationship with Elise in *Imagined Corners*, Ruth is taken up by a female helpmeet in her new land who becomes the only person
she loves and trusts, and Donna Lisetta nurtures and cares for Ruth even to the extent of forsaking her own family (like Elizabeth, who perhaps subconsciously releases her husband Hector from his familial responsibilities because she finds a sense of wholeness with Elise). But, also like Elise, Ruth intellectually battles patriarchal ideology, especially that which consigns women to pregnancy and motherhood against their will. Like Elise, she argues vehemently against heteronormativity in both word and deed, for both Elise and Ruth flee their native England for the more lax foreign clime of Italy.

By the end of the novel, after Ruth has made peace with herself by making peace with England, by rejecting motherhood – and accepting that rejection – and by accepting the support, nurturance, and love of Donna Lisetta, perhaps Ruth has found an answer to her continuous questioning of ethics, love, and responsibility. It is always “something different” that she wants. The message she received before childbirth was that she would be happy with “Something worth having. Something beyond and above it all […]. Something new” (28). Perhaps she has finally found it in the end, but encapsulated more by the freedom of the tiny Italian island, the liberation from motherhood she finds there, and the freedom to be cared for by the fierce love of a woman.
Like the other protagonists of this section, Sophia, of Sylvia Townsend Warner’s 1936 novel *Summer Will Show*, is a highly intelligent, thoughtful woman. She is a “slow and rigid thinker,” although physically vigorous (20). Following *Spleen* one feels a very definite change of tempo. For this protagonist, to bide twenty-two years on an island working out her personal matters, like Ruth, to “sit still and contemplate” would fill her with “anguish” (20). And indeed, Sophia does not contemplate at a standstill, but instead opts for movement over stasis to nudge her intellect. However, it is that movement or action of the novel that generates strong criticism about this text. Unlike Minna’s sentiments in the above epigraph, practicality, it would seem, has no place in this text. Although practically minded, the protagonist Sophia participates in a plot that is not only impractical, but implausible.  

According to Terry Castle in her 1997 article concerning the text, the problem with Townsend Warner’s novel – if in fact it is a problem – is not so much that it forfeits plausibility at the end but

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90 Robin Hackett notes: “Critics who focus on the lesbianism of the novel have criticized [the] ending for its melodrama” (118).
that it forfeits it from the start. There is nothing remotely believable about Sophia Willoughby’s transformation from ‘heiress of Blandamer’ into lover of her husband’s mistress and communist revolutionary, if by ‘believability’ we mean conformity with the established mimetic conventions of canonical English and American fiction. (‘Sylvia’ 547)

Although Castle seems to concede the novel’s lack of plausibility on the one hand, she counters the argument on the other by suggesting that Warner is in on the joke, that she “seems aware of this, and without ever entirely abandoning the framing pretense of historicity […], often hints at the artificial, ‘as if’ or hypothetical nature of the world her characters inhabit” (547). As a result, Castle questions whether or not the criticism of “plausibility” is a true weakness of the text. She suspects the reason for the novel being “underread” and other resistance to it [such as finding it implausible] is because of its love story between Sophia and Minna, “which challenges so spectacularly the rigidly heterosexual conventions of classic English and American fiction” (537).

Castle argues against two critics in her article, both resistant to the lesbian content of the novel, although to differing degrees. Robert L. Caserio and Sandy Petrey argue against the lesbianism in Summer Will Show, preferring a more conventional reading of the protagonist: Caserio suggests that Warner’s Sophia and Minna were “intended […] to be seen as ‘chaste sisters in revolution,’” and Petrey claims the oyster scene, noted at the opening of the chapter, is “at last cryptic and equivocal” (551, Fn 7). Caserio’s and Petrey’s attempts to strip the
topoi of lesbianism in Warner’s novel are examples of the rock-and-hard-place novels are placed by handling lesbianism at all. Out of every fantastic thing in this novel, Caserio and Petrey would have us think it is the lesbianism that makes it implausible. Yet, compared to other happenings in the novel, the fact of Sophia and Minna coming together as lovers seems the least of these extraordinary acts.

**Not a Mother-Woman**

To be sure, Sophia is more unconventional a character than many critics give her credit; she is from a long tradition of powerful and strong characters who do not easily fall under the label of “mother women,” and suggests our first glance at negative valence mimesis in the creation of this representation of woman.\(^\text{91}\) Just how far she falls outside this realm may be shocking to some readers: She is overtly disappointed in how her children have turned out; they bore her; and ultimately she finds them entirely unsuitable to be her heirs and those of Blandamer, her estate. She is befuddled and amazed that “she, who had been so strong all her life, should have given birth to two such delicate children” (SWS 21). Not far off from *Spleen’s* Ruth where she is incredulous not only because she is pregnant in the first place, but because she is expected to take it all as a happy and natural fact of her womanly existence while personally feeling that the experience is both unnatural and monstrous; Sophia finds it unfathomable how

\(^\text{91}\) It should be noted that in her late 19\(^\text{th}\) century novel *The Awakening* (1899), American author Kate Chopin offered feminists a first glimpse of the distinction between “mother women” and “non-mother women,” a radical idea in the cultural milieu of the time in which “woman” and “mother” were meant to be interchangeable. The novel’s protagonist, Edna Pontellier is a feminist symbol of the non-mother woman held up against her intimate friend Adele Ratignolle, who symbolizes the traditional role.
she has given life to bodies with such strangely weak constitutions. She feels “profound disgust and weariness” at one point when Damian, after fighting with sister Augusta and half-cousin Caspar, is still weeping in his room an hour later (43). “He is always ill,” she thinks “bitterly impatient” (43). At another point, she takes a crying Augusta into her arms to comfort her, but we are told she is “despairingly detached from her emotions,” as she reflects on anything else because of her inability to empathize with the child (36). Indeed, immediately after this moment, Sophia concedes she “cannot understand […] her own children” (37).

“I live for my children,” she states near the opening of the novel, “a good life, the life my heart would have chosen” (12). But, she asserts on the afternoon of the visit to the limekiln, “it was one thing to live for one’s children: another to go [on] walks with them, and converse with their nurse-maid” (14). The text also makes clear that Sophia is impatient with her frail children’s need to rest after their walk to the limekiln; she “dislike[s] sitting down in the middle of a walk” as well as “dawdling” of any sort (20). As Sophia ponders more about her life and these children from which she feels curiously detached, it is obvious that her feelings as a mother are as unconventional as her own personality.

She is pleased from the beginning at the notion that no horse, sheep, or dog raised at Blandamer was “a more vigorous or better-trained animal than she” (9). She revels in her own strength and – since writing to inform Frederick he

92 Sophia and the nurse have taken the children to the limekiln where they are to be held over the opening and made to inhale its fumes. It is a treatment Sophia had herself as a child in order to relieve whooping cough. Unfortunately, the limekiln man has smallpox and soon after the visit both children contract the disease and die as a result.
need never return to Blandamer – sense of independence. She is “tall, well-made, well-finished”; she has an “upright carriage,” a “direct gaze,” a “slow, rather loud voice and clear enunciation” (24). With these attributes, she conducts herself in a “sensible” and “rational” way in accordance with her “views as to the conduct of life” (24). And yet, her rational attitude makes her an unconventional mother, for not only does she reside by herself and children without a husband present, but she is more proud of Blandamer’s animals than her children. The stables, for example, give her a “sense of escape” from her domestic concerns and the overall messiness of life when one does not fit into the heteronormative mold of wife and mother. In the stables, everything is “clean, bare, and sensible; there [is] no untidiness, and no doubt” (23). She shows a love, understanding, and genuine affection for her horses, which were “everything that her children should have been: strong, smooth-skinned, well-trained, well bred” (23).

Sophia’s “motherly” feelings for her children are not exactly those which are idealized in heteronormative culture. Rather than the conventional glow of motherly possession, we find that the children are a “care” to her instead of, say, a joy (57). They are anemic little things to be “tended, made allowances for, buttressed up, remedied,” and realizes herself that these emotions do not necessarily come from love. She further describes Damian and Augusta as a “wound […] that would never quite heal, that must perpetually be cleansed and dressed” (57). With the time it has taken to “care” for her children, she suggests she has “scarcely ever had time to love them,” and that what she has done she has done out of “devotion,” which she explains is not the same thing as love” (57).
Undermining Heteronormativity

Warner plays with the negative and positive valences of mimesis in order to show the irrationality of always positioning women within conventional discourse regarding gender/sex performance and other behaviors. Therefore, critics who attempt to read Sophia through an heteronormative lens may miss the cues that suggest a different kind of reading. For example, if one notes Sophia’s thoughtful, pragmatic, and even masculine traits as well as her intense distaste for mothering are Warner’s way of using negative valence mimesis to illustrate a different kind of “womanhood,” one will not find so implausible Sophia’s repositioning from mother and wife to lesbian revolutionary.

Sophia’s unconventional decisions and activities are more true to her personality than others that have remained unquestioningly plausible for critics. For example, after her children have died, Sophia concludes that what she wants, “what she must have” is another child (84). Even though we have been offered ample evidence to the contrary – have been shown that she is impatient with children, that she is more comfortable and proud of her animals than her children, and that although she may have a sense of devotion to little ones, she does not necessarily love them – and after also having been presented with her feelings of bitterness and despair when she learns that her friend, Mrs. Hervey, is pregnant, it seems implausible that Sophia herself would go the way of childbirth and nurturance again. Indeed, after Mrs. Ingleby confides in Sophia that her daughter (Mrs. Hervey) is due in the spring, through free indirect discourse we gather the utter despondency Sophia has to the very idea:
She had left the doctor’s house feeling as though she had escaped, and only just in time, from a dusty and airless closet. Yet in such a narrow den of gentility, and with such a mother, a young woman would bear a child. Yes, and another, and another; and grow middle-aged, and grow old, and die, and be buried under a neat headstone, describing her as a beloved wife. But what other lot, said her thoughts scratching nearer home, need any woman look for? […] With angry reasonings she tried to shake herself free from the sense of intolerable flatness and tedium which Mrs. Ingleby’s excited confidence had evoked. It was as though, after long days in a court-house, she had heard amid the buzzing of flies and the shuffling of feet a sentence of death pronounced, or of that worst death, a life-long imprisonment […]” (77).

This can in nowise imply a woman who “must have” a child. Yet, it is not commented on at all by critics who find other parts of the text implausible. It is an example of Warner’s play with positive valence mimesis – conventional representation of a woman’s ‘natural’ desires – to show the absurdity of conventional assumptions about women like Sophia who do not and cannot harmonize with that particular characterization.

Two other motivators of Sophia’s move to Paris I find equally troubling and implausible. First, when Sophia decides she must have another child, her brilliant idea to this end is to visit the limekiln man. To herself she explains: “I will go to him, as those other women do. He robbed me of my children, he shall
This escapade is almost immediately terminated before Sophia ever has the opportunity to explain her desires. Frightened by his lumbering toward her and thrusting his face in hers after a short treatise on reproduction, she escapes him and is only followed by “the sound of a woman’s laughter,” most likely one of the man’s lovers.

Second, after her dialogue with the kilnman, she thinks him “[t]oo rough a sire, perhaps, for the heir of Blandamer” after all, and suggests that his “words, plain and vile” had “served a purpose [in] fathering a determination in her mind” (83). She directs herself toward Paris in a strikingly outrageous pursuit: to be impregnated once again by her estranged husband:

Plenty more children, he had said. Rich and poor can breed alike.

Fate should not defeat her, she would have a child yet. And having already a husband it was certainly best and most convenient that the child should be his. So she would go to Paris, fetch Frederick back if needs be, beguile him, at the barest, explain her purpose and strike a bargain. As other women could trudge up to the lime-kiln, Mrs. Willoughby might go to Paris. (83-4)

And, it is the lesbian relationship of which scholars are skeptical? Indeed they seem not to raise the most miniscule of criticisms regarding the practicability of her alleged motivation for going to Paris in the first place. Nor does anyone raise a fuss about whether or not it would be plausible that Sophia would even consider

93 After she had taken the children to the limekiln man, Hanna, the children’s nursemaid gossips about the man saying that he was a “stranger from across the county, without kith or kin,” living a solitary life. “Yet,” she states, “it was said that women would go to him, stealing to him by night, guided by the red glare of his kiln upon the dark hillside” (59).
impregnation by the limekiln man (80-83). Because these flights of fancy fall under the protected wing of the *positive valence* mimesis of a woman, they raise no flags regardless how absurd they may be to and against the grain of Sophia’s character.

The text does not withhold the fact that Sophia is not interested in heterosexual relations. In fact, the text explains that romantic sentiments are met by the thoughtful young woman “with bewilderment, embarrassment, and disapproval” (25). As if she were an observer outside of her own life, she critiques herself during the “short season in London in which she met and married Frederick” (25). Sophia, we are told, “had worn the prevailing mode of feeling as duly as she had worn flowers in her hair” (25). Although her mother and father in certain ways had condoned this affectation, Sophia expresses to the reader that she found the first “foolish” and the second “messy” (25). Furthermore, she is unequivocal in that she regards such conduct as nonsense, holding as a badge of honor the fact that she never had “the slightest yielding of heart to these whims of behaviour and feeling” (25).

But the ritual of finding a spouse is only silly; Sophia keeps her revulsion for heterosexual expression and intercourse. Indeed, at one point she asserts that the fragility of her disappointing children are the “worst, the only enduring result of that deplorable mating” (21). She frankly asserts that the “sudden imperious curiosity to know what the love of man and woman might be” which led to her unfortunate relationship with Frederick in the first place, had “shrivelled away” upon “first learning” and had left her “cold and unamorous” (209). While sharing
a bed with Frederick in the early days, and “hearing him splashing and crashing in
his dressing-room,” she constructs her own obstacles to intimacy. She had been
“as shy as a nymph, as disobliging as a virgin martyr, armouring herself in great
starched dressing-gowns voluminous as clouds” (144). Her experience with
heterosexuality has left her “frigid to wine and the love of man” (67).

When Frederick becomes a dependable philanderer, Sophia is both
indifferent and then irate (27). The text explains that Frederick’s behavior might
have elicited a different response from a wife other than she:

A weaker or an idler woman might have been jealous; a woman in
love would certainly have been so. Indifference and responsibility
preserved her from any sharper pang than annoyance. (29)

More than any other emotion at the beginning of the novel Sophia is angry.
However, as noted above, it is not drawn out by jealousy. By the beginning of the
novel she has given Frederick up completely eighteen months prior, has written
him a four page letter explaining “her exact reasons for wishing not to live with
him again, her exact decision never to do so” (21). Her rage springs from her
thoughtful and independent will, and the comprehension that as a woman she is
kept stifled in the box of domesticity, and that the woman’s sphere allows her no
freedom of movement, no vitality outside that sphere, and no right to inhabit it.
The feminist impulse to shed her sexed image at the beginning of the novel is not
only reflected in her aversion to heterosexuality, but to her wish to experience
herself outside the conventions, to experience herself otherwise. Although she
finds “mother” a fine title, she finds “landowner” a finer one, and she is pleased
that the title “wife” has been put to rest: “fortunately, she need no longer be counted among the wives,” Sophia thinks triumphantly (21).\footnote{Sophia is pleased Frederick is simply gone, for in an estranged partnership, she knows very well that she is “safer than if she [were] a widow” and people were “pestering” her to marry (22).}

But it is not just her title she wants changed, she wants and yearns for fundamental transformation. She wants to live without the heteronormative structures that surround her. She finds women’s lives dreary and tedious: “It was boring to be a woman, nothing that one did had any meat in it. And her peculiar freedom, well-incomed, dishusbanded, seemed now only to increase the impotence of her life” (47). Undeniably, she is relieved to be rid of Frederick, and a certain freedom is extended to her because of this and subsequently through the deaths of her children, but she still feels the constraints of a woman’s lot. In a few instances she wishes she were a man – “It was a pity (for many reasons it was a pity) that she was not a man” – in order to handle her grief in an easier manner, such as “plung[ing] into dissipation” … and other unnamed reasons (10, 66). She thinks if she were a man she might well be an ambitious one due to her “long-breathed resolution, her clear head and love of dominance” (67). More than anything else, she craves freedom from her gendered bonds.

To break free of these bonds, she seeks action and productivity, both personal and public. She fancies at one point that she might live alone in a small cottage and “do everything for [her]self,” like chopping her own wood, which symbolically stands as a concrete way in which to make a mark on the world and from which women are kept (47). Of course, in her fancy Sophia must set aside
entirely the feminine gendered role; therefore, the domestic work of “cooking and mak[ing] the bed,” ironically, would be done by a hired woman (46).

She also daydreams of running amok in Cornwall “unsexed and unpersoned,” leading a “wild romantic life” where she,

- rode, sat in inns, slept in a bracken bed among the rocks, bathed
- naked in swift-running brooks, knocked people down, outwitted shadowy enemies, poached one night with gipsies, in another went a keeper’s round with a gun under her arm (33-4).

Presently she thinks resuming her habit of hunting may be the answer to her need to exhibit herself publicly, to do something. “I will hunt again!” she exclaims, to “show openly to all that knew covertly how destiny and death had combined to make a free woman of her” (77-78). And yet, gaming, she points out to herself, “in its very fever is cold,” and she knows inherently that to “survive,” she, so cold herself, “must be warmed” (67).

If one reads carefully Warner’s play with negative and positive valences of mimesis of “woman,” one should not question so stringently Sophia’s move toward lesbianism. After noting Sophia’s obvious and sincere disillusionment with womanhood, her move toward a more radical and unusual lifestyle from lesbianism to revolutionary seems much more credible, even reasonable.

**The Mundanity of Lesbianism**

Sophia’s yearning for escape by the time she makes her way to Paris has become insatiable. However, once in Paris and under the charms of Minna,
Sophia’s life changes from mother-to-be-again, to lesbian lover and French revolutionary. Although this movement in character development sounds radical itself, after having seen the ways in which Sophia has resisted heteronormativity through rejecting the prongs that stabilize it – namely, heterosexuality, motherhood/wife-hood, and proper gender performance – it is not as implausible as one might be led to believe why she is drawn to a lifestyle of lesbianism and revolution.

In her introduction to *Summer Will Show*, Claire Harman explains that within the novel, “The plot turns, without explanation, explicitness, or a single blush, on the development of Sophia and Minna’s unexpected and immediate sexual attraction to each other” (x). This is not to say that Warner does not make the relationship explicit; rather, it suggests that it is brought in with as little fanfare as any romantic liaison is from any novel. In other words, the lesbian relationship between Sophia and Minna is treated as mundanely as any other relationship might be.

But to say that their relationship is mundane does not suggest boring in the least. It suggests, Harman claims, that Warner’s novel “refuses to unpick and categorize the characters’ sexuality, so there is no special pleading on behalf of the author’s own political ideology” (x).\(^95\) It means that unlike Radclyffe Hall in *The Well of Loneliness*, Warner felt it unnecessary to dwell solely on why the

\(^{95}\) Although Harman is a sympathetic reader of lesbianism in the novel, she too downplays lesbianism in the book at the expense of the novel’s historical aspect, argues Heather Love in her 2007 book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. “Claire Harman asserts that ‘lesbianism was not Sylvia Townsend Warner’s theme in this book,’ and that the novel’s plot of ‘anarchic’ love forms the backdrop of its central concern – class politics” (132). Please see full citation in the bibliography.
lesbianism occurs and/or explain why lesbianism exists in the first place. Warner simply demonstrates to the reader that it is there, that it is the way of the plot. Of course, with handling lesbianism in this way, she, like many of the previous British authors, simply acknowledges lesbianism. Period.

Her bluntness notwithstanding, Warner does exhibit a sexually stimulating and stimulated relationship. After all that has been said about Sophia’s reaction to Frederick, Warner allows Sophia an entirely new response to Minna. Her first night in Paris Sophia goes in search of Frederick and ends up at a storytelling in Minna’s house. It is as soon as this that the reader observes Sophia falling in love with the other woman before she knows it herself:

Never in her life had she felt such curiosity or dreamed it possible. As though she had never opened her eyes before she stared at the averted head, the large eloquent hands, the thick, milk-coffee coloured throat that housed the siren voice. Her curiosity went beyond speculation, a thing not of the brain but in the blood. It burned in her like a furnace, with a steadfast compulsive heat that must presently catch Minna in its draught, hale her in, and devour her (120).

The literally heated description makes it obvious to the reader that Sophia has found the warmth that will be her salvation. Like Elise, the match who needs Elizabeth as a box to strike on in Imagined Corners, Sophia’s warmth arises from

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96 Minna is a gifted storyteller and revolutionary, and is known throughout the country for both. On this particular night, many revolutionaries and sympathizers have gathered in Minna’s home, which ends with Minna telling a story of her childhood as a Jew in Lithuania.
feelings of love and desire for Minna – especially Minna’s intellectual understanding of politics and the world – which she has never felt for Frederick.

As far as Frederick is concerned, Sophia’s curiosity about heterosexuality was quickly stopped short by experience, but even so was always seen rather clinically, from outside it all. Her curiosity in this case is a burning in her blood, an interior yearning to experience Minna within.

By the end of the storytelling as Minna makes her way around the guests in her room, Sophia feels as if she has failed in her quest. She does not know what she expected to have happened with Minna, but as the crowd trickles out of the house, Sophia stays on watching Minna while Minna takes note of Sophia. After hearing the woman’s story, Sophia’s plan is forgotten. Now, as she considers leaving the house and the country itself, the future looks bleak, indeed the future looks filled with “futility, rage and regret” (115). We find that these stinging emotions are not evoked because of her foiled plan involving Frederick, but because if she leaves she will not know Minna.97 Her rage and regret will be because she has lost that hope:

97 Before leaving for Paris, Sophia had begun daydreaming and dreaming about Minna, the possible mistress of Frederick:

“Presently she began to dream of her. Minna driving with Frederick in a painted circus chariot would appear on the horizon of the desert […] The chariot would sweep nearer, bouncing lightly as a bubble over the ridges of sand, pass, and vanish, and presently reappear, persistent as a gadfly. Or she would come on Minna alone, seated in her own morning-room, and suddenly who that she had been established there for weeks. Waking, she kept the sense of the dream’s vividity; the time of day, the position of a glove, every word spoken, remained. But there was always one blank. However she might interrogate her memory, or try by a stratagem of suddenness to surprise it of its secret, Minna’s visage still eluded her” (74).

Although she attempts to allay sleeping in order to avoid dreaming, she again dreams of Minna nights later, and it is when she awakes after this dream in “a blacker despair than she has ever known,” when she decides to visit the kiln (79). This acts as another example of how Minna already rouses Sophia’s desire even to the point of compelling the latter toward the incredible act
hope of knowing more about Minna. From all those dreams she had never been able to carry into waking a recollection of the dream-Minna’s face; and from this real-life encounter she would depart as tantalized, as unfulfilled (115).

Before her decision to go to Paris, Sophia had had a number of dreams about Minna (74, 79). If read through the positive valence of mimesis, the reader might interpret the dreams as the preoccupations of a wife with her husband’s mistress; however, on a deeper level through the negative valence her dreams take on more erotic possibilities. Rather than foreboding, they are anticipatory. Sophia seems to be obsessed with Minna because she wants to see her. The one thing she cannot see in her dreams is Minna’s image; she does not know what the woman looks like. But, now that she’s seen her, the despair the dreams evoked can now be seen as foreshadowing the despair she feels at the thought of leaving Minna in the present.

By the end of the evening, fatigued from her travels and having drunk hot wine offered by her hostess, Sophia falls asleep on Minna’s sofa, is fawned over and caressed by Minna herself: “Sleep, you must sleep, my beauty, my falcon” (124). As noted earlier, Sophia states herself that she is “frigid to wine and the love of man” (67). However, Minna’s “warm spiced scent[ed]” wine is soothing to Sophia, “caressing” (115). While on the sofa, she dreams she has failed at her purpose in Paris (just as she had consciously thought earlier in the evening). But, of her visit to the limekiln man. It can be argued that Minna is the reason, after all, that Sophia goes to Paris. It is not the desire to become physically pregnant after all, it is rather an unconscious and metaphorical pregnancy of knowledge, political and sexual knowledge, that she hopes to find through the unknown Minna.
her dream subliminally shows the reader that it is the anxiety of now losing Minna and the love and hope she has found in her that manifests itself in dreamlike melancholy, much like the dreams she had before:

Something else was lost, there was some other hope, some other promise, irrevocably mismanaged and irrevocably lost; and it was for this something, this unpossessed and unknown, that she mourned in such desolation, having not even the comfort of knowing what was for ever left behind and forfeited – […]” (124).\(^{98}\)

And yet, the next morning finds Sophia talking to Minna for hours about her own life, while Minna listens and does any number of things a lover might do: caresses Sophia’s hand “with abstracted attention,” examines her hair as if it were of great value. The text explains: “Neither woman, absorbed in this extraordinary colloquy, had expressed by word or sign the slightest consciousness that there was anything unusual about it” (129). Certainly the entirety of the day passes in what the text terms “passionate amity” between the two women (128).

\(^{98}\) Warner’s use of the psychoanalytic term “foreclose” indicates something must be lost to Sophia in order for her to gain subjectivity. In this context, it is uncannily similar to Judith Butler’s variation on Freud’s melancholia as directed toward gender. As noted by Claudia Lapping in her book *Psychoanalysis in Social Research*:

Butler’s reconceptualisation of melancholia as constitutive of gender foregrounds or extends several aspects of Freud’s initial account. Her conceptualization of loss as instantiated in the foreclosure that ‘founds and forms’ the subject might be thought of as a crystallization of Freud’s observation of the poverty and emptiness of the ego in instances of melancholia. The emphasis on foreclosure also, perhaps, extends Freud’s account of the melancholic loss a ‘withdrawn from consciousness.’ Foreclosure suggests a loss that cannot be withdrawn from consciousness as it was never first admitted as an element of conscious subjectivity: it is a loss that is always already disavowed (Butler qtd in Lapping 24).

In this sense, Sophia uncannily senses her own melancholia for a loss that she cannot name or articulate, which I argue is a loss of love for/from Minna that she has never known to be possible. It is only after Sophia becomes involved with Minna that her melancholia is assuaged.
By nightfall Sophia takes Minna out to dinner as penance for having monopolized her entire day. But they continue their admiration of each other. After Sophia has secured food and wine, Minna proclaims: “How much I like being with English people! They manage everything so quietly and so well” (132). To this, Sophia asks rather pointedly, “And am I as good as Frederick?” and is answered with “You are much better” (132). It is at this point that Frederick is both acknowledged and disposed of as a player in either woman’s life. If Frederick and Minna have indeed had an affair – something Terry Castle argues has less evidence than the relationship between Sophia and Minna – with these words Minna expels Frederick from her life and confirms her romantic feelings for Sophia.99

Sophia finds freedom in Minna. Since her inheritance of Blandamer and unknown sums of money from her parents, Sophia has always been proud and not a little irritated that Frederick had become such a spendthrift: “Her pride had always snarled at seeing him spend what was in truth her money, and her prudence had snarled to see him spending it so lavishly” (209). Because she defiantly disregards Frederick’s wishes about where she should reside – he

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99 Castle notes that critics like Sandy Petrey who attempt a reading of *Summer Will Show* as void of lesbian sexuality since Warner does not explicitly describe any such thing, may be creating a paradox in their own arguments. For as Petrey argues, the oyster in the oyster scene (see epigraph at beginning of the chapter) “may be just an oyster” and that “semiotic flux” may be responsible for a lesbian reading of the scene. Therefore, missing the sexual connotations of the oyster scene cannot be chalked up to ‘Puritanical blindness’ on the reviewer’s part (Petrey qtd in Castle Fn 7, 550-51). With this premise, Castle notes that Petrey is caught in his own contention, since “no sense of such ‘semiotic flux’ impairs Petrey’s conviction that Minna and Frederick have been lovers. He takes it for granted that the heterosexual pair have at one time or another had sexual intercourse, though strictly speaking, the text provides no more ‘proof’ of this than it does for my (admittedly brazen) reading of the scene between Sophia and Minna. […] Typically, it is lesbian lovemaking that evokes the hermeneutic doubt (is it there?) while ambiguities connected with heterosexual lovemaking go unmentioned” (Fn 7, 550-51).
believes while in Paris she should stay with her great aunt Léocadie at the Place Bellechasse or return to Blandamer – he flourishes his privilege as an English gentleman in 1848. At their final meeting of the novel Frederick points out that she no longer has any influence over her own inheritance:

It’s mine, do you understand? By the law, it’s mine. When you married me it became mine, and now after ten years it’s high time you understood it. (217)

Therefore, not only has Sophia taken up with a woman of no social standing to speak of, save that she is adored by the revolutionaries and Marxists, but because of this decision and without aid from her own inheritance, she must learn to live Minna’s lifestyle.

As irritating and unjust as Sophia’s loss of financial security is to the reader, Warner suggests that the reality of Sophia’s situation is not as dire as one might believe. For Sophia, by relinquishing her standing as a gentlewoman, frees herself from key conventional heteronormative strictures. By both rejecting heterosexuality and withdrawing herself from the influences of massive wealth, Sophia liberates herself from much of that which keeps women like her in their places. With no children to mother, no husband to coddle, no wealth to constrain her behavior, Sophia is more uninhibited than she has ever been. In thinking of Minna, Sophia admits to herself that she has “never known such freedom, such exhilaration, as [she] taste[s] in [Minna’s] presence” (183). And Minna notes this newfound rush for independence as well:
“You have run away,” said Minna placidly. “You’ll never go back now, you know. I’ve encouraged a quantity of people to run away, but I have never seen any one so decisively escaped as you.” (179)

Sophia’s desire for escape is not only to be free of the stifling, unbearable borders of domesticity she endures at Blandamer, but to experience that which has eluded her through her society’s heterosexual imperative: happiness. Neither the woman’s sphere of the home nor the necessity of active heterosexuality has brought her any kind of joy or delight. Her exhilaration, up to the point she meets Minna, is only found through her feelings of independence and free reign over the massive outdoor space of Blandamer and the landscape and animals it accommodates. It is also through her celibacy, as sex is avoided entirely when one’s husband is completely and physically absent. But when Sophia meets Minna, desire becomes a vital part of her life, and brings with it pleasure she could only have dreamed of earlier. At one point she explains to Minna, “‘I am here as I am because I saw a chance of being happy and took it’” (226).

**Evolution, a Plausible Revolution**

As for the revolution, this novel, it seems to me is much more about the evolution of a woman’s private, feminist revolution against heteronormative patriarchy than it is about the French revolution of 1848. As Sophia argues to Minna near the end of the novel, “For it is not true, Minna, that I have left Frederick and renounced my income because my sympathies are with the Revolution” (226). She goes on to explain “…when I smacked my husband’s
face and sent him to the devil, I never gave it [the Revolution] a thought” (226).  

That so many things had to occur in succession for Sophia to become a free individual, that the stars had to align in order for her to gain her freedom, seems a refutation of the implausibility of this text. As noted earlier, Sophia herself admits the fact that “destiny and death had combined to make a free woman of her” (78). She understands that multiple factors came about to bring forth exactly her fate. These factors include the deaths of her parents, her wealthy inheritance, her lack of sexual desire for men, her marriage to a cad of a husband and their subsequent estrangement, the deaths of her children, her travel to a foreign land, her introduction to and falling in love with Minna, and the zeitgeist of revolution.

It is true that one could argue how unlikely it would be that all of these things would occur to any one woman in a single lifetime, and therefore the plot is implausible. But, likewise, one could argue that Warner’s plotting out of each necessary point in order for Sophia to gain independence, demonstrates the reality of dense and multiple social strata that must be overcome before a woman could even begin to be sovereign of her own life. In other words, the reason I argue the plot is plausible is not because these various and some might think outlandish

100 As a reminder for the reader: Sophia and Frederick meet for the final time at Sophia’s great aunt’s house where Frederick first chides Sophia about staying with Minna, attempting to appeal to what other’s will think about her behavior, appealing to her sense as a wife, and finally “playing the heavy husband” because she will not do what he deems best (226-27). Sophia hits him in the face with her fist for his smug and hypocritical pretensions.

101 It is interesting to note that Minna suggests that outside of Frederick’s obvious faults, he may also be a misogynist, which could imply sexuality outside the realm of heterosexuality: “Frederick completely despises all women. I think that is why he seems so dull and ineffectual” (133). This might be an interesting angle of thought to pursue in parsing out the character of Frederick. However, it will not be done at this time.
things *could* happen to one woman in order to grant her independence, but that these kinds of things *must* happen. Yes, it is unlikely that a real woman would meet with every life altering event that occurs to Sophia… but for a woman to find that kind of independence, they would *have* to occur thus. The implausibility is not in the fiction, but in the fact: women cannot escape womanhood. Having been alleviated from the webs of wifedom and motherhood that hold women fast to the home, Sophia is able to use her wealth and newly unfettered mind and body to search for a more fulfilling life, both romantically and emotionally. Reading *Summer Will Show* in this light, that Sophia’s journey is not just revolutionary but evolutionary, vastly dilutes assertions of implausibility.

And, is the relationship between Sophia and Minna there? Is the lesbianism between these two women plausible? It seems so. I find more evidence of lesbianism in Warner’s text than any other kind of sexual intimacy. As stated by Sophia herself in one of the most inspiring and emotional moments in novel, as she lies on the floor embracing the cold and dying Minna:

> From the moment I got wind of your voice, she thought, from the moment that Frederick, standing by Augusta’s deathbed, echoed those melancholy harp-notes, I have been under some extraordinary enchantment. \(^{102}\)

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\(^{102}\) Frederick shows up after Damian has already died and Augusta is still struggling for her life. Sophia notices immediately a change in his voice, that it has “altered,” that [t]here was a new note in it…” (68). Over the bed of Augusta, she hears him say “Ma fleur,” that is described as “two grave harp-notes” that Sophia knows are the “appropriate timbre” only “Minna’s Jewish contralto” could provide (71). She insults Frederick, calling him an “[a]ccomplished mountebank,” who “was always a copycat, a weathercock to any breeze that tickled him,” and must have “heard the right intonation [from Minna], and unwittingly reproduced it” (71-2). It is not so much Frederick’s voice, then, that haunts Sophia, but Minna’s, even before Sophia has met her.
uncomprehending, and resolute from one piece of madness to another. I have thought I could have a child by the lime-kiln man, more demented still I have proposed to have a child by Frederick. […] I have left Blandamer as though I should never return, I have been in a street battle, I have pawned my diamond ring in order to entertain a collection of revolutionary ragamuffins. From sheer inattention I have been on the brink of a reconciliation with my husband, and as inattentively I have got myself into a position in which he seems able to cast me off. And now I am lying on the floor beside you, renewing the contact which, whenever I make it, shoots me off into some fresh fit of impassioned woolgathering (207).

With the evidence that Sophia has grown warm with desire, has found herself bursting with passion when she and Minna have physical contact, the ways in which Sophia’s life is reinvigorated by Minna’s presence, we can certainly argue that lesbianism has a place in the relationship between Sophia and Minna. Nothing that has happened between the two women romantically seems so outlandishly implausible as the critiques mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, rather, it seems as if the character of Sophia is transforming into a person who finally comprehends romantic love. And that love in which everything Sophia has endured culminates in the representation of freedom for which she has yearned. As Sophia frankly states: “I have never known such freedom, such exhilaration, as I taste in her presence” (183). With this said, Sophia is successful
in her own revolution; the entire story after Paris is a radical departure from her
life as an upper-class English woman. Her revolution is an evolution into a
woman who has found the possibility of wholeness and happiness that did not
exist for her in heteronormativity.

The Text Does Show

The criticism of Warner’s text as implausible seems to be mostly related to
critics’ inability to see what Warner attempts to show. As noted by David James
in his 2005 article, Warner “mount[s] a symbolic challenge to patriarchal modes
of seeing” (119). James suggests this is accomplished through Warner’s play on
the tradition of the flânerie:

[T]he leisured practice of amorous observation is subsumed,
replaced by ecstatic encounters of a more assertive kind […],
[which] […] is the catalyst for more purposeful and reparative
forms of engagement.” (119)

The passion Sophia finds with Minna shatters the distance Sophia has placed
between herself and life. At Blandamer, Sophia is indeed an observer… of her
children, the estate, her estranged husband’s affairs, herself. This portion of the
novel is not questioned by critics. Sophia “looks” like a conventional woman
from a distance: she is married, she has children, she remains the responsible
parent for her children while her husband sows tomfoolery all over the continent
and abroad, she is – or rather her life is – plausible. But, deeper scrutiny paints
Sophia as a thoughtful and practical, independent and rather masculine woman
who is in no way a mother woman. She scorns and ultimately rejects marriage and heterosexuality. And, finally, through her feminist rationale and newfound lesbianism she evolves into an active participant in her life, or as James states it: “Sophia begins to anticipate the way she is implicated in the social experience of what she perceives” (121).

Indeed it is this second part of the novel in which Sophia revolts against heteronormativity and sets up house with Minna, in which she overwhelmingly evolves through a unification of her vibrant mind with the action of her capable body and spirit that critics find implausible. Perhaps they have something here. But, the vocabulary is insufficient. Perhaps the critics think it improbable that Sophia’s freedom described by Warner would happen just so. But plausible? I venture that any woman of Sophia’s character if given a chance at freedom through such improbable circumstances, the escape would not only be plausible, but indisputable.
SECTION 3

AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS AND THEIR NON-THINKING

This section will explore four American novels: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* by Anita Loos, *Quicksand* and *Passing* by Nella Larsen, and *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes. The analysis will revolve around a topos of the “non-thinking” woman and how that particular activity assists in presenting the situation of lesbianism in US fiction. These protagonists show a wider variation in their use of “thinking” than on the British side, for the “thinking” of these women manifests itself in less obvious and direct ways. From humorously downplayed rumination in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, to the willful ignorance displayed in *Quicksand* and *Passing*, and the overzealous contemplation in *Nightwood*, the protagonists display how thinking in their narrative contexts must be treated with care. The protagonists’ careful strategies of hidden thinking, disregarding thinking, and over-thinking in this section reveal themselves as part of the topoi of lesbianism.

The analysis of this section moves in a less direct way than the previous section since it must follow the protagonists’ more roundabout means of undermining heteronormative paradigms and institutions. These protagonists seem more conventional than their British counterparts because their thought processes and behaviors tend toward the oblique, which means their arguments against heteronormative patriarchy are perceived similarly. But, their indirectness
notwithstanding, using their thinking as evidence for a critique on heteronormativity is a ripe and insightful endeavor.
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Team Teaching:

Education, Sexuality, and the Body in Anita Loos’ *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*

“I mean I seem to be thinking practically all of the time.”
Lorelei Lee ~ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*

Anita Loos’ novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (GPB) offers a new take on the relationship between mind and body, especially intellect and sex. Unlike the sexologists of the time, Lorelei Lee and Dorothy Shaw do not take sex all that seriously. H.L. Mencken (a good friend of Loos’ and a well-known editor of the 1920s), in fact, told Loos he would not publish her story in the magazine he edited – *The American Mercury* – because it might offend his readers. “Do you realize, young woman,” he stated at the time, “that you’re the first American writer ever to poke fun at sex?” (qtd in Barreca xii). Whether or not Loos is the “first” writer to poke fun at sex in an American context is beyond the scope of this chapter, but that Loos does it, there can be no question. The novel exudes sexual innuendo and humor from the opening sentences to its very end. The main characters, two “gold-digging flappers” (Barreca viii) by the names of Lorelei Lee and Dorothy Shaw offer a unique intellectual spin on sexuality to say the least, and this chapter will focus specifically on that relationship between intellect and sexuality that becomes evident through the two women’s various adventures. This chapter, in other words, will expound on the ways in which Lorelei and Dorothy play with the mind/body divide and in the process unveil an interesting feminist move of
Loos where she actually separates sex from the body through her unlikely heroines.

From previous chapters regarding the connection between women’s intellect and sexuality we know that medical men of the early 20th century believed that too much brainwork and exercise could impair women’s sexuality permanently, specifically their sexual function, i.e. their ability to reproduce. As noted by Dale Bauer in her book *Sex Expression and American Women Writers, 1860-1940*, “brain power eradicated […] sexual power” for the sexologists of the day, and sex power referred to reproduction exclusively (24). But the novel wholly ignores the popular sexological discourse of the time – Lorelei’s fictional tête-à-tête with Freud notwithstanding – although it is certainly on the cutting edge of culture itself with its American slang and Loos’ iconic flapper image.

Indeed, Loos’ particular brand of flapper ignores most every cultural constraint placed upon women of the era, and runs to the extreme edge of sexological discourse by promoting two protagonists who are not only wholly intellectually disengaged, but whose only interest in sex has nothing to do with reproduction, indeed it has barely anything to do with “sex” at all.

Counter to sexological discourse Loos unleashes protagonists who sever the relationship between intellect and reproduction by promoting disinterest in both activities simultaneously; therefore, the causal connection, the belief that too much of the former would cause too little of the latter is moot. But, the two do not stop there. Lorelei and Dorothy go further by severing the relationship between sex and reproduction. The two witless but wily protagonists play with
heterosexual desire, use heterosexual desire, but there is never any concern about one particular consequence of heterosexual desire – pregnancy – because, frankly, no one ever seems to get far enough with either woman to promote its cause. To the extreme, Loos obeys the medical and sexological proscription that women be spared rigorous intellectual exercise; the two companions will certainly not need a holiday like intellectually overtaxed young Sydney Warren in Elizabeth Bowen’s novel, nor will they have conversations akin to the two Elizabths in Willa Muir’s work. They will undoubtedly not philosophize on feminist themes like the exquisite Sophia Willoughby or the vigorous Ruth in Sylvia Townsend Warner’s text or Olive Moore’s novella respectively. No, these American women refuse to take anything seriously. Instead, they and the novel poke fun not only at sex, but at intellect as well.

Loos engages in what Bauer calls the “literary style” of “sex expression,” which, he suggests, comes about through American women of the Modern era who begin challenging the “conventional notions of sexuality” through new types of heroines, “new themes for fiction,” and “new literary styles” (11-12). Bauer notes that Loos is one of the authors who not only writes in a new literary style – journal-cum-novel – but writes about a new kind of heroine: the “kept woman or mistress” (12). These new styles “come about” suggests Bauer, “in the rendering of new kinds of heroines” who have a “burgeoning self-consciousness about sexuality” (12). These heroines, that I will rather call “protagonists,” move about in both sanctioned and… sanctioned… sexual behaviors and by virtue of their
authors speak in “normative vocabulary to express the ‘unconscious’ desires” the authors “presumed women to possess and embody” at the time (11).

One way Loos participates in this styling of sexuality is through her play with conventional heteronormative views relating the mind and body of woman. In her short biographical note at the beginning of the novel, Loos explains that her model of Lorelei Lee was a woman she had “singled out” from the many blonde women she knew through film and the Ziegfeld Follies (Loos “Biography” xxxviii). This person was the “dumbest blonde of all” and a woman who had “bewitched one of the keenest minds of our era” (xxxviii). Although her intent seems to be to tease women of little intellect – she notes candidly in the biography of GPB that she wants “Lorelei to be a symbol of the lowest possible mentality of our nation” – who receive copious amounts of male attention regardless, the effect of the novel rather turns the two protagonists into unwitting sages, the intellectual standard-bearers of the novel, while the men come off as rather dimwitted, naïve things who never quite comprehend that they are not getting exactly what they want from Lorelei and Dorothy.

Through the euphemism of “education,” the novel plays on the idea of sexual education suggesting Lorelei and Dorothy are being sexually “educated” by these men in exchange for diamonds, jewelry, and other lavish gifts. However, as Loos’ story unwinds, it seems obvious that Dorothy and Lorelei are the educators of the men they meet, they are a couple, a sort of teaching team released

103 The keen mind in this quote refers to H.L. Mencken, a good friend of Loos and an important editor of the 1920s. Indeed, he had fallen for a woman Loos believed to be a “witless blonde” (xxxviii).
on an impressive amount of “gentlemen.” Additionally, with everything she has already taken on, Lorelei takes it upon herself to “educate” Dorothy, which generates a sense of sexual dissonance within the heteronormative framework through which most critics read the novel.

Adjusting the Narrative

The hilariously “straight” 1925 novel has seen renewed critical interest [although most recent interest has been in its musical film adaptation], but textual analysis of the novel is nowhere near exhaustive as yet. Therefore, this chapter will focus on an angle that is quite familiar to film scholars, but hardly ever discussed in literary criticism.

Although it is frequently asserted in film analysis that there is a palpable lesbianism or lesbian tension between Lorelei Lee and Dorothy Shaw, in literature analysis, it is not even an element of critique. The visual nature of film with

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104 As stated by Susan Hegeman in her article “Taking Blondes Seriously,” the film has been “an important site for feminist scholarship” while there is “almost no recent criticism about the book on which the film was based” (525-26). At the time of her writing, 1995, she asserts that she can only count “one previous scholarly essay on the book” (526). Contemporary criticism of the novel has still to catch up with the work.

105 For example, Lori Landay, in her book Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture, goes so far as to call Lorelei a “consummate female female impersonator,” but does not follow where unconventional desire might lead by way of such an impersonation. She focuses most closely on Lorelei’s desire for autonomy and takes for granted the heterosexual aspects of the novel. Dale Bauer, whose entire book is about sex also suggests the typical heterosexual reading of GPB, that Lorelei is being sexually educated through diamonds supplied by gentlemen such as Mr. Eisman, the Button King (158). Daniel Tracy’s 2010 article is so clearly caught up in an anxiety of heterosexuality in the text that he suggests “Loos provides a relatively direct treatment” of Lorelei as a “prostitute,” although softening the accusation by asserting Lorelei does not, in the end, sleep with “all” the men she meets (128-29). In her 1995 essay, Susan Hegeman does contribute to an alternative form of criticism about the novel; however, by suggesting that Lorelei is, more than anything, sexless and child-like, and works to remain so through a kind of de-sexualization of her personae. All full citations can be found in the bibliography.
Jane Russell (Dorothy) and Marilyn Monroe (Lorelei) in 1953 (based on the musical adaptation from 1949), more visibly presents the homoeroticism of the two main characters. But for this very reason, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* the text should be revisited in order to explore and expound on the lesbian content of Loos’ original work.

It has been pointed out that Lorelei’s and Dorothy’s relationship is the most important relationship in the book. As Regina Barreca notes in her 1998 introduction to the novel, Lorelei “retains complete autonomy over her own actions and continues her strong and central relationship with Dorothy, whose importance clearly eclipses devotion offered by any man” (xvii). This is exactly the direction in which this critique aims to move. For, although Lorelei may have a passion for diamonds, that only tells us about her passion for jewelry; a passion for the men who supply them is an entirely separate matter. In fact, throughout *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and the insinuations of critics (and innuendo of the text at times) that Lorelei is being “educated” by men (wink, wink, nudge, nudge), the ambiguity of her (hetero)sexuality remains the only “sure thing” in the text. The only concrete facts to hold onto about Lorelei is that indeed she has a singular focus on the acquisition of riches, but alongside that, her only other interest – shown distinctly in the text – is Dorothy. Not only does she make a living for herself and Dorothy quite often by securing a rich benefactor’s financial backing for both women’s travel, but the entire book is rife with Lorelei’s attempt to “educate” Dorothy herself, interestingly echoing exactly the same innuendo critics have suggested of her own “education” by her wealthy admirers. Therefore, I
suggest that the sexuality of this text focuses primarily on the lesbianism within the relationship between Lorelei and Dorothy, especially in the form of “education” between the two of them and their romantic ambitions.

The representations of Lorelei and Dorothy in *GPB* rely extensively on Lorelei’s mimetic renderings of the two. The beauty of Lorelei’s mimesis, however, is that it is an honest mimetic rendering of everything she hears, thinks, and sees, but her honesty and truthfulness undercuts the honesty and truthfulness of what she is supposed to be honestly and truthfully rendering. Two things that will be discussed in this chapter are the two women’s incredibly intimate relationship with one another, and how both women mirror approval and disapproval in each other’s love lives.

**Stylizing Sex: Separating Sex and the Body**

“Lorelei does have an interest in men,” notes Alexander Doty in his book *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*, “but it is predicated on their having money/diamonds. Does Lorelei love or sexually desire these men, or does she get turned on by their money, and the cultural power it represents?” It seems a reasonable question to ask after all, since literary critics of *GPB* have always and only assumed Lorelei is “giving it away” – suggested by Regina Barreca in her introduction to the text (xv) – which also implies (heterosexual) desire.

Through the gold-digger and the dumb blonde stereotypes that Loos makes famous, Lorelei simultaneously disrupts the mind/body distinction that undermines women, and uses that disruption to stylize a sexuality detached from
the body. The stereotypes of the gold-digger and the dumb blonde suggest two opposing personalities and modes of behavior that are more nuanced than the old virgin/whore dichotomy from which it sprang. The gold-digger is a clever, even wily woman who will do just about anything to get the material possessions she wants. The dumb blonde, however, can be seen as a woman who never quite understands the nuances of cultural communication, is mystified and/or surprised by everyday occurrences, and often possesses her own rules of life and code of conduct. Because of the dumb blonde’s naïveté, she is often preyed upon by sexually predatory males although she is an erratic target because of the independence from conventions her naïveté affords. Sexuality is associated with both types of women, but in unpredictable ways that enable wiggle room for the protagonist that the virgin/whore dichotomy does not afford.

The genius behind Lorelei, then, is that she is both the gold-digger and the dumb blonde; therefore, she is simultaneously clever and clueless, which has a destabilizing effect on the performative work that must be done to upkeep

106 The newer dichotomy of gold-digger/dumb blonde could be described as near-opposition rather than exact opposition required by the virgin/whore binary. While the older version is obsessed with sexuality (none on the one hand and a lot on the other, but both simultaneously), the newer version revolves around not just sexuality, but mentality as well. The gold-digger is allowed sexuality because she is smart, the dumb blonde is allowed sexuality because she does not know any better. Therefore, this amalgam of sexuality and smarts – or lack thereof – is given the opportunity for more movement and acceptability in society.

107 In her entry “Blondes” in the Women’s Companion to International Film, Tessa Perkins makes the following assertions: “Dumb blondes are defined by their combination of overt, ‘natural’ sexuality (of which they may or may not be aware) with a profound ignorance and innocence manifest in an inability to understand even the most elementary facts of everyday life. It is this lack of understanding of what is ‘obvious’ to ordinary people that is the basis of dumb blonde humor. However, dumb blonde humor can also contain elements of ‘native wit,’ which stems from naivety and functions to show up the irrationality and/or the hypocrisy of the social order. To this extent the dumb blonde stereotype has a subversive side which is sometimes overlooked…” (47). Full citation in bibliography.
conventional heterosexual relationships. Indeed, as noted by Tessa Perkins in the
*Women’s Companion to International Film*, the dumb blonde “has a subversive
side” that can lay plain the “irrationality and/or hypocrisy of the social order”
(47). In the case of *GPB*, the social order is turned upside-down as Lorelei spins
the boundaries of the mind/body dualism: the male/female, transcendent/material
dichotomy underlying Western cultures.108 Lorelei, who for all intents and
purposes has been read as the epitome of the “body” in the novel, actually resists
this by subtly (and humorously) brandishing her mind instead. As suggested by
Susan Hegeman, it is the “uncertainty” about Lorelei’s sexual “agency, and her
“actual intelligence, [that] hovers over the text, producing the double entendres
that make for much of its humor” (534). Indeed, after her many adventures she
comes off as the brains that transcend the mental abilities of the men around her,
while those same men, unable to rely on their own bodies to interest, instead
proposition her with “materiality” (jewelry/wealth).

A good example of this is when Lorelei and Dorothy are in Paris being
wined and dined by the French father and son team (Louie and Robber) who have
been commissioned to steal the diamond tiara from Lorelei to give to Lady

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108 In her book *Questioning Gender: A Sociological Exploration*, Robyn Ryle reminds us that the
Cartesian duality of mind and body “is a belief, expressed in many different forms, in a split
between the physical body and the nonmaterial entity we call mind (or spirit, soul, thought, etc.),
where the mind is seen as superior in many ways to the inferior body” (266). This split is
interesting enough in itself, but that it is also a gendered divide still makes it an important place
of argument for feminists. “The mind,” Ryle explains, “is associated with masculinity; it is rational,
aspires to the best efforts of the self, is closer to god, and is working toward ultimate self-
realization. The body is feminine and is the heavy drag on all the higher aspirations of the mind.
[…] [T]he negativity associated with the body is also associated with women and femininity. Like
the body, women came to represent ‘distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God,
capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death’” (Bordo qtd in
Ryle 266). See full citation in bibliography.
Francis Beekman. The two men attempt in their bumbling way to outwit the two women, but Lorelei and Dorothy find out almost immediately what they are after and take advantage of this knowledge. They allow the men to take them out, entertain them, buy them things, and all the while Lorelei purposefully makes the tiara visible every now and again so the father and son will not get too “discouraged” (64). Eventually, Lorelei lets them know that she has been luring them with a counterfeit tiara, and then suggests a remedy to the situation in which everyone comes out a winner. When the men hear her plan, they are amazed:

“So then Robber looked at me and looked at me, and he reached over and kissed me on the forehead in a way that was really full of reverance” [sic] (72).

Crucially, it is her mind that transcends the situation. It seems that this dumb blonde can really amaze those who underestimate her mental capacity.

But Lorelei has only begun to amuse and amaze. With her stereotypes in hand, she exploits them to the best of her ability by stylizing sex in such a way as

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109 As a reminder to the reader: In London, Lorelei de vises a plan to buy a diamond tiara from an English woman, Mrs. Weeks, but of course she cannot pay the $7500 herself; therefore, she immediately begins working on a “gentleman who seemed to be quite well groomed,” Sir Francis Beekman (Loos GPB 37). Although she is told that Beekman is “really famous all over London for not spending so much money as most English gentlemen” (41); in fact, is warned by Mrs. Weeks to “’not waste [her] time on him’ because […] whenever Sir Francis Beekman spent a haypenny the statue of a gentleman called Mr. Nelson took off his hat and bowed” (37-8); Lorelei becomes quite close to Sir Beekman, gives him the nickname of Piggie, and makes him feel terribly good about himself, so good, in fact, that in the end Piggie buys the diamond tiara for Lorelei. Of course, when Lady Beekman finds this out, Sir Beekman “suddenly [goes] to Scotland to go hunting” (59), and Lady Beekman makes her way to Paris to find Lorelei. It is after Lorelei and Dorothy refuse to hand over the tiara that Lady Beekman hires the two French men to steal it for her.

110 After Lorelei tells the men that they have been trying to steal a fake tiara, they are very discouraged. But then Lorelei tells them to buy another fake tiara with Lady Beekman’s money (which has been financing the entertainment and shopping for the ladies all along); have the purchase rung up as a handbag, and then present the tiara as the original to Lady Beekman. This way, Lady Beekman will feel vindicated, the two men will be paid, and Lorelei keeps the original and the fake tiaras for future use.
to disconnect it entirely from her body. First, she steers clear of any feminine material reality that might make her body supersede her mind. For example, she rejects the ways in which women’s bodies are connected to sexual activity by steering clear of prolonged (heterosexual) coupling that smacks of (heterosexual) marriage (which will take a different turn when we discuss Dorothy later).

Although in the end, she does marry the tedious but very rich Mr. Spoffard, a possible sexual materiality of marriage for a woman is completely ignored: there are no pregnancies, no talk of children, no children present in the novel, no childcare or “care” in any sense. There is nothing that will chain Lorelei to the body, because caring for other bodies marks the woman’s body and would never be an option for Lorelei.

Next, with her routines of gold-digger and dumb blonde, she stylizes “sex” in such a way as to suite her material needs only, which makes her more of a tease – or a gamble – than a prostitute. As noted by Hegeman, although *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was a “racy offering in 1925, [it] is remarkably free of prurient detail: the book offers us nothing explicit to indicate that Lorelei offers sexual favors in return for her sponsors’ generosity” (534). Although perhaps Lorelei’s

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111 Indeed, children are not spoken of in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*; however, Lorelei does get pregnant and have a child in the sequel *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*. This concession might suggest that my theory about Lorelei’s distance from the body might change after she has had the “Little Mouse,” but this does not seem to be the case. Lorelei continues to stay distant from the chains that bind women to maternity and motherhood. Lorelei and Dorothy (who has almost lived with the couple during the pregnancy) throw a party without Henry, for example, on the very afternoon that she has given birth. And of course they all hardly got a glimpse of the infant because “noise and cigarette smoke are not good for little babies the day of their arrival” (136). Please see Loos’ follow-up novella for additional information.

112 One important way in which women are seen as “the body” is through their almost exclusive jobs of nurturing and caring for other bodies from infancy through childcare to young adulthood, and finally through old age.
“education” for these men “suggests the promise of sex, […] for Lorelei it as strongly promises jewelry” (540). The promise of sex and sex itself are two different things, and Lorelei’s gentlemen friends ante up to bet on that promise of sex without knowing they are up against a card sharp. Lorelei compels the men to raise the pot, through shopping and gifts, in order to remain in the game. But her own material contribution can only be described as IOUs that we cannot even be sure she writes herself, since the promise of sex is murky, unarticulated, and possibly imagined by the players themselves. She never formally “calls,” and the men dare not call themselves for fear of her leaving the table altogether. In other words, Lorelei has stylized sex into a gambling venture. Rather than the commercial exchange most critics attribute to her – where “goods” and “services” are exchanged and paid for – Lorelei assures the audience she is no “sure thing.” In fact, she often simply leaves the table once the pot is considerable enough. Because everyone who wants to gamble plays by her rules, she effectively functions as “the house,” and everyone knows “the house always wins.”

A good example of Lorelei’s savvy gambling/teasing technique and her own penchant for education is her friendship with Piggie (Sir Francis Beekman) in London. This friendship highlights how Lorelei prefers “teaching” men to satisfy her material desires. Importantly, it is her chosen method of flattery, not the use of her body, that helps her acquire the wealth she desires. Lorelei’s extensive flattery of the older man is the only “act” she must perform to get the tiara. With lethal fawning, she first persuades Piggie to buy her ten pounds of
orchids daily. She then insists he wear his “unaform” [sic], and by the same method of flattery increases Sir Francis Beekman’s pride in his own image (Loos GPB 48). With undisguised admiration, she states two things that seal the proverbial deal: after asking him to wear his uniform, she tells him that his “gorgeous unaform” [sic] makes her feel like she could only feel “fit to be with him in a diamond tiara,” and that she and he “could still be friends […] even if his wife was in London” (48). Here the dumb blonde meets the gold-digger in a brilliant way (and needless to say, receives the tiara forthwith). On the one hand, the flattery and appreciation of the gold-digger make Piggie feel like Lorelei is “the only one who admires him for what he really is” (49). On the other hand, the dumb blonde reassures him that they can still be friends even with his wife in town, which can surely carry a sexual connotation, but as the dumb blonde, Lorelei can, well, play dumb, and ignore the innuendo completely.

Once the tiara is finally on the table, Lorelei takes the pot and leaves; only the IOUs remain unpaid. The promise of jewelry has been realized, but the promise of sex is as easily avoided as Piggie himself after the tiara has been secured. Although she has promised Piggie she “would always stay in London and we would always be friendly,” within three days she and Dorothy are on a ship for Paris. Of course she notes that Piggie “does not know that we have gone

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113 This scene will be discussed in full later. For now, suffice it to say that Lorelei has opened the table for play and Piggie has opted to buy in.

114 Lady Beekman has sent a letter to her husband, Sir Francis Beekman, that she is coming to London. When she arrives in London, she will stay with a friend of theirs who happened to see Piggie in a jewelry shop with Lorelei the day before the letter arrives. Piggie is obviously disconcerted by this news and shows his agitation to Lorelei the day he wears his uniform and gifts her the tiara.
but I sent him a letter and told him I would see him some time again some time” (49).

We never hear again from these men who fancy they are having sex with Lorelei, but are instead engaging in only the *promise* of it. Gus Eisman the Button King, Lorelei’s longtime financial supporter, for example, plays a mostly absent “educator” in the novel, and when Lorelei must finally break off their friendship because of her marriage to Henry, she softens the blow by telling him that she (now a member of the higher social class) will always acknowledge him and that he can tell his friends that “it was he, Gus Eisman himself, who educated [Lorelei] up to [her] station” (121). Her consolation implies that Gus might assuage his disappointment at having been left alone at the gambling table by freely discussing every real or imagined IOU left there. In what we might now call “locker-room talk,” Gus can save face by suggesting the promise of sex was the sex itself. Furthermore, Lorelei does not commit herself one way or another about whether or not we should think of their past association as a sexual one. She simply states: “…and I really do not care what [Eisman] says to his friends, because, after all, his friends are not in my set, and whatever he says to them will not get around in my circle” (121). Once again, Lorelei’s mind trumps her body, and in the end the men’s minds are clearly outwitted and outmatched. So, through her ignorance or obliviousness and her clandestine cunning, Lorelei turns the conventions of heterosexual relationships on their heads by focusing foremost on the mind rather than the body, divorcing the body from paying out (only *promising*); she literally takes the “sex” out of heterosexuality.
The “Education” of Dorothy Shaw

As noted before, assumptions that Lorelei is willy-nilly “giving it” to every male person she meets is just as untrue as it is true. The innuendo of “education” that surely exists in the novel must be reevaluated because it not only refers to activities between Lorelei and the men she meets, but to the activities between Lorelei and her partner Dorothy. For, the only thing of importance for Lorelei other than acquiring wealth is educating Dorothy. Therefore, the suggestion of heterosexual activity in *GPB* criticism must either be tempered or the suggestion of homosexual activity augmented to explain the euphemisms of the text. For example, similar to the argument above regarding sex, Susan Hegeman suggests that the sexual intimations in the novel do not clearly represent Lorelei’s actual sexual activity.

According to Hegeman, Lorelei distances herself from “the (albeit euphemistic) sexual act of developing her brains,” by not actually doing what the men who want to “educate” her ask her to do (539). For example, the reader cannot tell if she has ever done any of the reading that has been suggested to her. In fact, Lorelei assumes her maid, Lulu, will either participate by proxy or assist her in some of her acts of “education” (the reading of novels mainly), which queers the metaphorical reading of Lorelei’s heterosexual “education” (3, 13). Another example of Lorelei distancing herself from euphemistic sex is by experiencing most of her moments of “education” with her companion of choice, Dorothy. It is with Dorothy that Lorelei chooses men to financially foot-the-bill for the two women; it is Dorothy with whom she goes to London to educate
herself; it is with Dorothy where, in Paris, Lorelei feels she is truly “educated” and can “educate” Dorothy (33,52).115 The list continues in which Lorelei’s euphemistic sex is triangulated with another person and therefore diminishes the suggestion that euphemistic sex is real sex.

Although GPB is packed with sexual innuendo and allusion, they remain simply what they are: innuendo and allusion. By the end of the novel, the reader has no more solid evidence that Lorelei Lee has had sex with any or all of these men than the evidence exactly to the contrary. Not to mention that the evidence of sexual tension between Lorelei and Dorothy is not only just as obvious – if just as opaque – but at the least more probable. Conceding that Lorelei and Dorothy’s relationship holds the most significance in the novel, Barreca points out that:

“One of the most extraordinary and positive aspects of Gentlemen Prefer Blondes’ depiction of the friendship between [Lorelei and Dorothy] is the absence of competitiveness, envy, and pettiness.”

By making a nonsexual same-sex friendship the strongest relationship in [the] book, Loos continues to break the rules and threaten the usual social order which would dictate that, for

115 In one of the more droll moments in the book is the moment in Paris where Lorelei explains how educational the city is: “And when a girl walks around and reads all of the signs with all of the famous historical names it really makes you hold your breath. Because when Dorothy and I went on a walk, we only walked a few blocks but in only a few blocks we read all of the famous historical names, like Coty and Cartier and I knew we were seeing something educational at last and our whole trip was not a failure. I mean I really try to make Dorothy get educated and have reverence. So when we stood at the corner of a place called Place Vandome, if you turn your back on a monument they have in the middle and look up, you can see none other than Coty’s sign” (52).
example, a married woman’s strongest sense of loyalty should be
given to her husband rather than her best girlfriend. (xvii)\textsuperscript{116}

It is interesting that Barreca states without equivocation the sexuality of the two
women by naming theirs a “nonsexual” friendship; this is most notable because in
her quote she refers to Lucie Arbuthnot’s and Gail Seneca’s 1982 film article in
which they imply if not lesbianism, at least homoeroticism between Lorelei and
Dorothy. So, while I agree with Barreca that the relationship between the two
main characters of the text in and of itself violates (patriarchal) rules and threatens
(patriarchal) social order, I would go further and assert that it just as importantly
violates heteronormative rules and order by placing lesbianism at the center of a
highly heterosexualized work.

If one, without the necessity of evidence, assumes the two women are
truly “giving it away” to the men in the novel, one must allow for the possibility
that they also are “giving it to” each other. Why? Because we can certainly
establish that Lorelei Lee and Dorothy Shaw are more significant to each other
than to anyone else. The two are almost intrinsically together. They share
vacations, rooms, money, men, and lifestyle. As noted by Barreca, Lorelei is the
better con,\textsuperscript{117} which means she is able to more readily secure financing in order to
support the two on their various adventures. If critics assume that the novel’s
commodity culture functions in such a way that money is used by men to secure

\textsuperscript{116} Barreca’s interior quote is from the essay “Pretext and Text in \textit{Gentlemen Prefer Blondes}” by
Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca. Full citation in bibliography.

\textsuperscript{117} Specifically Barreca states that the two are “closer to con-artists than whores: they dazzle, they
confuse, they indulge the willingness of their audience to suspend disbelief” (xvii).
women’s sexual favors, then it seems Lorelei is certainly using money in much the same way in order to “keep” Dorothy.

Alongside her quest for riches in the novel, Lorelei’s foremost aim is to “educate” her less refined friend, for Lorelei thinks Dorothy could utilize her time with men in a more productive manner: “But Dorothy really does not care about her mind and I always scold her because she does nothing but waste her time by going around with gentlemen who do not have anything…” (19). In this instance we see Lorelei’s logic of association: nurturing the mind – or her “brains” as they are sometimes called – is literally refining one’s ability to procure wealth efficiently. Although many critics assume the text refers to Lorelei’s “mind” and “brains” euphemistically, half-jokingly camouflaging the substantial amount of heterosexual sex (education or improving of her mind) had by the petite blonde nymphomaniac, it might be reasonable to temper that view in order to also account for Lorelei’s desire to, in turn, improve Dorothy’s “mind.”

Barreca notes above that Lorelei and Dorothy are not competitive (or envious or petty) with each other, an observation that is interesting in itself. These seem surprising characteristics to Barreca, I suggest, because she presupposes the two women’s relationship to be “non-sexual,” and therefore finds it interesting that two heterosexual women can be envy-jealous- and competitive-free when men are involved. It may be even more productive; however – to

118 To be clear, no critic to my knowledge has actually named Lorelei a “nymphomaniac”; that is my doing. I use the term because it illustrates the absurdity of placing heterosexual sex on the same plane as money and jewels for Lorelei. Although the book exudes sexual innuendo, it does not specify who actually makes sexual transactions. I assert that we take the sexual innuendo and euphemisms too far if we contain them solely in heterosexual territory.
further open possibilities – to consider that the reason these sentiments are not issues between the two women is because of the presence of a lesbo-eroticism that resists that kind of stereotypically heteronormative in-fighting.

With this said, however, Lorelei’s and Dorothy’s relationship is not entirely serene. Although they are not petty, envious or competitive, the two “quarrel” quite often throughout their adventures. In fact, the disputes between the two are almost as frequent as they are brief. They are sometimes facilitated by a clash between the more astute character of Dorothy and the entertainment she procures from her less clever partner. For example, at one point they have “quite a little quarrel” when Dorothy teases Lorelei for asking the “French veecount what was the name of the unknown soldier” (55). But there are more serious quarrels (yes, it is difficult calling anything serious really in *GPB*) that seem to function as checks and balances between the two women to ensure their relationship remains the topmost priority. Although they certainly allow and encourage each other in their extracurricular acquaintances with men, they also genially – but jealously – monitor the gravitas of each other’s relationships to the men around them. “Jealous” in this context is used very specifically, for as stated above, the two woman are not envious of each other’s conquests with men, but they seem quite protective of ensuring the sustainability of the one possession that is far more valuable even than their jewelry: their relationship. For example, Lorelei and Dorothy have “quite a little quarrel” after Dorothy insists on calling

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119 By way of explanation, Lorelei tells Dorothy, and the reader, that she did not really want to ask that question, but rather a more particular one: “…what I did mean to ask him was, what was the name of his mother because it is always the mother of a dead soldier that I always seem to think about more than the dead soldier that has died” (55).
Mr. Eisman “Gus,” because using his first name does not show proper “reverance” [sic] to a gentleman who “spends quite a lot of money educating a girl” (Lorelei) (5).¹²⁰ Although Lorelei would chalk this up to Dorothy’s “unrefined” manner, it is more a matter of chiding her friend, reminding her that Gus is footing the bill for both of them to travel all over Europe, and therefore she should at least try not to insult the man to his face. At another moment they have “quite a little quarrel” because Dorothy says that Lorelei is becoming “too English” since meeting the Prince of Wales (44). In this scene, Lorelei has already danced with the Prince and Dorothy has just been asked to dance with him as well. Lorelei’s irritation is roused by Dorothy’s continuous use of American “slang” – handing her fan to Lorelei when the Prince invites her to dance, Dorothy says: “Hold this while I slip a new page into English histry” [sic] – and she relays that irritation to Dorothy when her friend returns from the dance floor. But Dorothy, lest her material girl get carried away by royalty and dreams of wealth untold, confers a cultural dig mocking Lorelei’s Englishness and persists in her use of slang to implicitly remind Lorelei of their American-ness, and most importantly, their alliance with each other.

Two other incidents in which the women “rein each other in” seem to always have to do with ribbing each other about their handling of the men.

¹²⁰ To illustrate her own couth, Lorelei explains: “I mean I never even think of calling Mr. Eisman by his first name, but if I want to call him anything at all, I call him ‘Daddy’” (5). Susan Hegeman notes that Lorelei’s childish ways with older men (giving them nicknames like ‘Piggy and ‘Coocoo’) “diminishes the overt signs of a mature sexuality and ameliorates the potential conflict between the demands of companionship and sex by reminding her male companions of that one moment in which companionate – and possibly also erotic – relationships with women were least problematic: childhood” (535). The particular nickname of ‘Daddy,’ suggests Hegeman, “should serve to remind Gus that Lorelei is both harmless and dependent on him in a way that refers directly to traditional patriarchal roles” (535-36).
currently buzzing around them. At one point, their “quarrel” is a private tutoring session where the more focused Lorelei reminds Dorothy of their particular purpose in travelling:

> So Dorothy and I had quite a little quarrel because I told Dorothy that she was wasting quite a lot of time going with any gentleman who is out of a job but Dorothy is always getting to really like somebody and she will never learn how to act. I mean I always seem to think that when a girl really enjoys being with a gentleman, it puts her to quite a disadvantage and no real good can come of it” (42).

Lorelei’s concerns are certainly because she means to continue to “educate” Dorothy in the refined art of accepting gifts, but to also keep Dorothy from straying too far away from their intimate liaison. By making friends with the lower classes, Dorothy is not only playing hooky from school, but also taking time and resources away from them as a couple.

After having ingeniously convinced Piggie to spend money on her, Lorelei is teased by Dorothy about her methods, although Dorothy does concede they are so brilliant as to be criminal. But, Lorelei pushes back, implying that

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121 As a plot reminder to the reader, the episode is reproduced here. And since it is better said by Lorelei, I quote the scene entirely:

“Yesterday afternoon I really thought I ought to begin to educate Piggie how to act with a girl like American gentlemen act with a girl. So I asked him to come up to have tea in our sitting room in the hotel because I had quite a headache. I mean I really look quite cute in my pink negligay. So I sent out a bell hop friend of Dorothy and I who is quite a nice boy who is called Harry and who we talk to quite a lot. So I gave Harry ten pounds of English money and I told him to go to the most expensive florist and to buy some very very expensive orchids for 10 pounds and to bring them to our sitting room at fifteen minutes past five and not to say a word but to say they were for me. So Piggie came to
engagement in her mode of persuasion is necessary because Dorothy insists on squandering her own time on an unprofitable liaison:

So Dorothy and I had quite a little quarrel after they went because Dorothy asked me which one of the Jesse James brothers was my father. But I told her I was not so unrefined that I would waste my time with any gentleman who was only a ballroom dancer when he had a job. So Dorothy said Gerald was a gentleman because he wrote her a note and it had a crest. So I told her to try and eat it. So then we had to get dressed” (46).

This scene, the ephemeral quarrel, the teasing on both sides so entirely encapsulates Lorelei’s and Dorothy’s fun-loving (fun and loving) relationship. But there is one quarrel where Lorelei’s right to Dorothy is shown to trump any

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tea and we were having tea when Harry came in and he did not say a word but he gave me a quite large box and he said it was for me. So I opened the box and sure enough they were a dozen very very beautiful orchids. So I looked for a card, but of course there was no card so I grabbed Piggie and I said I would have to give him quite a large hug because it must have been him. But he said it was not him. But I said it must be him because I said that there was only one gentleman in London who was so sweet and generous and had such a large heart to send a girl one dozen orchids like him. So he still said it was not him. But I said I knew it was him, because there was not a gentleman in London so really marvelous and so wonderful and such a marvelous gentleman to send a girl one dozen orchids every day as him. So I really had to apologize for giving him such a large hug but I told him I was so full of impulses that when I knew he was going to send me one dozen orchids every day I became so impulsive I could not help it! So then Dorothy and Gerald came in and I told them all about what a wonderful gentleman Piggie turned out to be and I told them when a gentleman sent a girl one dozen orchids every day he really reminded me of a prince. So Piggie blushed quite a lot and he was really very very pleased and he did not say any more that it was not him. So then I started to make a fuss over him and I told him he would have to look out because he was really so good looking and I was so full of impulses that I might even lose my mind some time and give him a kiss. So Piggie really felt very very good to be such a good looking gentleman. So he could not help blushing all the time and he could not help grinning all the time from one ear to another. So he asked us all to dinner and then he and Gerald went to change their clothes for dinner” (Loos 45-6).

122 Of course the Jesse James brothers allusion refers to the brothers from the Old West whose occupation was thievery.
man and that is when the two are leaving London and the unemployed ballroom dancer appears:

I mean we had quite a little quarrel because Gerald showed up at the station with a bangle for Dorothy so I told Dorothy she was well rid of such a person. So Dorothy had to come with me because Mr. Eisman is paying her expenses because he wants Dorothy to be my chaperone (49).

When the pitiful bangle is offered to Dorothy, Lorelei disdainfully rejects it in her stead. Lorelei is the only voice in this re-telling of the event; Dorothy has no droll comment or witty comeback. When it comes down to it, Dorothy’s silence seems to concede that between the two things, Gerald and his bangle and Lorelei, she knows she wants the latter. Lorelei is both wealth and companion for Dorothy, the two are fused together; therefore, Dorothy would never choose a bangle – or a man – over her partner. Although Lorelei is trying to improve Dorothy’s mind in order to have a two-income familial circle, for the most part Dorothy will not put into practice the lessons Lorelei teaches her about making her own money. From this we can deduce that Dorothy is content in the relationship as it stands, with Lorelei as the breadwinner. Likewise, when Lorelei explains to the reader that Dorothy “had” to come with her because Mr. Eisman wants her to be Lorelei’s chaperone, her words belie not only what it is that she wants herself, but the role of each woman in the relationship. It is obvious that

123 Lorelei not only rejects the bangle, but as far as she is concerned the bangle itself becomes a stand-in for Gerald, i.e., it allows Lorelei to reject the person because of the thing that he has purchased, which has become him. (49).
Lorelei is more of a caretaker for Dorothy, and if anyone is acting as a chaperone, it would be each of them for the other. Lorelei reminds the reader that she is their main source of income, and although she names Mr. Eisman as the reason that compels Dorothy to continue on to Paris, all parties seem content with moving along per usual. We certainly never hear again from or about Gerald.

There is one incident where Lorelei’s plan even favors Dorothy over herself. Granted, she will also benefit by shopping on someone else’s dime, but Dorothy will make money herself. Lorelei explains, “So I really think it would be delightful if Dorothy could make some money for herself because it might make Dorothy get some ambitions” (69), and proceeds to explain her plan to her partner: “So when I got through telling Dorothy what I thought up, Dorothy looked at me and looked at me and she really said she thought my brains were a miracle” (65). Not only does Lorelei’s mind shine even in this moment with her much smarter friend, but her plan will instruct her partner in the art form Lorelei has already mastered.

The plan, mentioned earlier with the French father and son team who have been hired to steal the diamond tiara, works out in the best possible way as Louie and Robber spend large quantities of Lady Beekman’s money attempting to seize the tiara, and in the end both men individually buy the tiara from Dorothy. After Lorelei has seen both men pull aside Dorothy and whisper to her during their shopping trip, Lorelei is advised by Dorothy that both men individually have

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124 Granted Dorothy equivocates the compliment in the sentence immediately following: “I mean she said my brains reminded her of a radio because you listen to it for days and days and you get discouraged and just when you are getting ready to smash it, something comes out that is a masterpiece” (65).
asked Dorothy to steal the tiara and sell it directly to him (neither knows what the other is proposing). In this way, either Louie or Robber can give the tiara to Lady Beekman and claim the full monetary reward for himself. Lorelei explains to the reader:

So tomorrow morning Dorothy is going to take the diamond tiara and she is going to tell Louie that she stole it and she is going to sell it to Louie. But she will make him hand over the money first and then, just as she is going to hand over the diamond tiara, I am going to walk in on them and say, “Oh there is my diamond tiara. I have been looking for it everywhere.” So then I will get it back. So then she will tell him that she might just as well keep the 1000 francs because she will steal it for him again in the afternoon. So in the afternoon she is going to sell it to Robber….(69)

Although Lorelei is at the outset of the novel supposedly the object of derision – the gold-digging dumb blonde – by the end, the reader finds her fantastically funny, a little silly, and rather ingenious. Even Dorothy, the person who by all accounts is exponentially smarter than Lorelei, enjoys their non-intellectual tête-à-tête. She especially enjoys watching her partner maneuver through the endless situations in the book. It is she who witnesses the ways in which Lorelei uses her unique mind over her body; it is she who is the eyewitness to Lorelei’s detachment of heterosexual sex from the body. And finally, it is she who is either also involved in euphemistic sex with Lorelei or not. All we know in the end is that even as Lorelei gets married, the moment where the theory of Lorelei’s
lesbianism could break down, Dorothy remains unperturbed. She knows that even Lorelei’s marriage of convenience and status will not change the dynamic of the two women:

And everybody says my wedding was very, very beautiful. I mean even Dorothy said it was very beautiful, only Dorothy said she had to concentrate her mind on the massacre of the Armenians to keep herself from laughing right out loud in everybody’s face (121).

Dorothy obviously does not become self-sufficient nor does she become more “reverant”; therefore, we can only assume she will continue to be “kept” by Lorelei. If euphemism has been effective in suggesting Lorelei’s sexual activity, it must also include Dorothy.
II

Willful Ignorance as Lesbian Topos

Nella Larsen’s Quicksand and Passing

The mimetic rendering of black women was as fraught with difficulty as handling lesbianism in the modernist era. As noted in previous chapters, mimetic representations of lesbianism in the U. K. brought us the sharp, outspoken, and thoughtful feminist, and the U. S. brought us the twinned gold-digging flapper and the dumb blonde. In African American literature, Nella Larsen’s two novels, Quicksand and Passing (1928 and 1929), made the representation of lesbianism even more complex. By infusing lesbian topoi into racial issues of representation, Larsen illustrates a specific kind of forced thoughtlessness in American fiction, willful ignorance. Willful ignorance, also known as willful blindness, is a legal term that suggests a person has intentionally kept herself from information that might make that person criminally liable. In this spirit, this chapter will argue that both protagonists of Larsen’s novels, Irene Redfield and Helga Crane, intentionally engage in intricate mental acrobatics in order to conceal from themselves their own liability in queer desires.

Irene Redfield, the married mother of two falls terribly hard for her newly re-found childhood friend Clare Kendry, and Helga Crane in her final move into a perverse marriage and metamorphosis into a baby making machine, rejects in myriad ways heteronormativity. Lesbian desire, then, is one way in to these two
texts that, although finally enjoying near full acceptance into the American
Modernist canon, have not yet been exhaustively vetted by literary scholars.

If it is true that lesbianism is not yet congealed into a firm and static
identity in the late 1920s, then the mimesis of lesbianism is in a piecemeal state
and is not yet designated through one coherent topos, through fashion or behavior,
for example. The mimetic topoi of lesbianism, then, is fragmented not only
between texts but within a single text as it does its work of reflecting and
refracting itself. In other words, as pointed out previously, hints of lesbianism
regarding masculine dress or manner are unremarkable at this stage; therefore, the
mimesis of lesbianism is more pluralistic and holds more variety. Although the
general public overall had some knowledge of the female “invert” or a woman
classified within the “third sex” at this time, these identities were not expected to
be discerned outwardly.\footnote{This is not to say that even now we can outwardly discern sexual identity; it is to note that to
form communities many self-identified lesbians take up visual indicators associated with
lesbianism in order to be acknowledged as such. Specific clothing fashion and hair styles are now
often perceived by the general public and self-identified lesbians as “lesbian.” Also, the general
public has by now created stereotypes around the lesbian identity – such as dress, behavior, music
choice, etc. – in attempts to discern for themselves supposed members of the group.}

If one were to wish to draw attention to lesbianism,
one must shout it from the rooftops akin to The Well of Loneliness. Texts that did
not (shout), however, demonstrate that representing lesbianism was much more
fluid, containing an infinite topos of womanhood and femininities. This fluidity is
particularly exemplified in Larsen’s novels because black women novelists of the
Harlem Renaissance were struggling already to represent, or whether to represent
at all, the sexual desire of black women. As noted by Deborah E. McDowell in
her introduction to the 1986 publication of Larsen’s two novels:
Since the very beginning of their history running over roughly 130 years, black women novelists have treated sexuality with caution and reticence, a pattern clearly linked to the network of social and literary myths perpetuated throughout history about black women’s libidinousness. It is well known that during slavery the white slave master constructed an image of black female sexuality which shifted responsibility for his own sexual passions onto his female slaves. They, not he, had wanton, insatiable desires that he was powerless to resist. (xii)

In response, a “pattern of reticence about black female sexuality dominated novels by black women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (xiii). To combat the “myth of the black woman’s sexual licentiousness,” notes McDowell, women writers insisted “fiercely on her chastity” (xiii):

Fighting to overcome their heritage of rape and concubinage, and following the movement by black club women of the era, they imitated the ‘purity,’ the sexual morality of the Victorian bourgeoisie. (xiii)

The slippery slope of black women writers’ writing black women’s desire illustrates the constraints of possibilities in representation: black women are either seen as hyper(hetero)sexual or frigid. In acknowledging only these options – the virgin/whore dichotomy – the possibilities for representation are limited by positive valence mimesis, which is ruled by black women’s relationships to men. Heterosexuality as a normative paradigm is not questioned.
As discussed earlier in the project, when *negative valence* mimesis eclipses *positive valence* mimesis, it produces possibilities of difference into literary representation. By entering the dialogue about black women’s sexuality and garnering ample hostility toward heterosexuality in the process, Larsen engages the topoi of lesbianism through *negative valence* mimesis, intentionally or not.\(^{126}\) Because the topoi of lesbianism is diffuse at this time, it is not yet stereotypical, which means it incorporates various women, femininities, classes, and races without particularly congealing around any obvious “type.”

Traditionally feminine and conventionally seen characters, such as Irene Redfield and Helga Crane, surrounded by assumably heterosexual plots, then, can be read in new ways. *Negative valence* mimesis of black women’s desires offers the reader of Larsen’s texts an alternative way of seeing their protagonists. Yes, disparagement of the heterosexual paradigm by black women novelists can be read as reproaches of or dissatisfaction with the hegemonic idealization of heterosexuality, a reading that remains along *positive valence* mimesis that keeps heterosexuality intact.\(^{127}\) However, *negative valence* mimesis of desire tolerates a

\(^{126}\) This line of argumentation is in the tradition of Barbara Smith’s in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” of 1997. In that text, Smith argues that Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula* “works like a lesbian novel” not just because of the “passionate” relationship between the two main female characters, but because of “Morrison’s consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and the family” (165).

\(^{127}\) Claudia Tate and Barbara Johnson are two notable critics who take for granted a hetero-centric impulse in the criticism of *Quicksand*. Both scholars undertake psychoanalytic readings of the protagonist, Helga Crane, with especial concern for Helga and her relationship with her absent, black father. These readings are excellent, but rely entirely on the assumed heteronormativity of the text and protagonist, since the psychoanalytic archetype relies specifically on heterosexual implications of childhood development and attachments (although it must be noted that Johnson does in fact allow for a lesbian reading of Larsen’s other text, *Passing*). I prefer George Hutchinson’s reading in his article “Subject to Disappearance: Interracial Identity in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand,*” which suggests that:
much harsher critique. Because new and different possibilities of sexuality and sexual identities appear in the American collective consciousness in the late 1920s, a reproach of heterosexuality can also be a rejection of heterosexuality itself. And, if negative valence mimesis in this case indeed encapsulates a rejection of heterosexuality, it ipso facto leaves a space where the topoi of lesbianism can thrive. Negative valence mimesis allows the reader to see a different sexual reality of/for black women. Of course, in doing so – in handling an as yet atypical representation – deciphering it can be challenging since it is perhaps not wholly recognizable.

Seeing the Difference

It has often been said that Larsen’s plot lines are implausible and that her protagonists border on the perverse. The endings of both novels, for some critics are problematic, plot lines are irregular; the protagonists are eccentric and motives for their actions and behaviors are unclear and remain unexplained. These problems could suggest either flawed artistry, or simply weaknesses in the text, both of which have been suggested by critics at some point. Yet, it seems like

“In place of the Oedipal drama and the incest taboo (as ubiquitous in tragic mulatto tradition as in psychoanalysis), Larsen turns to a female-centered drama [in Quicksand] figuring the abandonment of woman under patriarchy, death in childbirth, the enslavement of the body to procreation of racial subjects alienated from themselves and their mothers by national ideologies of racial and class identity” (190).

Please see full citations of Johnson’s The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender, and Tate’s Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race in the bibliography.

128 In his 2006 biography of Nella Larsen, George Hutchinson reiterates this idea by noting that “disappointment with the novel has derived chiefly from its ending” (308). However, since Larsen is now a frequent name in the American literary canon, one can assume that these issues do not have to do with her “art” per se (as early critics have suggested), but rather her art evokes these
this criticism has as much to do with the critic as the texts. Critics have expectations for texts and Larsen continues to be a “straight” writer of “straight” texts; therefore, the texts may seem incomprehensible at times. As late as 2004, for example, one critic who concedes the homoerotic tension between Irene and Clare still cannot bring herself to admit it exists on a significant level. In her article “A Plea for Color: Nella Larsen’s Iconography of the Mulatta,” Cherene Sherrard-Johnson notes Deborah McDowell’s lesbian argument about *Passing* along with Barbara Johnson’s support of McDowell and Thadious Davis’ argument against, and decides for herself in the end: “While there is a strong erotic attraction between the two women, I am not convinced that *Passing* can be called a lesbian text” (867 Fn 29).

A conclusion such as is made by Sherrard-Johnson demonstrates the resistance to acknowledge lesbianism as a recognizable and valid function in women’s literature, or black women’s literature. For lesbian feminist critics, this kind of resistance where in 2004 one can use the term “lesbian text” in such a strict way as to disqualify some topos of lesbianism in a particular novel, seems like a revisitation of second wave feminism again where arguments about *how* to

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129 To be clear, Steven J. Belluscio points out that Davis does not entirely reject McDowell’s assertion of lesbianism in *Passing*, noting that he “has argued for the historical viability of this reading” (243), that “‘[l]esbianism as a theme in a popular work’ and as a visible cultural presence was ‘neither unfamiliar nor shocking in Larsen’s milieu’” (Davis qtd in Belluscio). However sympathetic Davis may be with McDowell’s lesbian reading, his own criticism of the text relies solely on compulsory heteronormativity, thus diluting the significance of a lesbian reading altogether. Please see full citation of Belluscio’s book *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* in the bibliography.
define a “lesbian text” was de rigueur. With the move into a post-second wave or even third wave feminism, as well as established lesbian, gay, and queer studies departments at universities all over the world, it seems that one cannot still discount the lesbian reading of a text simply because it is not lesbian enough.

To return to negative valence mimesis, then, is to explain how lesbianism even now is difficult for readers to accept because it is difficult to perceive. If a text is consistently read along positive valence mimesis, assuming the heteronormative values of gender, sexuality, and reproduction, how will most readers ever see the shadow of negative valence mimesis peeking out from the subtext? In The Apparitional Lesbian (1995), Terry Castle seeks the ghostly shadow of lesbianism in literature, especially paying close attention to works that are frequently read straight. Her argument, much like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s in The Epistemology of the Closet (1990) relies more on scrutinizing what remains unsaid and unapparent in literature, thereby often engaging in reading literature against itself.130 Castle’s text suggests that the representation of the lesbian in Western literature, simply, cannot be seen by the general reader. “[E]ven when

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130 Sedgwick’s text, a follow up to her 1985 Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire, was methodologically revolutionary in its feminist and queer deconstruction. Taking an important idea from Michel Foucault, Sedgwick asserts that “closetedness” as a performance in the speech act of silence “accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it (Sedgwick 3). She reminds us, “Foucault says: ‘there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things…. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault qtd in Sedgwick 3). It must be noted; however, that Sedgwick’s text was criticized by some feminists who felt she was expending time and resources for the study of homosexual men that would be better used for feminist and lesbian research. Carolyn Dever, for one, argues in 1997 that by focusing solely on male homosexuality, Sedgwick once again marginalizes the lesbian in the canon of literary criticism and theory. Please see her article “Obstructive Behavior: Dykes in the Mainstream of Feminist Theory.” Full citation is in the bibliography.
she is there, quite plainly, in front of us” because she has been “made to seem invisible – by culture itself” (Castle 4). She suggests that “Western civilization has […] been haunted by a fear of ‘women without men’ – of women indifferent or resistant to male desire” (5), and therefore the lesbian is often “elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot” (2). For the purposes of reading Nella Larsen’s work, the jumping off point is from Castle’s and Sedgwick’s work of reading through silences and things unsaid, a methodology that has proven its effectiveness in previous feminist scholarship. These cues will only support the chapter’s main focus, willful ignorance, which suggests a review of things dishonestly said and things intentionally misunderstood. The lesbian topos, then, in both *Passing* and *Quicksand* will be found through the willful ignorance of the main characters, Helga Crane and Irene Redfield. Cues inferring lesbianism will be seen more clearly through a methodology advocated by Barbara Smith, among other lesbian critics, that deconstructs the “consistently critical stance[s] toward the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and the family” in a literary text (Smith 165). In the case of these two novels, Larsen’s criticism of heteronormativity is at times ruthless and at others simply brutal.

Although there are those who continue to downplay its significance or imply its inconsequentiality, most contemporary scholars acknowledge a presence of lesbianism in *Passing*.¹³¹ This reading will assume that, at the least, has been proven sufficiently by previous critics. Therefore, more time will be spent on

¹³¹ Some critics, like George Hutchinson, are willing even to state that the “real story” in Larsen’s *Passing* is about “lesbian attraction […] wrapped […] in the guise of the ‘safe and familiar plot of racial passing’” (486).
analysis of Larsen’s harsh commentary on marriage and family that deconstructs further heteronormative expectations in the text in order to support an even stronger lesbian reading.

Critiquing the Core: Marriage, Family, Desire

Passing

Near the beginning of Passing, trying to fathom Clare Kendry’s return to New York and Harlem after having passed as white for twelve years (and continuing to pass at this point), Irene Redfield discusses with her husband Brian why those who pass over the color-line, in his words “always come back”: 132

“But why?” Irene wanted to know. “Why?”

“If I knew that, I’d know what race is.”

“But wouldn’t you think that having got the thing, or things, they were after, and at such risk, they’d be satisfied? Or afraid?” (185).

Irene’s description of passing is a rational one, and is obviously informed by her own biased perspective, for she is known to pass on occasion for convenience to get what she wants. However, as in so many other places in the novel she remains blissfully unaware of how ironic her words are. Clare’s desire to return to the black community is certainly a reality in the text, but race also and often doubles as desire in Passing. The nature of desire in this case, unwittingly stated out loud

132 As a reminder to the reader I give this short summary: Clare Kendry, a childhood friend of Irene Redfield, returns to New York after a 12-year hiatus. Clare Kendry is a gorgeous woman light enough to pass into the white world, which she has done successfully for that many years. She has even married a white racist and riskily borne a child. Now that she is back in New York, she becomes increasingly involved in black life and culture to the horror of Irene, who finds her passing silly – she passes on occasion for convenience – but finds her return to black life dangerous.
by Irene, is a clear cue for readers to be aware of Clare’s racial yearnings as well as her sexual desire. But it is also a foreshadowing of Irene’s own desire for the other woman the more Clare’s presence unsettles her and distresses the “security” she so viciously defends. Security for Irene is defined in this author’s 2011 article, “In the Place of Clare Kendry: A Gothic Reading of Race and Sexuality in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” as “ontological certainty” (Wagner 143). Irene has created a secure place for herself through her “static beliefs about race” and sex (143, 149), and her bourgeois class status (150). But when Clare reenters Irene’s life, Clare’s ability to evoke passion in the woman whose only desire up to this point is to be “tranquil” (Larsen 235), causes subterranean undulations in Irene’s typically controlled disposition.

Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained? And did too much striving, too much faith in safety and permanence, unfit one for these other things? (235)

Irene’s contemplations are tinted by a sense of yearning revealing a cognizance that she has foregone opportunities of integral human emotions in order to preserve her security. She concedes, even, that she has never actually known love:

Strange, that she couldn’t now be sure that she had ever truly known love. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the
father of her sons. But was he anything more? Had she ever wanted or tried for more? In that hour, she thought not. (235)

But, this analysis of her life’s philosophy arises because of Clare Kendry, and even as she begins to question, her mind begins to snap down on the unusually introspective moment, and the questions and what-ifs about her life are put aside in order to return to willful ignorance where security reigns supreme. She does not love Brian, but she insists that he belongs in America and has a “duty […] to her and to his boys” (235); for it is not so much love as the bourgeois lifestyle Brian provides, and Brian’s steadfastness in black heteronormativity – the public pressure that obliges him to act responsibly in marriage regarding his wife and children – that offers security to Irene. At one point, Irene revels in the fact that she knows Brian “as well as he [knows] himself, or better,” which is a hubris borne of surety (187).

The one thing she is determined to do is keep his dissatisfaction in check in order to ensure her feelings of safety and security. To this aim, she plays his responsibility for family in the US against his longing for exotic escape in Brazil. And yet, this is not enough. Clare’s appearance brings more insecurity and more instability. It is unsettling for Irene that she cannot pin down Clare as easily as

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133 This patriotic moment comes from a long ago rift between the two when Brian had voiced the desire to move to Brazil to escape the blatant and cruel racism of America, and Irene had insisted on their staying in the country: “He had never spoken of his desire since that long-ago time of storm and strain, of hateful and nearly disastrous quarrelling, when she had so firmly opposed him […]. No, there had been, in all the years that they had lived together since then, no other talk of it….” (187).

134 At one point, Irene distances herself in her relationship with Brian by deemphasizing their relationship to each other and simply referring to Brian as “the father of Ted and Junior” (220). At another she admits that “She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle” (221).
Brian. According to my previous article, this inability “heighten[s] Clare’s mystery” and becomes the “site of Irene’s anxiety” (Wagner 148). As noted in his 2008 article “Deauthenticating Community: The Passing Intrusion of Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen’s *Passing,*” Josh Toth claims that for Irene, Clare is a “type of mystery that *must* be solved, a dangerously unstable object that requires stabilization” (58). While Irene means to stamp out Brian’s discontent once and for all, that the restlessness that intermittently “flare[s] up and alarm[s] her” should be “banked, smothered” and ultimately “die,” Clare’s own restlessness and instability continues to intrigue Irene (188). To be sure, Clare remains an irritant and indeed rather frightens the protagonist, but her insistent presence is from the start fascinating, “strange and compelling” (161).

The mysterious passions that Clare arouses in Irene overwhelm that woman’s serene and reserved manner. She cannot repress her instinctual reactions to Clare’s beauty, mystery, and danger. One moment in which this is particularly evident is when Irene determines to cut off her friendship with Clare by not answering her letter. However, Clare presents herself unexpectedly at Irene’s home, and rather than explain the rehearsed speech of how she would not act as the liaison between Clare and the black community, Irene blurts out “Dear

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135 After the disastrous tea at Clare’s in which her racist, white husband pops in just long enough to meet Clare’s old friends and insult African Americans openly, mistaking Irene and Gertrude Martin – both light enough to pass – for white women, Irene is furious with Clare and vows to keep herself clear from any further entanglement with her: “Well, Clare can just count me out. I’ve no intention of being the link between her and her poorer darker brethren” (185).
God! But aren’t you lovely, Clare!” (194). At another moment, Clare’s beauty is so tremendous, Irene only looks on in “choked admiration” (203).

In comparison, Irene’s response to Brian’s attractiveness is objective and distant. While Brian is busy reading Clare’s letter one evening, Irene looks at him “with a sort of curious detachment” and concludes that:

Brian […] was extremely good-looking. Not, of course, pretty or effeminate; the slight irregularity of his nose saved him from the prettiness, and the rather marked heaviness of his chin saved him from the effeminacy. But he was, in a pleasant masculine way, rather handsome. And yet, wouldn’t he, perhaps, have been merely ordinarily good-looking but for the richness, the beauty of his skin, which was of an exquisitely fine texture and deep copper colour. (183-4)

Irene looks at Brian as she might look at a painting, or at any other human being. Her view of him neither suggests erotic love nor pride in possession (through marriage). For Irene, the image of her husband does not induce emotional

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136 For a more developed exploration of the effects of Clare on Irene, please see this author’s 2011 article mentioned earlier.

137 One can also question Irene’s attractiveness to Brian. Although we do not get much information directly from Brian, we can assume that direct conversations reported by the unreliable narrator is as reliable as one can get. Therefore, we can assume that Brian at one point in the novel does state his aesthetic ideal. Irene, believing Clare to be the most beautiful woman she has ever seen, asks Brian if he does not agree that Clare is “extraordinarily beautiful”:

‘No,’ he had answered. ‘That is, not particularly.’

‘Brian, you’re fooling!’

‘No, honestly. Maybe I’m fussy. I s’pose she’d be an unusually good-looking white woman. I like my ladies darker. Beside an A-number-one sheba, she simply hasn’t got ‘em’” (209). In this exchange, it should be pointed out that Irene is as light skinned as Clare and therefore, it makes one wonder; if Brian prefers darker women, how does he feel about his own wife? Of course, that assumes that Brian is interested in women at all. For the male homoerotic
intensity like Clare’s does, but in her objective appreciation for Brian lies security. In other words, Irene uses the tools of sexless-heterosexual marriage and children to ignore any deeper inquisitiveness she may have about erotic desire and sexuality. We know, for example, that Irene and Brian’s sex life is nonexistent. The text is fairly clear on this fact through, among other things, a fight between Irene and Brian about the topic: Irene finds (heterosexual) sex unsavory and Brian calls it a “joke,” the “greatest in the world” (189). And, of course, On the basis of this fact – Irene and Brian’s sexless marriage – McDowell, mentioned earlier, was the first to suggest a lesbian connection between the two protagonists of *Passing*, Irene and Clare: “Having established the absence of sex from the marriages of these two women, Larsen can flirt, if only by suggestion, with the idea of a lesbian relationship between them” (xxiii). But, as noted above, lesbianism is not only an aversion to heterosexual sex, it is also an aversion to other institutions that take heterosexuality as its core. Therefore, topoi of lesbianism can be noted through unfavorable or even disparaging depictions of heterosexual marriage and the family – which automatically implies reproduction – as presently constituted. In this case, willful ignorance allows Irene to push aside frightening questions such as whether or not she loves her husband (and...
vice versa), or why she reacts to Clare with such startling passion, and allows Irene to keep the smallest of ripples from overcoming her placid surface.

Critiquing the Core: Family, Marriage, Religion

Quicksand

Family and Marriage are taken to task by Larsen more viciously in Quicksand than in Passing; in fact, the text expresses quite candidly that marriage and reproduction has “ruined” Helga’s life (133). Helga has no family to speak of in the novel, and the very morality of the family structure itself is questioned by the stark portrait painted by Larsen. Helga’s parents are both dead. Her father is the absent black father who left her mother before Helga would become old enough to remember him. Her mother is a white woman from Denmark who marries a white man after having been left by Helga’s father. Helga is raised by the “jealous, and malicious hatred” of a white father and the “savage unkindness” of her half-siblings, although she is saved for a time by her Uncle Peter who, after her mother’s death, sends Helga off to a “school for Negroes” at fifteen (23). Later Uncle Peter forsakes her completely, although he gives her a small amount of money as a final relinquishing of their ties, and she visits her only remaining

139 Early in the novel the fairness of black bourgeois society to place such emphasis on particular types of family units is questioned by Helga:

“No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga it accounted for everything her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville. It even accounted for her engagement to James. Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn’t prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn’t ‘belong.’ You could be queer, or even attractive, or bad, or brilliant, or even love beauty and such nonsense if you were a Rankin, or a Leslie, or a Scoville; in other words, if you had a family. But if you were just plain Helga Crane, of whom nobody had ever heard, it was presumptuous of you to be anything but inconspicuous and conformable” (8).
relations, a white Aunt and Uncle in Denmark. “Family,” then is revealed by Larsen as a less than noble institution, and one in direct opposition to bourgeois societal and religious depictions.

Furthering her brutal critique of family, Larsen examines Helga’s willful ignorance required by religion, which is the only way in which Helga winds up married in the end.\textsuperscript{140} Religion itself, as the impetus of non-thinking, is severely attacked by Larsen. The twenty-one page description of Helga’s time under the influence of religion is devastating for the protagonist and painful for the reader. Religion, rather than the clothing and colors that had shielded her before, becomes the “protective coloring, shielding her from the cruel light of an unbearable reality” (126). This unbearable reality will be discussed later. For now, the conversion scene and the religious influence that leads Helga into “unbearable reality” will be investigated.

The conversion scene is one in which we see the protagonist move from a pensive – although not particularly insightful woman – into a thoughtless automaton. After having stumbled into the church service, soaked from the torrent of rain outside, fighting a hangover, and emotionally defeated, Helga laughs at the irony of song being sung – “showers of blessings” – and her current plight. And yet, after her wry laughter, she breaks down and weeps in “great rocking sobs” (112). At this point, she looks at the congregation as an outsider,

\textsuperscript{140} My assertion about family and marriage is in direct contradiction with critics like Thadious M. Davis who argue that Helga’s “rush” into marriage “fulfills the logic of her search for family” (268). I suggest that Helga has shown time and again her aversion to “family” since it finally takes a literal act of God and a shutting down of her mind to get her into that institution. Please see Davis’ biography \textit{Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman’s Life Unveiled} in the bibliography.
finding their service in some way “entertaining” and curious; she is interested in
the “zealous shoutings and groanings” of the mass of people (113). Still separated
from the congregation, she observes the believers with amusement, anger, and
disdain; however, she is principally interested in the group’s women whose
“writhings and weepings” seemed to “predominate” the proceedings (113). She
watches the performance take on a “Bacchic vehemence” through the “frenzied
women” who gesticulate, scream, weep, and totter “to the praying preacher,
which had gradually become a cadenced chant” (113).

Although still fascinated, Helga’s fascination turns to “indistinct horror” at
the event. Yet, it is at this moment when Helga can no longer move. The horror
secures her immobility, which in turn affects her ability to actively think. As an
observer she becomes affected by the “mixture of breaths,” the “contact of
bodies,” and the “concerted convulsions” in a “wild appeal for a single soul. Her
soul” (113). It is described in the text as a “weird orgy” that “penetrate[s]” her
(113). Frenzied, the women drag “themselves on their knees” or crawl “over the
floor”; they “tear off their clothing,” sob, and pull their hair (114). Once the
window for her escape is closed, the scene is no longer rationally presented.
Instead, it takes on a wild turn. Helga is pressed into on all sides by the wailing
women who have pushed her against a rail enclosing the preacher’s small
platform. She feels herself “possessed by the same madness” as the congregation
(113). She feels a “brutal desire to shout and to sling herself about,” and does so
impromptu, “[m]addened” by the crowd (113). She becomes “unconscious of the
words she utter[s]” and “their meaning” (113-14). Finally, through the “hot” tears
and sweat dripped on her “bare arms and neck” she is “encouraged” by the women to give in to her oblivion, and “within her” opens a “supreme aspiration” (114). Some in the crowd faint and other’s voices are “spent” at the end of the conversion, while Helga’s mind is taken far and away from the present (114).

The homoerotic-orgasmic dimensions of the conversion scene are obvious and troubling to a conventional reading of the protagonist. For it is in the church and enfolded by women that Helga first engages in, and is swept away by sexual passion. Larsen sexualizes and more particularly lesbianizes Helga’s religious experience while illustrating religion as terrible and frightening in and of itself. Furthermore, religion is where one goes to stop thinking; it is where intellect is generally expelled.

Religion authorizes willful ignorance for Helga, who makes a habit of non-thinking from her “conversion” forward. Immediately after the church scene,

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141 McDowell’s 1986 introduction to Quicksand and Passing also describes the conversion scene this way: “The sexual desires, pent-up throughout the novel, finally explode in Helga’s primitive, passionate, religious conversion, the description of which unambiguously simulates sexual excitement and orgasmic release” (xix-xx). Similarly, Wagner illustrates it this way: “It is a most vivid sexual scene, yes, but emphatically queer as well. The frame of desire is unquestionably homoerotic, and paradoxically religious and sexual, horrifying and ecstatic” (35).

142 Of course, she has already had the sexual precursor to the church scene in the cabaret scene of Chapter 11:

They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstastically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms. For a while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraorindary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taught her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature (59).

She has also already been the recipient of the surprising kiss from Robert Anderson (104). Although both the cabaret scene and the kiss from Robert elicit a sense of sexual arousal, neither comes anywhere near the sexual tension and orgasmic release illustrated in the church scene.

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for example, she walks back to her hotel “half-hypnotized,” “dizzy,” and “exhausted” with the “fattish” and “rattish yellow man,” Reverend Green (115, 118). And although she decides to sleep with him in a moment of purposeful clarity, and in another one the next day decides to marry him, in order to go through with it all, she “deliberately stop[s] thinking” (116).143 Somewhere in the back of her mind she knows marriage to this man will “cost” her far more than she may be able to pay, but instead of further intellectual investigation, she rejects the thought reminding herself that “such thinking was useless” because she had already “made her decision” (116-117).

Although very much unlike Irene in character, Helga suggests she also wants “stability” and “permanent happiness,” and is therefore willing to make this rash decision to be married with these goals in mind. She proclaims that she is “done with soul-searching” (121), which apparently means that the course of her life will be dictated by a refusal to think, or what one might call “religion”. The text suggests that Helga’s embrace of heteronormativity is her downfall; she rejects sound reason for ignorance, contemplation for oblivion, and her demise begins with marriage.

Marriage has no better treatment than family and religion from Larsen. McDowell notes that Larsen’s first novel “likens marriage to death for women”

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143 A plot point here will be helpful to the reader: After having slept with the reverend the night before, and frightened that she will again only see this bit of “happiness and serenity” fade “just as they had shaped themselves,” like all other happiness has faded for her, Helga decides to return to Reverend Green and entice him to propose (116-17). One of the most difficult things to understand about Helga is that, like Irene, she is an unreliable character and narrator; therefore, motivations focalized through her are suspect, eliciting dramatic irony. In this case, the sequence of Helga’s next decisions are increasingly horrifying; the reader distinctly does not think that Helga is happy – something the text suggests she has never quite been or known – or that any good will come of marrying the revolting Reverend Green.
“Larsen,” she continues, “dismantles the myth that marriage elevates women in the social scale; she suggests that for them the way up is, ironically and paradoxically, the way down” (xxi). Likewise, in *Mothering the Race: Women’s Narratives on Reproduction 1890-1930*, Allison Berg suggests:

In the claustrophobic conclusion of *Quicksand* maternity comes to signify and literally embody – the psychic entrapment that Helga feels throughout the novel. In a text filled with references to fate Helga’s reproductive fate serves as her final inescapable destiny (104).

Through the willful blindness that religion affords, Larsen suggests, Helga Crane, who does not marry until the end of the novel, demonstrates how marriage is used in the text as the symbol of a woman’s literal demise. Claudia Tate notes:

Because of the traditional sexual expectations that govern a woman’s life, each scenario has a romantic plot, as social convention attempts to stage Helga’s marriage. At almost every turn in the plot, then, there is the possibility for what Helga’s associates would regard as a successful marriage for her. (243)

Further than McDowell and Berg, Tate’s observation suggests that Larsen not only frustrates the reader’s trust in marriage, but also thwarts any attempt at a heteronormative reading of the novel through the romantic plot.  

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144 While Maria del Mar Gallego argues that both *Quicksand* and *Passing* hide “behind two unassuming and inoffensive genres” in that they “pass” for sentimental novels of passing, while the author actually delves into the more serious work of exploring the diverse stereotypes ascribed to African American women” (122); Hazel Carby suggests a more violent observation: “The *Quicksand* of 1928 did not just explore the contradictory terrain of women and romance; its sexual
Reverend Pleasant Green in any way appealing in the first place, willful ignorance under the guise of religious devotion turns her eyes from the unpleasant and rather sickening depiction of him:

What did it matter that he consumed his food, even the softest varieties audibly? What did it matter that, though he did no work with his hands, not even in the garden, his finger-nails were always rimmed with black? What did it matter that he failed to wash his fat body, or to shift his clothing, as often as Helga herself did? There were things that more than outweighed these. In the certainty of his goodness, his righteousness, his holiness, Helga somehow overcame her first disgust at the odor of sweat and stale garments. She was even able to be unaware of it. (Larsen 121)

Like Irene, Helga’s mind is astute; she is thoughtful by nature. But, by the time she is under the influence of religious conversion, her thoughtfulness is replaced with willful ignorance. Although she marries the preacher believing that it will bring her exhausted soul relief, when she begins to come out of her religious oblivion she feels only hatred and loathing for him. The text notes unequivocally that Helga “hated this man” (129). At another instance, when she plans to leave him and pities him, her hatred is reiterated: “Nevertheless, she hated him” (134). The text calls him only “the man” at one point only then follows it up with “her husband” (129). This illustrates the distance between politics tore apart the very fabric of the romance form” (168). Please see Gallego’s Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance: Identity Politics and Textual Strategies and Carby’s Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist in the bibliography.
Helga and Reverand Green. Even in her oblivion she finds him repulsive, yet ignores her repulsion: “The thought of her husband roused in her a deep and contemptuous hatred. At his every approach she had forcibly to subdue a furious inclination to scream out in protest” (134). In fact, it could be said that Helga’s pregnancies are the only ways in which she can keep him away from her for prolonged amounts of time. She especially luxuriates in the time she spends during the final coalescence of the book away from her children, church members, and especially her husband. In fact, Helga herself has something to say about marriage: “Marriage. This sacred thing of which parsons and other Christian folk ranted so sanctimoniously, how immoral – according to their own standards – it could be!” (134).

Ignorance and Oblivion

Irene and Helga, although very different characters, hold a similar trait in their desire to ignore certain kinds of knowledge. Irene, for example, wants a placid life without stimulus or passion. Heterosexual passion, for one, is something the bourgeois African American woman scorns. However, when Clare Kendry returns to Harlem, Irene finds it difficult to abstain from the incitement of passion Clare evokes. She ignores her passion as best she can by avoiding Clare,

145 Although there is evidence that Helga in some way remains curious and even stimulated by heterosexual sex, it is never separated completely from repulsion. Through the text’s rhetoric, one can see the ambiguities with which Helga holds the activity: “And night came at the end of every day. Emotional, palpitating, amorous, all that was living in her sprang like rank weeds at the tingling thought of night, with a vitality so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason” (122). In her 1995 article, Pamela E. Barnett notes that the “articulation of passion” in this description is “undermined by some of the rhetoric of the text itself” (598). “Rank weeds,” she notes, “is no blooming rose” (598).
but as Clare pursues her more forcefully, Irene cannot resist her beauty and
mystery. Helga, on the other hand, has not lived her life in stability as Irene has.
She has spent most of her life on the margins of society and heteronormativity. It
is her temporary acceptance of religious zealotry and its associated non-thinking
that exhort her into conventional marriage and family, which finally destroy her.

Irene, of course, has an astute mind. She prides herself in knowing how to
negotiate her social and familial businesses to such an extent that they run like
well-oiled machines. Irene as the machinist, guides her family and close
associates along the conveyer belts of conformity in order to produce and
reproduce the illusion of calm and stable living. For Irene, uniformity is key to
stability. Monotony is “easy,” and she is “wholly unable to grasp” why Brian or
anyone else would despise it (190). Stasis in her life – emotional, personal, and
public – is essential to her serenity; heady emotions that stir the monotony,
mystery that clouds the clear pathway of her life are those things that Irene refuses
to acknowledge. And Clare is what compels exhilaration and curiosity in Irene,
heady emotions and desire.

When first Irene reunites with Clare on the rooftop of the Drayton Hotel,
she does not recognize her. She only sees an “attractive-looking woman” with
“strange languorous eyes” (148, 150). Before she knows it is her childhood
friend, she finds already that she cannot resist the “charm” of Clare’s smile and
surrenders to it “instantly” (150). Within the few hours the two women
reacquaint, Irene finds herself “petted and caressed” by Clare’s eyes. In a
cataloguing of Clare’s features there is a “tempting mouth,” “sweet and sensitive
lips,” and her eyes are “magnificent” (161). Irene concludes that “Clare Kendry’s loveliness [is] absolute” (161). Throughout the novel there are many variations on this theme. Irene finds Clare “extraordinarily beautiful” (209).

Most critics of Passing assume that Irene’s increasing paranoia about Clare is founded on her jealousy as a wife for her husband’s affections, yet there is no evidence that Irene desires Brian’s affections as noted earlier in the chapter. Instead the paranoia can be seen as a topos of lesbian desire. Ample evidence shows that Irene’s desires split at the point where her paranoia manifests itself, causing a psychological crisis for the protagonist. Her one desire, security – which is maintained through Brian – is now rivaled by her passion for Clare. Therefore, her paranoia and subsequent strategy of willful ignorance may not be motivated, as critics have suggested, by jealousy, but rather about Irene’s battle with desire, an emotion that she has up to this point eradicated in order to remain emotionally placid and secure.\(^{146}\)

Irene’s use of a foil – the relationship between Clare and Brian – to mask her feelings about Clare confer a doubling effect on her subsequent willful ignorance. By conjuring the relationship between the two, Irene can state more openly to the reader her intention to repress her thought. Each pang of the heart and retreat from surety about Clare and Brian conveys a double entendre relating to her own inability to confront her feelings about Clare. After first generating the foil at her tea party, Irene “recoil[s] from exact expression” of what she

\(^{146}\) Charles Scruggs comments in his 2007 article that there is “one thing about Irene’s sexuality [that] is obvious. It has been replaced by her desire for safety and ‘security’” (159). Please see the full citation in the bibliography.
imagines; she closes “unseeing eyes”; she wants no “empty spaces of time” to think; even when her mind drifts toward it, she catches herself and warns that “she mustn’t think yet”; and finally, she has “no thoughts at all now” (218-20). She concedes that underneath her deliberate non-thinking is a “knowledge” that she has “stumbl[ed] on”; she even “glance[s] away” when she thinks she has witnessed an intimate moment between the two; and then wipes her mind clean by admonishing herself that she cannot “think of that now” (218-20). Later in the evening, she fancies someone at the party knows about the relationship and promises herself that she will “keep him from knowing that she knew,” reasoning that “it didn’t matter, if no one knew” (221-22). And finally, with the “self-assurance that she [has] no real knowledge,” Irene “redouble[s] her efforts to drive out of her mind the distressing thought of faiths broken and trusts betrayed” (223). These moments are recorded as interior monologue through Irene, which allows the reader to see the doubling effect of Irene’s fancy about Clare and Brian and her more conscious suppression of the her own feelings for Clare.

Through willful ignorance, Irene attempts to quash outright admission of her feelings for her friend – unless one counts her numerous comments about Clare’s irresistible beauty and charm – which has become the only other important desire of her life. The desire for security and lesboerotic desire fragment Irene’s easy monotony and both cannot live in harmony together. Therefore, when Clare falls to her death from a window on the sixth floor during a party crashed by her white bigoted husband – “One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone.” (239)
– Irene’s only mode of managing her knowledge per usual, is through ignorance:
“What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly” (239).147

Likewise but to a greater extent, Quicksand is built upon Helga’s willingness to turn a blind eye to unsavory knowledge, to look forward – not back – in order to avoid self-scrutiny. This is especially apparent when Helga turns herself over to religion and quits thinking altogether, as discussed previously. Although one can follow this pattern of rash decision-making clearly throughout the book – and surely she is impetuous many times in the novel – Helga survives each one free to be rash again another day. However, a close reading of the final two chapters show how Helga is finally caught in the muck that will be her sinking: the everyday muck of domesticity. Her methodology of willful ignorance has sucked her deeper into a true oblivion, and by the time she begins to think of a move that may place her back on firm ground, it proves to be too late; gravity is too strong, her sinking too steady.

Helga fails as the “wife of a preacher” in that her life does not at all reflect that of a woman who has standing in the community. Rather than being listened and looked up to by the other women of the town, as she had envisioned, Helga becomes pitied, for within twenty months Helga has three children and is pregnant with a fourth:

147 It should be noted that Larsen’s ending is ambiguous. The text insinuates three possible scenarios: The first is that John Bellew, Clare’s racist husband who finds out only a moment before that Clare has been passing for white pushes Clare. The second is that Irene, who runs to Clare when Bellew enters and lays “a hand on Clare’s bare arm” pushes her (239). The third is that Clare has jumped out of the window of her own accord. Witnesses are no help in this matter, as none of them actually saw the moment of the fall because of Bellew’s distracting presence.
How, she wondered, did other women, other mothers, manage? Could it be possible that, while presenting such smiling and contented faces, they were all always on the edge of health? All always worn out and apprehensive? Or was it only she, a poor weak city-bred thing, who felt that the strain of what the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green had so often gently and patiently reminded her was a natural thing, an act of God, was almost unendurable? (125)

As Helga’s physical health disintegrates, she clings to religion more tenaciously, for religion to her now is a “kind of protective coloring, shielding her from the cruel light of an unbearable reality” (126). The women of the town can both see and sense Helga struggle under this tremendous toll to body and spirit and become more sympathetic to the outsider:

Pore Mis’Green, wid all dem small chilluns at once. She suah do hab it ha’d. An’ she don’ nebah complains an’ frets no mo’e. Jes’ trus’ in de Lawd lak de Good book say. Mighty sweet lil’ ‘oman too. (126)

Helga, on the other hand, begins to understand it herself only as she allows herself consciousness again and wades a little out of the pool of oblivion she has suspended herself in for nearly two years.

Following the difficult birth of her fourth child, Helga sinks into a quiet state of non-thinking. She neither responds to the child she has just borne, nor the people hovering around her bed. While the church people and Reverend Green pray for her recovery, Helga remains “unconcerned, undisturbed by the
ommotion about her. Nothing reached her. Nothing penetrated the kind
darkness into which her bruised spirit had retreated” (128). Helga had “gone
down into that appalling blackness of pain” after childbirth (128). And yet the
“pain” noted in the text refers to the pain of childbirth, yes, but also alludes to the
pain creeping into Helga’s mind by increments as the anesthetization of religion
wears off and the full realization of her present heteronormative horror fully
confronts her.

The “ballast of her brain had got loose” in Helga’s struggle in childbirth
and she “hovered for a long time,” the text says, “somewhere in that delightful
borderland on the edge of unconsciousness, an enchanted and blissful place where
peace and incredible quiet encompassed her” (128). For weeks, then, Helga stays
in this serene fog, her brain digging deeper into a more extreme form of
repression to keep herself from thinking, from knowing the truth about her life.
Even when her fourth child, a “sickly infant,” the “fourth little dab of amber
humanity which Helga had contributed to a despised race,” dies only a “short
week of slight living,” Helga merely closes her eyes in relief and thinks: “One
less” (131, 127).

Yet, she cannot remain in this place of non-thinking about the present and
the “refreshingly delicious […] immersion in the past” she has enjoyed in that fog
(129). When she comes out of her haze and realizes that she will not die, she
begins her recovery with reluctance, clinging to the peacefulness her time of
oblivion offered: “She mustn’t, she thought to herself, get well too fast. Since it
seemed she was going to get well” (130). As the scales of religious-induced
repression fall from her eyes, there is born in Helga an “angry bitterness” and “an enormous disgust” with the stunning clarity of her present reality (130). A full knowledge of the heteronormative marsh in which she has gotten herself stuck is not only dissatisfying, but “asphyxiating,” and Helga is determined to “escape from the oppression, the degradation that her life had become,” making it clear that if she did not, “she would have to die” (134-35).

But, as soon as she is able to walk and leaves her bed, she begins “to have her fifth child” (135).

It is clear that Irene and Helga will never let go their need for willful ignorance. As noted above, Irene’s final moments with Clare will always remain dense and opaque. Similarly Helga will never successfully release herself from the deathly pull of heteronormative quicksand; she will either succumb to the oblivion in her brain as before, or she will loose herself to the ultimate oblivion… death.

**And the Difference Is**

*Quicksand* and *Passing* are two novels that demonstrate a topos of lesbianism to the Modern reading public as well as today. Through the seemingly conventional facades of two bourgeois, African American women in Harlem, readers can witness *negative valence* mimesis overtake the *positive valence*. A profusion of unconventional opinions, affections, and beliefs – all of which run against the grain of heteronormativity – through such conventional figures as the married and slightly frigid African American wife whose desire is only for her
friend, and the single African American woman cum preacher’s wife who
despises her husband, skew the very image of “woman” that heteronormativity
replicates. On this front, Maria del Mar Gallego contends:

In these novels Larsen tries to redefine both topics [sexuality and
motherhood] from the point of view of contemporary African
American women who are actively engaged in the reconstruction
of their own identity and history. This conscious process of
reinterpretation offers a new vision of black women springing from
their real life experiences and intentionally subverting externally
imposed images. (121-22)

The reader is offered instead another kind of woman, a different kind of woman,
and one that may or may not be a modern woman, a new woman, or a lesbian. It
is not important, however, in this moment of difference, to isolate what this kind
of woman is, only that she is.

Through Irene Redfield’s disdain for heterosexual sex and her obvious
attraction to Clare Kendry, we can see another form of desire in Harlem
Renaissance literature that is just as difficult to explore as the authors in the 1920s
found the exploration of sex in general. From Helga Crane’s initial eschewal of
marriage, heterosexual sex, religion to her ruin by these very same institutions and
activities, readers find an effective articulation against heteronormativity.
Readers become aware that heteronormativity requires willful ignorance of many
women, many women who cannot abide by the strict prescriptions of the
heteronormative. These women represent a different kind of woman who was not
always easily perceived in the late 1920s and she often remains imperceptible and unacknowledged even now in literary criticism if those in the discipline choose not to see.
Thinking Too Much to Think
Deluge of Desire in Djuna Barnes’ Nightwood

By 1936, British and American culture had gotten no closer to visually pigeon-holing the lesbian. Thanks to such representations as Sophia Willoughby, the sober, practical, and feminine protagonist in Townsend’s Summer Will Show, and the strange and mysterious depiction of the notorious congenital invert Robin Vote in Nightwood by Djuna Barnes in the same year, the identifiable aspects of lesbianism had not yet stabilized even while lesbianism as a concept continued to congeal into a knowable, thinkable idea. But, regardless of the fact that Robin is not a particularly good representative of the lesbian, she has been read as the symbol of lesbianism in the novel. Along with the other out “invert” in the text,

148 The “invert” as described by Havelock Ellis has two forms, the “congenital” and the “acquired.” The congenital invert is one who is “born” with a predisposition for inversion, and is a convoluted term that assumes causal connections between sexuality, desire, and gender. The congenital invert is explained as a simple inversion of the sexological knowledge of the time. She is, first, identified by her/his sexed body, but that body transgresses boundaries of gender (what Ellis suggests is a taking up of the opposite gender performance, i.e., behavior and dress), and desire (through desiring the same body as their identified sexed body). The acquired invert, as one can expect, is suggested to be a kind of accidental invert because of social circumstances. The acquired invert is explained as being acquired by spending time in an atmosphere that is too intimate with her/his own sexed body, e.g. a convent or boarding school. For women, at least, it is also explained by a girl/woman’s lack of enough eligible men available to her. This is one argument that was used to explain the more visible/thinkable lesbian after World War I in the UK, for example. A significant difference between the congenital and the acquired invert is that the congenital is “born” and the acquired is “made.” This suggests that the acquired, then, is not a “true” sexuality. In Krafft-Ebbing’s early work, he describes it as a “pseudo” homosexuality (qtd in Ellis, Section 1, Chapter III). This information notwithstanding, it must be noted that by the end of Ellis’ study he (and also Krafft-Ebbing, Freud and other sexologists) discounts any differences between so-called “congenital” and “acquired” inversion (Section 1, Chapter III).
Matthew O’Connor, Robin has become the character through which critics perceive and gauge Nightwood’s lesbianism.149

Since critical attention of Nightwood was rejuvenated by second wave feminists, Robin Vote has received the lion’s share of the attention.150 This is to be expected, of course, since Robin is a most amazing and brilliant creation, a creature on the edge of life and death, cross of human and beast, asleep in thought yet alive in body. Some critics even question whether or not she can be read as a character at all, opting rather to see her as a non-identity or symbol.151 Regardless, between her innovative characterization and the novel’s direct reference to her as a “sodomite,” an “invert,” a “girl who should have been a boy,” a “girl who resembles a boy,” and a member of “the third sex,” it is evident why so many critics choose to center their critique of lesbianism around her (93, 136, 148, 136, 148). Barnes’ use of clearly sexological terms and a loose

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149 Dr. Matthew O’Connor is an Irish-American expatriate in Paris, and an unlicensed physician. He is an integral figure in the novel, often conflated with the narrative voice of the text. His commentary is often used to explain the text or demystify the action. As a character, he is the verbose sounding board and confidante that Nora Flood (Robin’s foremost lover) and others seek to converse with about Robin.

150 It should be noted that Nightwood was “unpopular in the United States in the 1930s, despite being hailed by T. S. Eliot and widely canonized,” writes Teresa de Lauretis in her 2011 article “Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future.” This unpopularity may be “attributed partly to the shockingly sexual imagery of its ending, but the main reason why it is still widely unread today is that it is difficult to read. It is not that a plot is missing, for there is a narrative, but the text’s syntactical and rhetorical density, its unusual lexical choices, and the kaleidoscopic storytelling embedded in its elliptical narration frustrate both narrative and referential expectations” (244).

151 In Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900 – 1940, Shari Benstock notes that Robin serves as the “object of the narrative investigation, not as its subject” (263). Joseph Allen Boone suggests that the characters in Nightwood “serve as symbols of the unconscious or psychodramatic projections of states of desire” for the most part (234). The forthcoming article co-authored by this author concludes that Robin acts as the interpellative (Althusserian) power through which the other characters in the novel are subjected. Please see Boone’s Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism and Wagner’s ‘The Power of Robin: Subjectivity and Temporality in Djuna Barnes’ Nightwood’ in the bibliography.
adherence to the idea of congenital inversion through Robin makes criticism of that character today a particularly easy target for lesbian readings.\textsuperscript{152}

However, there are other lesbianisms in the book. Nora Flood, for example, Robin’s most important lover in the novel, presents a kind of lesbianism that is obviously unlike Robin’s. Nora is not the masculine “invert.” In fact, if one is to suggest sexological verbiage of the time, Nora would be in a vague and nameless group Ellis describes as: “A class in which homosexuality, while fairly distinct, is only slightly marked,” and which is “formed by the women to whom the actively inverted woman is most attracted. (Chapter IV). Conveniently then – at least for Barnes who is much reflected in the character of Nora, to be discussed presently – Nora is not placed in the category of the invert herself; although in the novel she is as lesbian as Robin, she is portrayed differently. She is not “mannish” or “boyish,” she is not mentally ill, she is not a night person, and although haunted by her love for Robin, one does not get the feeling she is haunted by a moral imperative against her desire.\textsuperscript{153} The point of these observations is that our criticism of the novel reflects this difference between

\textsuperscript{152} As noted by Doan previously, contemporary society’s understanding of the lesbian has a strong visual element, i.e. that we “can tell” a lesbian sartorially. Although critical theory in LGBTIQ studies and feminism discourage the idea that one can visibly denote sexuality, people in general continue to believe they can decipher sexuality just by looking. This means that our contemporary thought about sexuality continues to work with the underlying assumption of masculinity of the lesbians.

\textsuperscript{153} Shari Benstock’s book, \textit{Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940}, suggests that Nora, through whose eyes the reader sees much of \textit{Nightwood}, “misread[s]” much of the novel, interpreting the “people and events she encounters” through “Western Puritanism”; therefore, as the “‘normal’” character of the novel, “[s]he is caught in an interpretive act that forces her to read perversion in her own actions, to interpret herself as a pervert” (261). Although Benstock’s book is an excellent resource, I disagree with this reading of Nora. Nora is far more devastated by Robin’s betrayal and their lost love than by any concern over whether their love is wrong or perverse in the first place. Please see the full citation in the bibliography.
Robin and Nora, and therefore, Nora is regarded symbolically as “straight” or “normal” womanhood and Robin is the symbol of lesbianism. But Nora is really acting as the negative valence that reveals the difference in Nightwood’s mimesis of lesbianism. If Robin has become the emblem of lesbianism in the novel’s criticism (especially involving Robin’s masculinity), Nora exposes a difference in its representation.

The “Lesbian” Dilemma

As has been noted time and again, Nightwood (1936) is one of the iconic lesbian novels of what would be in the future a strong and surprisingly extensive lesbian tradition.\(^{154}\) Although some critics have had reservations about placing this unique literary text in such a tradition, finding it problematic to do so since Djuna Barnes found the idea of her work being a touchstone for lesbians rather distasteful. Heather Love explains this phenomenon of the discrepancy between author identification and textual identification in her article “Lesbian Fiction 1900-1950”:

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\(^{154}\) This fact materialized much to the chagrin of Djuna Barnes herself. After the writer’s death, a friend wrote that Barnes herself comprehended “that what she had written in Nightwood, intentional or not, was regarded by many as a novel with a strong lesbian theme and was influential in ways she had not intended. This concerned her. It was acceptable for the strong literary qualities of the book to influence someone, but it was another matter if the book gave meaning or solace to young women, unknown to her, who were casting about in search of justification for their sexuality. ‘I don’t want the responsibility of changing anyone’s life,’ she would often say, ‘I don’t want to make a lot of little lesbians!’ She would tell me, ‘Girls used to kneel outside my door and beg to be let in and when they’d finally depart, they usually left flowers on the doorstep. One was so insistent, she just wouldn’t leave, I had to telephone the police to take her away.’ This seemed somewhat drastic action to me, but it was perfectly acceptable to Barnes” (qtd in Castle Literature 4).
Even Djuna Barnes, who was involved in the lesbian subculture of 1920s Paris and whose 1936 experimental novel *Nightwood* is central to the canon of lesbian modernism, cannot be unequivocally identified as a lesbian novelist. Regarding her decade-long relationship with Thelma Wood, Barnes famously remarked, “I am not a lesbian. I just loved Thelma.” Does that mean that *Nightwood* is not a lesbian novel? (394)

The inability to pin down the term ‘lesbian’ because of the disparity between Robin’s lesbianism and Nora’s, and the author’s dismissal herself of what can be termed legitimate “lesbianism” in the novel are two of the many difficulties brought to the fore as scholars continue “tracing the tradition of the modern lesbian novel” (394).

Although *Nightwood* criticism primarily revolves around Robin Vote, the unusually silent and absent, mainly indifferent protagonist, Nora Flood also acts as a protagonist because of her significant role in the plot, which revolves around Nora and Robin’s relationship. Therefore, Nora is the center of exploration in this chapter. Unlike Robin’s congenital-type of lesbianism, Nora’s unnamed and unnameable woman-who-is-loved-by-the-invert lesbianism cannot rely on comparisons with “manliness” or other strange compulsions of sexological

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155 And yet, this would not be the first time in which an author and her text and the text’s critical scholars have clashed. Along the same lines, the intensity of the relationship between the two main characters, Nel and Sula in Toni Morrison’s 1973 novel *Sula*, led Barbara Johnson in 1998 to suggest the novel can be counted within a collection of lesbian novels because of its ‘lesbian structure,’ and enabled Barbara Smith to nurture a strong ‘lesbian interpretation’ of the novel because of Morrison’s harsh critique of heteronormative structures (Johnson 160, Smith 15). Toni Morrison disagreed with these readings, suggesting that it “discredits the novel’s central focus on Nel and Sula’s friendship,” but the criticism has been spoken and the book will henceforward stand as an uneasy member in the tradition of lesbianism (Li 46).
Nora’s lesbianism is displayed by her intense practice of, even obsession with, contemplation, a topos prompted by her relationship with the opaque and reticent Robin. In this sense, surprisingly, Robin is the positive valence of mimesis to Nora’s negative valence regarding the representation of lesbianism in the text. Nora illustrates a different kind of lesbianism that sexologists cannot definitively describe, especially since she is intellectually insatiable and sexually active. This is most likely because in sexological discourse the intellectually robust mind and dynamic sexual desire are attributed only to those “inverts” who are “masculine.”

Unlike any other character in this project – Robin is unabashedly branded an “invert” by the text with no apology and no intention to disguise the fact. And, although this is interesting in itself, it has been explored by many a critic since Nightwood’s return to literary examination. What I find most interesting is that Nora is never labeled anything but herself. Although she clearly takes Robin as a lover, as discussed previously, there is no suggestion that she too should bear Robin’s label. This implies, as mentioned earlier, that lesbian identity was still not seen as a clear and bounded “type,” although I suspect it also and more readily

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156 It is humorous to read Ellis’ attempt to describe Nora’s “type.” At pains to present these women within “womanly” boundaries, the description is filled with contradictions and caveats. These women “are not usually attractive to the average man,” but there are “many exceptions” to this “rule”; their “faces may be plain or ill-made,” but they often “possess good figures”; they do not have “well marked” sexual “impulses,” but they are “strongly affectionate”; they “seem to possess a genuine preference for women over men,” but it is “not precisely sexual”; they are not “very robust and well developed, physically or nervously, and [...] are not well adapted for child-bearing,” but they do “possess many excellent qualities,” the most of which is that they are “always womanly” (Chapter IV).

157 The Well of Loneliness is the only other text by a woman during this period that uses the term “invert” to describe Stephen Gordon; unlike Robin, there is much apology for that character.
– and paradoxically, suggests its own very fluidity – implies that the lesbian
commences to congeal around the tomboyish, the Stephen Gordon-ish masculine
woman type. But women like Nora continued to be read as “normal,” and
therefore could share in lesbian love and romance without being so classified.

In a way, one may think that Nora’s increasing need to think, especially to
ruminate obsessively about Robin and about their relationship, insists on the
destructive effects – again an old claim of sexology – of the invert on “normal”
women or the destructive effects of lesbian relationships. But, it also asserts, like
the other protagonists discussed in this project, that in lesbianism there are women
who think lucidly and intellectually because they have good minds, not because
they are “like men.” Further, it suggests that lesbianism in the Modern period is
so radically thinkable that it stimulates rumination, it simply must be thought.
The intimate relationships between women, so old and yet so new in this period,
requires thought and contemplation. In fact, it is so thinkable as to make
characters numb by the thinking of it.

Out of the eight sections of the novel, half of them focus on Nora: “Night
Watch,” “Watchman, What of the Night?” “Go Down, Matthew,” and the
notorious final section “The Possessed.” The speed of these sections rise as
Nora’s increasing fixation, on comprehending Robin and their love, intensifies.
Each section repeats Nora’s obsessive contemplation at a higher pitch. They meet
in “Night Watch,” and within four paragraphs the relationship becomes strained
and remains thus for the remainder of the novel; their love – or more accurately
perhaps, the odor or aura of their love – pervades the rest of the novel. In this
section Nora is brought into subjective experience through her love of Robin, but her inability to understand Robin is acute and she expends much mental energy attempting to understand it. In the next section devoted to her, “Watchman, What of the Night?” because of her miserable desire to understand the elusive character of Robin, Nora goes to Matthew’s room at three o’clock in the morning, asking for a monologue on “the night.” This is followed by the section “Go Down, Matthew,” in which the text illustrates a heightening of Nora’s compulsion to think about Robin, although they are no longer together and Robin is now in America with another woman (Jenny Petherbridge). In this section, Matthew comes to Nora to stop her incessant writing to Robin, another act depicting her obsessive contemplation of her lost love. And, finally in “The Possessed,” Nora, who has now moved back to America, circuitously wills a final encounter with Robin and their only communication is through the mind, for the section has silenced human voice.

“Then she met Robin”

Nora is introduced into the book as a contemplative figure presented through her detachment from others. In her salon she “alone” stands out from the eclectic troupe (Barnes 50). She is the American woman “alone and apart” at any gathering, and “disengaged” from people (53). In general, she is an observer of human experience:

158 Robin is a night creature who leaves her lovers often alone, preferring to spend most nights in the pubs and night-life of Paris.
The world and its history were to Nora like a ship in a bottle; she herself was outside and unidentified, endlessly embroiled in a preoccupation without a problem. (53)

Although we know little of what Nora thinks at this point, her detachment from the world and her “preoccupation” act to suggest a private and profound pensiveness. While listening to a concert, for example,

One sensed in the way she held her head that her ears were recording Wagner or Scarlatti, Chopin, Palestrina, or the lighter songs of the Viennese school, in a smaller but more intense orchestration. (52)

At the opera, her “large” eyes, “protruding and clear,” reflected the action “contract[ing] and fortif[y]ing] the play before her in her own unconscious terms” (52). Because of her external preoccupation she “know[s] little or nothing about” such communal emotions as “[c]ynicism,” and a “sense of humour” (53). Although she smiles and “chuckle[s]” now and again, it is noted that it is an “amused grim chuckle of a person who looks up to discover that they have coincided with the needs of nature in a bird,” signifying a keen disengagement from a collective present (53).

Nora is “broad and tall,” as well as “savage and refined,” characteristics that themselves imply aloofness (50).\(^*\) She “record[s]” life and the human plight within that situation “without reproach or accusation,” a testament to her

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\(^*\) Later to Nora herself, Matthew humorously – and crassly – describes her objective indifference before she meets Robin as arrogance: “[T]here you were sitting up high and fine, with a rose-bush up your arse” (151).
grand indifference; indeed, the text notes: “In court she would have been impossible; no one would have been hanged, reproached or forgiven because no one would have been ‘accused’” (53). Because of this people are simultaneously drawn to and frightened of her, for “they could neither insult nor hold anything against her, though it embittered them to have to take back injustice that in her found no foothold” (53). Nora remains outside the experience of the world around her, as a foreigner, a Westerner, a Protestant, and an indifferent bystander… until she meets Robin.\(^\text{160}\)

The significance of Nora meeting Robin is mimetically presented in the text through visual repetition. While sitting in the front row at the circus, Nora notices the animals circling the ring are drawn to the girl next to her. The text states, Nora first “turned to look at her,” then, “she looked at her suddenly,” and finally, “At that moment Nora turned” (54). The same instant narrated from three angles in succession indicates the impact Robin will have on Nora, and unsurprisingly within one page the reader witnesses Nora’s crash into human experience via her love for Robin.\(^\text{161}\)

This transformation of Nora’s ontological situation begins in the section “Night Watch” with the onset of Nora and Robin’s fervent and explosive romantic relationship. But almost as soon as the relationship begins, it ends, and Nora who

\(^{160}\) Nora is not only an outsider because of her indifference, but also because she is a foreigner, an American, a Westerner, and a Protestant. *Nightwood* is set primarily in Paris, which is predominantly Catholic, narrates a few short moments in America, but references America throughout the novel. Both Nora and Robin are American.

\(^{161}\) In Jean Gallagher’s “Vision and Inversion in *Nightwood,*” she engages in an effective analysis regarding Nora’s movement within the “cinematic positions” of the novel, especially described in pages 290-93. Please see full citation in the bibliography.
had little understanding of intimacy in the first place, is left to explicate their ineffable love for the remainder of the novel. As each successive section moves toward the inevitable end, Nora’s intellectual activity intensifies. Reminiscent of Ruth in Olive Moore’s *Spleen* in the previous section of this project, Nora’s cerebral exertion increases to alarming heights. But unlike Ruth, whose obsessive thinking is calculatingly rational, Nora finds herself so enveloped in thought that she cannot think; logic and rationality are impossibilities. Instead, Nora’s increasing abstraction is reflected in the text’s narratological structure. Although the novel moves toward a final climax, there is no *one* climax in *Nightwood*; rather there are multiple climaxes with multiple denouements, as if the text, responding to Nora’s lesbian situation, responds by structuring itself in metaphorical multiple orgasms, a display of feminine, lesbian difference in the mimetic narrative formation.

Crashing down into subjective experience in the third section, Nora spends the rest of the novel trying to wrap her head around Robin and the passionate and toxic love between them that smolders long past the time of their separation.\(^{162}\) Although a fine and accomplished woman, Nora is devastatingly unprepared for a love like Robin; therefore, she spends the rest of the novel scrutinizing the love that so consumes her. As Robin takes to her habitual roaming of the city and countryside, leaving Nora alone “most of the night and part of the day,” the section thrusts her into the active role of the watcher, a part of the cerebral work

\(^{162}\) To a lesser degree Felix Volkbein, Robin’s ex-husband – whom she has left along with their son prior to Nora – also spends his final section talking about Robin to Matthew in an attempt to understand her. And Jenny Petherbridge, Robin’s lover after Nora, is also shown to the reader as an unhappy lover who cannot understand the enigmatic woman.
Nora does in order to unravel the mystery that is Robin (56). Yet, her watching and attempts to decipher Robin only work to entangle the two evermore.

At first Nora goes out with Robin at night, but:

as time passed, realizing that a growing tension was in Robin,
unable to endure the knowledge that she was in the way or
forgotten, seeing Robin go from table to table, from drink to drink,
from person to person, realizing that if she herself were not there
Robin might return to her as the one who, out of all the turbulent
night, had not been lived through. (59)

Therefore, Nora opts to stay home. She realizes that when Robin is away she is
“soft and careful” in her “movements” in their house because she is worried that
“if she disarranged anything Robin might become confused – might lose her scent
of home” and be unable to return (56). But, staying home is no good either, her
thoughts move too swiftly to remain still. Robin is an “appalling apprehension on
Nora’s mind” (56). Therefore, Nora takes to following Robin, looking only to
“catch a glimpse” of her lover to ease her heart’s longing (59). But this also
brings Nora no peace. Her mind gathers no more knowledge about her beloved.

And finally, in her watching, she ceases her search for Robin, literally:

Looking at every couple as they passed, into every carriage and
car, up to the lighted windows of the houses, trying to discover not
Robin any longer, but traces of Robin, influences in her life (and

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163 We know Robin’s propensity to wandering, during both day and night, often even days at a
time, from the previous section “La Somnanbule” (Section 2), when Robin is first introduced as a character.
those which were yet to be betrayed), Nora watched every moving figure for some gesture that might turn up in the movements made by Robin; avoiding the quarter where she knew her to be […]. (61)

When Matthew sees Nora out alone, the “tall black-caped figure,” he notes, is “[o]ut looking for what she’s afraid to find – Robin” (61). He further concludes that Nora “sees her everywhere” (61). Through the section, Nora’s increasing desperation to visually comprehend Robin and their inscrutable love builds up into Nora’s first intellectual orgasm, which is then released when she witnesses Robin’s affair with another woman first-hand.

**An Ineffable Love**

“Watchman, What of the Night,” illustrates Nora’s increasing inability to stop her ever-questioning mind, her search for the next intellectual orgasm. In this section, while Robin is out, Nora goes to Matthew’s room in the wee hours of the morning to discuss the “night.” By this time Nora knows of Robin’s numerous affairs, for in the final scene of the previous section Nora witnesses Robin and an unnamed woman in the garden of their apartment near sunrise:

Nora saw the body of another woman swim up […] with head hung down […] her arms about Robin’s neck, her body pressed to Robin’s her legs slackened in the hang of the embrace. (64)

Nora is struck with an “awful happiness” on the one hand, joyful that Robin is “protected, moved out of death’s way by the successive arms of women,” and on the other wounded by an appalling betrayal so acute that she falls to her knees
releasing an “'Ah!' With the intolerable automatism of the last ‘Ah!’ in a body
struck at the moment of its final breath” (64). The scene enacts both height of
climax and discharge of denouement.

“Watchman, What of the Night?” presents the search for Robin by more
specific means; Nora’s feet rest while her mind singularly continues the pursuit.
As noted above, Nora finds herself at Matthew’s door asking him to tell her
“everything [he] know[s] about the night’ (79), and the loquacious Matthew is
more than happy to oblige. And oblige, he does, for it is Matthew’s voice that
overwhelms this section. Nora does little talking while the grandiloquent
Matthew makes up for her reticence. Emotionally vulnerable and despondent in
her wretchedness, instead of speaking herself, Nora asks questions of the doctor.
Yet, as is frequent in the novel, Matthew’s orations often seem to go unheard. For
even as Nora gives Matthew a total verbal platform, it is unapparent whether or
not she actually listens to his “answers,” nevermind that we remain unsure
whether he actually answers her questions.

One of the questions Nora continuously asks Matthew in this and the
following section is “what am I to do?” (84, 93). Although she has always been a
pensive woman, coming into subjective experience has forced her into a
hyperactive mental space in her attempts to understand her own experience. After
listening and not listening to Matthew’s never-ending sermon, Nora
consequently concludes that she will “never understand” Robin, that she will
“always be miserable – just like this” (85). And wonders bitterly, “Is that what I
am to learn?” (87), “that” not referring to anything in particular.
Nora finally begins to cry, unable to understand Robin rationally or irrationally, as Matthew discourses on the invert:

“And do I know my Sodomites?” the doctor said unhappily, “and what the heart goes bang up against if it loves one of them, especially if it’s a woman loving one of them” (93).

But her crying is no release. From this time forward Matthew is the conveyer of the tension of the section, his bombastic prose disallow any real liberation from the section’s climactic tension. Even after Nora becomes impatient with his oration, Matthew insists on continuing. Mid-section, he tells both Nora and the reader that he will presently come to his point: “Wait! I’m coming to the night of nights – the night you want to know about the most of all” (89). She even stands up at one point, only to sit back down again, as he reminds her again that he is coming to a point: “Now, wait a minute! It’s all of a certain night that I’m coming to, that I take so long coming to it” (97). And later he states, “But I’m coming by degrees to the narrative of the one particular night […]” (99).

It is then his telling of this night that ends the section on edge. For the final third of the section introduces Nora to Jenny, Robin’s present mistress, and narrates the night Robin and Jenny meet. At the beginning of Jenny’s story Nora asks, “What is she like?” but after a last inattentive comment about Robin, she falls silent until the section’s end. Nora’s silence affects even Matthew, who although not particularly astute in reading the interest of his audience, is “embarrassed by Nora’s rigid silence” (105). His embarrassment signals his awareness that Nora’s silence is related to profound contemplation the subject of
which is withheld. The section ends without Nora having said another word; therefore, the section’s climactic swelling enacted by the dissonance between Matthew’s tirade and Nora’s deafening silence soars without hope of release.

“The secure torment”

Building on “Watchman, What of the Night,” “Go Down, Matthew” then, presents the highest climax of the novel. Interaction with Robin and Robin’s absence has created climax after climax, but there is no release in the preceding section, thereby a doubly heightened climax is established. Regarding climax in Nightwood, Boone notes, there is a “breakdown of narrative temporality” [that is] “facilitated by the structural use of repetition” (240):

[T]his involves the refraction of the same event (Robin’s betrayal of Nora) through various narrative perspectives, so that the climaxes of the third, fourth, and fifth sections keep returning to the same moment, as if all time for Nora has stopped at this one cataclysmic instant. (240)

Repetition of the same event echoes the narrative tripling of Nora and Robin’s meeting at the circus in the first place, and the significance of that repetition, a significance that amplifies their passion. Therefore, in this section, Nora functions at an intellectual intensity exhibiting how completely she has moved into subjective experience. Her first two sections are for the most part voiceless. In “Night Watch,” the narrator distances the reader from Nora, “telling” her actions and reactions to Robin through the narrative voice. In “Watchman, What
of the Night,” after a handful of comments Nora falls silent while Matthew is given the privilege of exhaustive variations on the theme of the “night.” Through his diatribe and her silence the novel continues at a piercing pitch in “Go Down, Matthew.” Nora finds her voice, then, through both composition and speech, matching the long-winded Matthew nearly word for word. The give-and-take between Nora and Matthew expands further the tension of the text, with Nora’s voice controlling the section and Matthew functioning as her complement. Although effusive, her voice is nonetheless weary and desperate, her writing compelled by immensity of thought and dictated by the speed at which those thoughts come.

The elevated pitch of the section is demonstrated by the reader’s immediate leap into the action; the section begins in medias res:

“Can’t you be quiet now?” the doctor said. He had come in late one afternoon to find Nora writing a letter. “Can’t you be done now, can’t you give up? Now be still, now that you know what the world is about knowing it’s about nothing?” (Barnes 124)

Straight away Matthew’s tone amplifies the situation of the section, reminding the reader of the ongoing climax bound up in Nora. His use of the word “now” quadrupled and further visually repeated twice in “know” and “knowing,” proclaims Nora’s place firmly in the present, which indicates more concretely her move into subjective experience. This does not mean Nora understands any better her desire for Robin, but rather illustrates a burst of associated intellectual work in the “now” so rapid as to impede any hope for clarity.
To Matthew’s question (above), she states: “If I don’t write to her, what am I to do? I can’t sit here for ever – thinking!” (125). She mistakenly believes that thinking is not “doing”; but, for the contemplative Nora, thinking is as much and possibly more a part of her desire as sexual satisfaction at this point. It is compelled by desire and becomes an agonizing repetition surrounding the incomprehensible Robin and their unresolvable love. “I’ve got to write to her,” Nora states again. “I’ve got to” (126). Her desire for Robin in her absence is channeled into incessant scribbling intent on constraining desire’s intensity.

By exercising (or exorcising) her mental faculties, she attempts to maintain psychic equilibrium by exhaustion. She soon recognizes, however, her mental anguish cannot be relieved, and that her desire cannot be split from that anguish. Wishfully she tells the doctor: “If only you could take my mind off, Matthew – now, […] that Robin’s mind and mine might go together” (139). Because Nora’s lesbianism is so inextricably entangled with her active intellectualism, it would seem as if her mind is very unlike Robin’s; however, as Nora’s intellectual powers are depleted and fatigued, the two seems closer together. Regardless, even in her wish, she knows her mind and Robin’s cannot be one. Her beleaguered mind perpetually translating her heart’s despair has numbed her thinking, for thinking everything is much like thinking nothing. And although that brings her closer to unthinking Robin’s mind, Nora cannot sustain it. “Every hour is my last,” she says to Matthew “desperately, [and] one can’t live one’s last hour all one’s life” (134). Theirs, then, Nora admits, is an impossible meeting:
Only the impossible lasts forever; with time, it is made accessible.

Robin’s love and mine was always impossible, and loving each other, we no longer love. Yet we love each other like death. (139)

Nora’s persistent intellectual energy obscures itself in its continuity; again and again she recites to distraction the couple’s life together and their cause of separation. Matthew muses on her ability to focus on one particular thought:

Nora, beating her head against her heart, sprung over, her mind closing her life up like a heel on a fan, rotten to the bone for love of Robin. My God how that woman can hold on to an idea! (161)

She “write[s] and weep[s] and think[s] and plot[s]” (126), but her singularity of vision only enables her to focus even more narrowly, which paradoxically expands the ambiguity of her preoccupation, as exemplified by ironic and inconsistent interpretations of Robin during the conversation. Suggesting that Nora’s mental vigor is for naught, Matthew explains “you have been unwise enough to make a formula; you have dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known” (136). In other words, an attempt to explain Robin and their love through Nora’s current epistemology is impossible, and no amount of brainwork can change that. “Even the contemplative life,” Matthew further expounds, “is only an effort, Nora my dear, to hide the body so the feet won’t stick out” (134). For Nora, the “body” in this case is her relationship with Robin, which try as Nora might she cannot think her way free of in any reasonable manner. The feet remain visible, signifying Nora’s inability to justify or reason on the unknowable Robin and their ineffable love. By this section’s end, Nora recognizes in Robin
the “secure torment” (151). Nora’s overworked mind has finally come upon a plausible explanation of Robin and their passionate bond, not an answer or conclusion, but an explanation. Although Nora will always desire Robin, the latter will forever act contrary to Nora’s desires.

The final pages of this chapter are Matthew’s, roughly eight pages of drunken ranting in a neighborhood Parisian pub. “To think is to be sick!” he yells from the bar at the other patrons, and then follows with an harangue provoked by his latest discussion with Nora (158). Thunderous and distressing, the section, then, remains in climax still. For Matthew prophesies at the end of the section: “Now,” he said, “the end – mark my words – now nothing, but wrath and weeping [original italics] (166).

“…nothing, but wrath and weeping”

The final chapter begins in a low but tense tone describing the cyclical motion of Robin’s wandering since arriving in the United States with Jenny. Her drifting conveys her “closer and closer” to “Nora’s part of the country” (168). The scene shifts then to the thoughtful Nora a “half an acre away” at her home in America, quiet, sitting by a kerosene lamp (168). She raises her head as her dog begins barking outside and running toward something away from the house. Tension in the section grows steadily now as Nora’s mind rushes into employment. Too restless to “wait,” Nora begins walking toward the sound of her dog: “At the top of the hill she could see, rising faintly against the sky, the weather-beaten white of the chapel; a light ran the length of the door” (169).
Intrinsically, Nora knows it is Robin who has provoked the dog and compelled her to the chapel nearby; toward it she runs “cursing and crying, and blindly” (169). Stopping herself at the chapel door, Nora, “benumbed,” (de Lauretis Nightwood S127) witnesses Robin fall to the floor on all fours in heart-wrenching play with the dog, laughing, barking herself, but ultimately collapses weeping on the floor (Nightwood 170).

As noted by Teresa de Lauretis in her 2008 article, the scene is one “without words but full of sound and fury” (S127). And indeed the section has no dialogue, even Nora’s swearing is only reported as “cursing” by the narrator. There is sound to be sure; the barking of the dog, the crying and cursing of Nora, has been replaced with the desolate weeping of Robin, as prophesied by Matthew. But, withholding verbal communication, which denies the reader’s interpretation of the women’s thoughts, adds to the tension of the elongated climax. Feeling through thinking is the only mode of interaction and transmission between the two lovers. Their non-linguistic utterings emphasize how even thought, for Nora, has become so overwhelming as to suggest un-thinking. The text notes she runs toward the chapel “blindly,” cursing and crying; all her activities related to unmediated psychological interaction. Her thinking has become a kind of non-thinking that corresponds more readily with Robin’s incoherent and non-articulable character.

With Robin’s purging of emotion, the heartrending scene also has a similar effect on the audience to an extent. The long-awaited denouement seems to arrive. However, the audience is also left with no way to resolve the central
conflict in the novel between Nora and Robin. Instinctively the audience knows this scene has resolved nothing; therefore, although there is a kind of purge, the audience is left with an anxiety built in to the end of the novel. For this reason, it is important to offer the final paragraph in full:

Then she began to bark also, crawling after him – barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching. The dog began to cry then, running with her, head-on with her head, as if to circumvent her; soft and slow his feet went padding. He ran this way and that, low down in his throat crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees. (170)

In a way, this ending is to be expected. The passion between Nora and Robin cannot be assuaged because it will persist no matter what action may be taken in the novel. As Matthew states to Nora in the preceding section when she asks him, “What will happen now, to me and to her?” “Nothing,” answers the doctor (129). And nothing is exactly what the novel does in the end. There is no acceleration of tension, but no resolution of conflict either. Nothing… but wrath and weeping.

Not the invert, or the sodomite, or the girl who resembles a boy, Nora is an undisputed woman who falls in love with another woman. Because Robin Vote has been the character through which most criticism has handled the lesbianism of *Nightwood*, Nora’s character can be read as the *negative valence* in the mimesis of
the novel’s lesbianism. Robin, the figure of the “congenital invert,” is the representation of lesbianism most critics see and exploit. But, the truth about Nightwood is that Nora is more the mundane lesbianism of the novel than Robin. Robin, having been exploited by critics through constant situation of her character, no matter how kindly, within “perversion” leaves the lesbianism Nora encapsulates completely out of the discussion. That Nora fell in love with a son-of-a-bitch of a person has less to do with Robin as a lesbian as it does to Robin as a person and a shockingly appalling partner. Robin is no more representative of lesbianism, really, than Matthew is of gay men. Neither should be looked to as icons of same sex relationships. Nora, however, the pensive woman whose intellect is overrun by passion, can be seen as a different kind of lesbianism, and should be.
SECTION 4

Conclusion

If, while reading through these chapters, one has thought, this does not look earth-shatteringly new, it is because it is not. The characters used in this study show the mundane rather than the exceptional lesbian. These characters are in no way visually anomalous to any other character in British or American women’s literature at the time. Unconventionalities in these women are not visual and are only noted by analysis of their intellect, their decision-making, their lifestyles, their indifference to heterosexuality, their animosity to patriarchal control, and heteronormativity in general.

The previous chapters have sought to demonstrate the fluidity of lesbianism in the decade surrounding Radclyffe Hall’s blatantly lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*. Before the general population had a clear idea of “the lesbian,” lesbianism existed in fiction – and often continues to exist – through fictional topoi that cumulatively thicken perhaps not the visibility but the thinkability of lesbianism. In this decade, it was not always apparent where lesbianism might be, but with the publicity of *The Well*, oversensitive culture warriors found that lesbianism could be anywhere. Because Stephen Gordon had shown the public what a lesbian *might* look like in a novel, the public began looking for that lesbian in society. Unfortunately for the lookers, however, finding out “for sure” would forever be an impossibility. This moment in which performative mimesis caused a fictional identity to be brought to light in fact, shows both how fluid and unstable the label is at this time. This moment of the
fissure in performative mimesis, at least the decade explored in this project, is a moment in which representations of lesbianism in novels just as representations of women in the world depict many different kinds of women who can, might, or do perform lesbianism. Through Modern techniques related particularly to the disruption of heteronormative commonplaces – often related to women’s intellectual activity – topoi is built into the texts of American and British Modernists that more readily enable readings of lesbianism.

Although at least three of the texts have previously been noted for some kind of lesbianism – *Summer Will Show* by Warner, *Passing* by Nella Larsen, and *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes – how to deconstruct the topos of the lesbianism through the performative mimesis of the noted protagonists of these and the other five novels has been shown to be an interesting foray into the ways in which women are represented. Through not only gender performance, but the protagonist’s performance of her intellect has demonstrated how that intellect works within the novel – the *negative valence* of mimesis out of the shadow of the *positive valence* – to resist heterosexuality and patriarchy. These are the topoi of lesbianism that ultimately work to reject heteronormativity as a whole.

Finally, it is important to note that the protagonists of this project are not the image of the congenital invert, the Stephen Gordons or Robin Votes of Modernism. Rather, these protagonists look quite like many women protagonists throughout the ages. The difference is not so much in the women themselves, but the idea of lesbianism that is not only thinkable in the novel – by the characters perhaps or through the narrative – but thinkable by the readers of the time, and by
extension, the readers of our time. Therefore, positive valence mimesis is
doubled as the protagonists in the novels are both likened to conventional
representations of women in literature, which supposedly reflects society, and also
compared to the newly “conventional” understanding of the as yet indistinct
representation of the lesbian in literature, which has also emerged in society.
Negative valence mimesis is twinned by the same token, but allows readers to
perceive the differences within and between women held up against the
representation of the conventional woman, as well as the dissimilarities within
and between women held up against the new conventions of the lesbian.
Although the conventions of the lesbian is not yet fully formed, our contemporary
belief that “masculinity” is a basis through which lesbianism can be perceived
remains in our critical reading of texts. Through negative valence mimesis we
can see a wider spectrum of women who participate in lesbianism without any
masculine explanation for their desire.

Contemporary scholars worry too much about interpreting lesbianism in a
time other than our own, and surely we must be careful not to ascribe our ways of
seeing to an earlier reading public, like the Modern reader. However, we scholars
also do ourselves no good if we do not acknowledge that which exists in the text.
Surely deconstructing the ways in which the protagonists of the novels in this
study revolt against clear boundaries for and definitions of “woman” and
“womanhood” can assist us in our feminist readings of older texts, and most
importantly, can augment our already burgeoning catalogue of lesbian texts and
lesbian readings of texts. This, after all, is what is necessary to a tradition in
literature, the ever strengthening of the argument itself. And, indeed, this is what this project has sought to do, and hopefully has accomplished.
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