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The Lesbian Identity in Victorian and Early Twentieth Literature

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Anne Lister's diaries and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*

Bachelor's project in English Literature

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Abstract

This bachelor thesis seeks to understand the formation of the lesbian identity in both British and American setting throughout the nineteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century. Through the analysis of the literature from this time period, the author explores how lesbian women enjoyed the company of other women, as friends or as romantic companions. In order to accomplish that, this thesis follows the diaries written by Anne Lister [1791-1840], the controversial novel at its time *The Well of Loneliness* [1928], as well as comparing the metaphorical lesbian in *The Awakening* [1899] to the typical Victorian lesbian description. First and foremost provides with a historical background of female homosexual bonds that occurred during a 150-year period. Thereafter, the author establishes a framework through Martha Vicinus' elaborating study on female friendships in order to understand the development of the sexual identity. Lastly, the thesis discusses how *The Well of Loneliness* differs from the other texts regarding its confrontation with the established expectations of gender, and how it bends the boundaries of what is considered to be a lesbian.

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Introduction

It is surprisingly difficult to properly define a lesbian identity. As Martha Vicinus once wrote: “Lesbian desire is everywhere, even as it may be nowhere” (Vicinus “*They Wonder*” 468). These words are particularly more pertinent today than they were a couple of decades ago. The lesbian identity was barely existing in the Victorian time until early twentieth century (Clark 24). One of the reasons was the thought that nineteenth-century women could not conceive of sexual desire for each other, having no words for such feelings (24). During this era, people used the notion “passionate friendships” on relationships between women, where touching one another was widely acceptable. There existed lesbians, but few records of proclaimed women who loved other women. The main evidence researchers and the rest of the world are left with are journals, self-biographies or novels that cover the relationships women had with each other. A common theme in these writings is the how women struggled due to a loss of a lesbian identity, and how they faced difficulties because of it not only from society but within themselves. I will therefore explain how the lesbian identity developed during the nineteenth century until the early twentieth century. *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and Anne Lister’s diaries are works written in the nineteenth century that share similarities of metaphorical and coded lesbian language. They represent the period’s encouragement and acceptance towards women’s friendships, but also the resentment towards homosexual love. Radclyffe Hall and her controversial novel *The Well of Loneliness* demonstrate how the lesbian identity was starting to change towards the beginning of the twentieth century. Both Hall’s novel and Lister’s diaries have contributed much to the lesbian community, which is why I have decided to include them in this thesis. Additionally, I identify with the three works on different levels. First, I can relate to the sensation of being an outsider of society simply because of one’s sexual orientation. Second, I have received hatred and judgement from people when they learned I was a lesbian. Therefore, I found it enriching to look at the historiography of the lesbian identity, in order to understand how privileged lesbians are in the 21st century. I also wanted to include *The Awakening* because it can represent how a lot of lesbians lived during the nineteenth century; in the closet. Some women are to this day still afraid to come out, and identify as a lesbian, and one can therefore think how difficult the situation was for lesbian women during the nineteenth century.

Tracking down the lesbian roots in history comes with a lot of challenges. Since lesbians in general have gotten less coverage than gay men, scholars struggle to find exactly how and when lesbians, and their community formed. Lesbian history can range all from tiny

school-girl crushes to cross-dressing that may or may not include genital sex (Vicinus "*They Wonder*" 470). Researchers have typically focused on the individual lesbian and her community, romantic friendships and butch-femme roles, and the question of when the modern lesbian identity arose. What is important to remark when studying the lesbian identity, is that it cannot fit into a simple characterization. A lesbian can choose to identify however as she pleases, and her experiences may not always follow a similar path as other lesbians. Blanche Wiesen Cook's definition encourages the thought that being a lesbian goes beyond a choice or a sexual involvement: "Women who love women, who choose women to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to work creatively and independently, are lesbians" (471).

In order to understand the development of the lesbian identity from the nineteenth century until the early twentieth century, one should initially include the lesbian history before this. By the late seventeenth century, the relationship between women were seen with more suspicion than before (Goode 178). The lesbian desire was in the eighteenth century an "unnamed" quality, even though most people had knowledge about it (177). For that reason, lesbian messages were conveyed through coded references. Sexual desire between women were displayed through visual pornography, classical texts, and medical treatises to name a few. The most familiar constructions of lesbian desire were the tribade, the femme friend, and the hermaphrodite. Women also married each other, and cross-dressed.

The notion of a lesbian identity did not exist in the nineteenth century (Clark 24). Women did as mentioned have passionate friendships, which very rarely became sexual. It was normal to kiss, exchange letters, and embrace each other. Men respected women's friendships as a component for family life for wives and mothers (32). Neither did society see these relationships as threats to the heterosexual norm, as they had an unexpected degree of knowing acceptance. To illustrate that society did not see a close relationship between women as a threat, there are reports describing two school teachers that were accused of lesbianism in 1811, but won damages as the judge did not believe that women in general could be lesbian (24). This represents the mind-set and attitudes a lot of people prevailing during this century. Moving on, women started to act more upon their feelings for other women during this period. Some did it in fear, while others tied up the knot in so-called Boston-marriages, named after Henry James' "*The Bostonians*" [1886]. Whilst the Victorian society gradually adapted romantic values, women got unified through feminist movements and revolts (Vicinus *Intimate Friends* 5). More and more women began to see themselves as independent of the man, and found happiness with other women. Some women moved

together, while others lived lives as romantic friends without sexual acts. Martha Vicinus, the foremost researcher on lesbian women in the nineteenth century, explains in *Intimate Friends* how these types of living arrangements between women were normal and accepted by society as long as they went by the term friends. Professor Sharon Marcus states that the lead reason to why it is difficult to draw a distinction between lesbian romances and normal friendships is the fact that lesbian women referred to a loved one or a romantic and sexual partner as namely a friend (Marcus 25). This leads us to the problematics of distinguishing lesbian relationships and friendships from this era, as lesbian couples hid behind friendships (Vicinus *Intimate Friends* 5). The female friendships are though “an excellent test of the arguments that women’s relationships were central to the Victorian society” according to Marcus, and demonstrate just how strong the bonds were between women (25).

Several scholars agree on the fact that it is difficult to distinguish romantic friendships and passionate love. Graham Robb argues that between women, the difference is not as visible as with gay men, and it was not as important either (Robb 115). Sharon Marcus explains how these friendships represented a spiritual shift from the hierarchy where men were supposed to be undermined by their husbands to “a more egalitarian conception modelled on friendship” (Marcus 25). Thus, the importance of the lesbian romances behind these friendships is paramount, because it symbolized the blossoming of Victorian women-loving women, and them idealizing themselves instead of their husbands and marriages. Another important aspect Marcus points out is how Sapphic relationships from the nineteenth century cannot be clarified on the assumption whether or not they were sexual, but seeing them in a larger context (43-44). Overall, the Victorians were in general more secret about their sexual life, even in the relationship between men and women (43). There was rarely mentioned about menstruation or excretion, and sex between husband and wife. However, Anne Lister and her diaries have provided solid evidence that nineteenth-century women were sexual with other women, while demonstrating that sex created different kinds of connections.

Lesbian lovers and female friends shared a lot of similarities, amongst other the idealization of the physical and spiritual qualities, but lesbian women often had obsessive passions and/or lived together (Marcus 29). It was not unusual to have joint finances and function as a married couple, and calling each other husband and wife (Vicinus *Intimate Friends* 9). However many Sapphic women disliked the thought of patriarchal marriage, which inspired them to do their own take on marriage. Anne Lister sets an example in this matter, as she would do a marriage ceremony for the love of her life despite her resentment towards the system (Clark 28).

Since the lesbian identity was not yet fully formed, it caused lesbian women to lack a community to which they belonged. Additionally, women did not have lesbian role models to look up to, due to little to none openness surrounding lesbianism. This meant that they had to figure out themselves the overwhelming feelings they felt towards other women. A lot of the lesbian relationships happened in secrecy, and one of the reasons behind it was that sodomy led to death penalty in Wales and England until 1861 (Robb 17). Furthermore, gay people in the nineteenth century often viewed themselves as “weak, sick or freakish, and their dream was to be cured or left in peace” (175). Michael Foucault posited that until the late nineteenth century the sexual acts of gay men and women were condemned as sinful or criminal (Clark 24). When sexologists and psychiatrists began to define people who committed such acts as “effeminate homosexual men or masculine lesbians”, the homosexuals were given an identity as biologically different rather than criminally deviant. They felt this explained the nature of their desires. Not only does this represent the beginning of the lesbian identity, but also how such an identity was longed for in society. Thus it can lead to show how lesbians in addition to gay men did not feel home in the heterosexual world with its constraints.

Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, the modern lesbian was starting to become more visible. In addition to increase in numbers, she was also a known figure in sophisticated circles in London and Paris (Vicinus *Intimate Friends* 172). Most educated women and men decided to dismiss all forms of same-sex love, but a small amount of wealthy women chose to live outside traditional family structures and created a greater visibility for the modern lesbian. Radclyffe Hall contrasts the bad families of the upper classes with the painful efforts to lesbians to create their own good families. She assumes that without social acceptance, these proto-families are doomed, but for good measure, she dooms them by giving each character a fatal weakness (173). The modern lesbian also got a broader vocabulary, since sexologists wanted to create a sexual identity for everyone. The most visible sign of lesbian desire continued to be cross-dressing, which is evident with Stephen in *The Well of Loneliness*. Radclyffe Hall’s novel and the trial around it contributed to an increased visibility of lesbianism (Oram & Turnbull 181).

It was only in the 1920s that the concept of lesbianism became more defined, and part of social knowledge (201). One does not know which groups first got involved and talked about lesbianism, but it became common knowledge relatively fast. Moreover, it was understood that women could be in love with each other in sexual ways. On the other hand, lesbian women were seen as criminals at this time, and were linked to prostitution, alcoholism and drugs to name a few. Some went as far as declaring how lesbianism could lead to the

rejection of marriage and childbirth, and the ultimate destruction of civilization (204).

The first chapter of this thesis discusses how Anne Lister has developed her own lesbian identity, and how she is somewhat untypical to the nineteenth-century lesbian. The second chapter will attempt to do a symptomatic reading of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. That involves interpreting metaphorical language, and pointing out multiple aspects of the novel that are similar to Lister's diaries while demonstrating that Edna could be a lesbian trapped in a heterosexual marriage. Chopin's work has been a feministic and lesbian inspiration. This work attempts to draw similarities in terms of writing style, word choice and themes with *The Well of Loneliness* and Lister's diaries. The third and final chapter handles *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, and how it has contributed to the development of a modern lesbian identity.

Chapter One: Anne Lister's controversial diaries and the creation of her own lesbian identity

Anne Lister (1791-1840) is of great relevance to the development of the Victorian lesbian identity, as her diaries demonstrate her enriching journey down the lesbian road, including sexual encounters with other women, heartbreaks, and the defiance of Victorian social norms. Lister was a heiress who resided in Shibden Hall, and she received public recognition when her diaries written between 1806 and 1840 were discovered in a county archive by Helena Whitbread during the 1980s. The diaries were then transcribed by Whitbread during a period of six years (Jay xviii). Lister's diaries were attempted to be hidden and burnt by Arthur Burrell after he and John Lister managed to crack the cryptic code. For them, the content was disturbing and they were afraid that it would cause a local scandal (Whitbread 9). Since Lister's diaries were not common knowledge during the nineteenth century, her diaries did not have an impact of the lesbian identity in that period. Instead, they demonstrate how a Victorian lesbian woman had to invent her own lesbian identity.

Most of Lister's diaries were written in code due to the wish to hide (Eisner 29). It was a way of transforming herself, in addition to an outward silencing of narrative. The diaries helped her navigate herself through the private world, where the texts became a sphere of openness. Furthermore, her social environment required her to disguise herself and her sexual nature (30). Eisner argues how the uncoded and coded portions of her journal "represent her desire to separate completely the public and private" (30). In public, she was outgoing, concerned about her social status, and profoundly conservative (Robb 175). According to her, the idea of women's rights was ridiculous. In private, she was a caring woman with the desire

to find a partner to share her life with. Lister was proud to love the same sex, but she did not use the term lesbian on herself. Instead, she wrote that “I love and only love the fairer sex, and thus beloved by them in turn my heart revolts from any other love than theirs (Whitbread 145).

Lister shows that some women at least formed physical and emotional relationships that were recognizably lesbian in a modern sense (115). Her diaries are the most detailed records of women’s lovemaking before the twentieth century, which makes them controversial at its time. The following passage gives information of her wooing of Maria Barlow, and is very informational of how lesbian women interacted sexually with one another:

[I] became rather excited. Felt her breasts & queer [genitals] a little. Tried to put my hand up her petticoats but she prevented. Touched her flesh just above the knee twice. I kissed her warmly & held her strongly. She said what a state I was putting myself into. . . I felt her grow warm & she let me grubble [touch her genitals] & press her tightly with my left hand whilst I held her against the door with the other, all while putting my tongue into her mouth & kissing her passionately as to excite her not a little, I am sure (Robb 175)

Since the Sapphic role was somewhat meant to be hidden in the nineteenth century, Lister had to invent her own lesbian identity (Clark 49). This passage alone demonstrates Lister’s confidence with other women, and is a representation of her own discovery within the lesbian world. Sex was never openly discussed, neither was people’s sexual orientation. Thus, Lister had to pick up on subtle hints of desire between women on her search for lesbianism (31). It appears in her diaries that she did that with great result, as she had numerous affairs and caught the eyes of multiple women. Additionally, the heterosexual sources was imaginatively reworked in order to fit lesbian relationships. Lesbian lovers frequently adapted familiar heterosexual rituals. However, as previously mentioned, most Sapphic women saw the heterosexual marriage as a negative constitution of oppression (Vicinus *Intimate Friends* 2). The case was different with Anne Lister, it seemed as though she benefited from providing financially for the women she loved. When she married Ann Walker, she played the role as the consoling and supporting man (2).

Cross-dressing was an important aspect of the lesbian identity, and some wanted to be perceived as a heterosexual couple from the outside (2). Therefore, one of the women in the couple would rely on attributes considered to be “masculine” at that period, for instance,

having short hair or wearing male clothing. Lister had a mannish appearance, and was often misperceived as a man. One can draw similarities between Lister and Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening*, who has the appearance of a typical lesbian artist; she is masculine. Both Anne and Stephen in *The Well of Loneliness* dress with men clothing, but the difference between them is how Stephen views herself of more a man than Anne. Women who cross-dressed did it to feel comfortable with themselves, but they identified themselves as masculine women. They experienced bullying, which both Stephen and Lister experienced first-hand. Especially Anne had rude comments thrown after her, but that did not break her nor stop her of searching for a female companion to share her life with. She sought a love that would benefit her romantically while strengthening her political and social power (6).

During the course of writing of her diaries, Lister's confidence grew parallel to the development of her lesbian identity. In the beginning she was afraid that someone would discover her journals, but in the end she wrote quite explicitly and in detail about her love affairs (Whitbread 9). After realizing she had the power to flirt with other women and gaining their love and trust, it gave her confidence a boost. Lister also flirted with married women, and that comes to show how fearless she became when it involved her lesbian identity.

Although lesbian subcultures probably existed among dancers and prostitutes in nineteenth-century Paris, there have not been found any evidence of such in England (Clark 26). Therefore Lister could not have been socialized into a subculture. In this time period, there was more knowledge about male sodomy, and lesbianism was typically confined to sophisticated and cosmopolitan circles of intellectuals and theater people in London and Bath (26). Anne got into these circles late in her life, after having multiple intense sexual relationships with women, and after she had begun to develop her own sense of a lesbian self (27). Clark therefore suggests Lister as an example of how some people constructed their own identities with three elements: their own temperaments and inherent desires; their material circumstances; and the cultural representations available to them (27). As a result, individuals who constantly found that their desires and circumstances were in opposition to their cultural role were more likely to create a singular sense of self. Stephen in *The Well of Loneliness* does not fill the shoes of an ordinary girl, leading her to creating her own identity instead. Even as an adult she decides she wants to be perceived as a man, and seen with modern eyes, she could be classified as trans. However, as such notion did not exist in the early twentieth century, she finds herself on the crossroad between the lesbian and heterosexual community.

In her diaries, it is clear how Lister and her lovers struggle with fear of judgement, and fear that the actions they are doing are sinful. Anne Belcombe, one of Lister's earliest lovers,

is concerned with their sexual acts and the view society has on them. Lister writes in her diaries how Belcombe “asked if the thing was wrong – if it was forbidden in the bible & she said she felt quere [sic] ...” (Lister 25). Even though Lister herself was a Christian, and assumed her heart was not clean because of her attraction towards women, she reassures Belcombe with rationalizing the fears she is feeling. Whenever Anne felt this way, she would seek forgiveness in prayers which gave her solace. One can see how lesbian women in the nineteenth century experienced an inner battle, where they are drawn between love and shame. Outside-factors such as economic benefits when marrying heterosexually, or acceptance by society made a lot of women decide to withheld their Sapphic emotions, which is what Marianna Belcombe did. She was the love of Lister’s life, and she wanted to be validated by society (Clark 28). Belcombe knew that Lister could not provide her with the same economic security as her husband, which is why she married for money. It inflicted them both with great amount of pain, since they both still cared for each other deeply. Lister’s latest love, Ann Walker, also viewed their relationship as sinful. What this demonstrates is how women, although they loved each other, were constrained and had to give up on their true loves in fear of judgement and faith. With Stephen in the *Well of Loneliness*, she deliberately ends her relationship with Mary because she knows Mary is not happy due to the social stigma of being a lesbian. All of the three works highlight in some way how it was expected of women to be rightful and only have female friendships in addition to marriage.

The reason as to why Anne Lister and her diaries are significant to the development of the lesbian identity, is due to fact that the descriptions of herself and her attitude resemble the modern lesbian. Her traits and her personality draw similarities to the social representation of lesbians in present time, which is why the scholars were taken aback by the content of her diaries. The diaries disclosed the cumbersome and long road through the development her own lesbian identity. Additionally, they show how other lesbian women did not manage to accept themselves and their Sapphic feelings.

Chapter Two: Edna Pontellier’s traits of a closeted lesbian

Both Anne Lister’s diaries and *The Well of Loneliness* tackle quite openly the subject of lesbianism and the lesbian identity. Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* however has been seen as a feministic novel for decades, but recent studies have made assumptions whether or not main character, Edna Pontellier, actually could be a closeted lesbian. She is unhappily married to Léonce, whom she has two children with. Eventually she meets Mademoiselle Reisz, who triggers an awakening within her. It leads Edna to start affairs with two men, Alcée and

Robin, the latter to which her heart belongs. In the end of the novel, she drowns herself as the world becomes too difficult to bear.

The novel represents motherhood, the independence of a woman, patriarchy and marriage (LeBlanc 289). After the its publication in 1899, the book provoked harsh newspaper criticism in America, leading it to be taken from circulation in St. Louis (Eble 261). The St. Louis *Republic* stated that the novel was “too strong to drink for moral babes and should be labeled poison”. All of the works presented in this thesis have either been banned or attempted to be in order to shut down the voices of these authors, but have done so unsuccessfully. Chopin deals rather explicitly with a woman’s longing to find herself without the confinements of society. Already in the beginning of the novel the author paints a picture of “a green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door” (Chopin 1). This parrot could symbolize the feeling the main character, Edna, has of being stuck in a marriage that does not satisfy her in numerous ways. Her desire is not to be confined to one option, rather to pursue various roles and vocations, which represents the overall critic *The Awakening* has against the depicted society’s inadequate recognition of the diversity of women and their talents, while it resents at the same time the idea that women only have one role in society (Valkeakari 205).

When studying the lesbian identity of Edna, I find it necessary to do a symptomatic reading of the novel. It includes an interpretation where the true meaning of the text could be read between the lines (Marcus 74). Preliminary presented evidence in this thesis indicates in what way women-loving women used literary language consisting of metaphors and codes in order to conceal lesbian themes and motives. Additionally, Edna’s story could align with the story of several Victorian lesbian or bisexual women that were too afraid to act on their feelings. Sharon Marcus argues that symptomatic reading is inadequate for reading Victorian fiction, as authors in this era openly represented their relationships between women, desire and marriage. From her point of view, it is researchers from the twentieth century who have ignored the true representation of these texts. Nevertheless, studying the lesbian identity in the nineteenth century requires in my opinion more depth when it comes to interpreting texts from the period. For instance, the importance of nonverbal communication styles, which includes flirtation, eye contact, touch and gestures are just as important when analysing the Sapphism of Edna. It was normal for friends to touch in the nineteenth century, but it seems like there is more tension in Mademoiselle Reisz and Edna’s relationship: “She [Mademoiselle] took Edna’s hand between her strong wiry fingers, holding it loosely without

warmth, and executing sort of double theme upon the back and palm” (Chopin 162). The lust of touching someone when in love is typically strong, which is also evident in *The Well of Loneliness*: “She had always said: “Good morning Miss Stephen,’ but on this occasion it sounded alluring- so alluring that Stephen wanted to touch her, and extending a rather uncertain hand she started to stroke her sleeve” (Hall 13).

A prominent researcher with enriching studies of the lesbian identity of Edna is Katherine Lee Seidel. She focuses on how Edna Pontellier is a metaphorical lesbian with lesbian ties to Mademoiselle Reisz. One of the reasons why this study argues that *The Awakening* contains lesbianism, is Kate Chopin’s use of narrative techniques, homoeroticism, witchcraft, and characterizations found in 1890s fiction containing same- sex relations (Seidel 2). Previous critics like Elaine Showalter and Cristina Giorcelli have found the possible lesbian relationship in the novel perverse (1). The reader can choose to disagree, as their relationship has awakened a spiritual journey within Edna. Her journey has gotten her to the point where she aspires to be an artist, and female artists were often lesbian as stated by Seidel. According to her, Mademoiselle Reisz also fits the traits of a female artist in the nineteenth century. When Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz discuss whether or not Edna could become an artist, they seem to be talking metaphorically, where artist in this sense stands for a lesbian. Edna asks if Mademoiselle Reisz does not think she can become an artist, to which she replies: “to be an artist includes much..” and proceeds to declare how the artist needs to possess the “courageous soul” that dares and defies (Chopin 165). For a lesbian in the nineteenth century had to be strong-willed in order to follow her true desires. It seems therefore like Mademoiselle is talking from own experience, and if one compares her to Anne Lister and Stephen, numerous characterizations align with what is considered to be the masculine lesbian. First of all they share the love for masculine dressing, but also in the way they seek to be independent, and do not care about what opinions people must have about them.

Another reason as to why Edna could represent the lesbian identity in the nineteenth century is her fear, and her lack of understanding her feelings towards Mademoiselle. It was normal for women-loving women to have a difficulty naming the feelings they experienced for other women. Seidel proposes a development in the novel where Edna realizes that she is attracted to Mademoiselle. First, the reader can see this in Edna’s inner monologue where she says she would “give up the unessential” (Chopin 122). This involves giving up her money, but not herself, which is something “I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me”. This particular phrase can indicate how the lesbian identity within her is starting to

change. It seems like she is unbothered with the material things in life, while having a tremendous love for her children. However, during the start of her spiritual awakening she makes it clear she does not want to sacrifice her happiness for what society thinks is best for her. Second, when Mademoiselle moved to another apartment, Edna has suddenly an urge to see her, it is almost like her feelings have taken over her rationality. After looking for her for days, she finally finds the new location of Mademoiselle's home. They are happy to see one another, and touches, flirts and discuss whether or not Edna likes Mademoiselle. Edna tells her: "I don't know whether I like you or not" (Chopin 164) while gazing down with a quizzical look. By saying this, it seems like Edna is struggling to acknowledge the nature of their relationship, but that she is being more open towards the feelings she has for Mademoiselle. Edna has a history of choosing men that have something lacking with them, for instance her husband only signifies a safe haven, financial security and that she is guaranteed a respected social status (Valkeakari 208). With Robert she thinks he is her soulmate, but they never achieve a sexual relationship. With Alcée Arobin she lacks the establishment of a mental connection. The repeated failure of her heterosexual relationships could signify that she is not straight, which is why Mademoiselle Reisz is everything she aspires to be, and to have in life.

The novel embodies as stated by Elizabeth LeBlanc a woman's struggle to "reappropriate her own mind, from the confines of male domination" (LeBlanc 289). Here she refers to the multiple characteristics of male power by Kathleen Gough, where the man is entitled to take possession over a woman. Furthermore, she refers to the emphasis on marriage and motherhood as the only acceptable modes of self-definition. These characteristics could demonstrate how nineteenth-century women, including Edna, repeatedly had to give up their freedom to please the wishes of men, and the expectations of society. The emotions Edna have for Mademoiselle make her go through an internal process of self-realization. When reading Edna as a metaphorical lesbian, one can assume that she redirects her Sapphism into the affair she starts with Robert. That could explain how she still does not find happiness, and decide to take her own life. Recent studies have come to the conclusion that lesbian women attempt suicide between two and seven times more often than their heterosexual counterparts (Sounders & Valente). If that is the numbers of today's more acceptable world, one can imagine the mental health of nineteenth-century women. Edna's suicide can therefore represent the malady that occurs when Sapphic emotions are ignored, and when society lacks a proper lesbian identity. It seems as though Edna commits suicide since she fails to acknowledge her true self. Even though Katherine Lee Seidel does not examine the reason

behind the suicide, one further assumption could be that Edna also fears she will be condemned for her adultery, as the Victorian society doomed such a thing (Marcus 58). As mentioned, women friendships were encouraged, and the men in Edna's life knew about her relations with Mademoiselle. Nevertheless, their relationship differed that of any of Edna's other female friends (Seidel 2). She was touched and inspired by the unconventional artist. Edna was perhaps stuck in a marriage where she wanted more than sexual relations with Mademoiselle, but it was too difficult to bear.

Anne Lister, Stephen and Edna Pontellier all represent how difficult it was to be a woman-loving woman during the late 1800s and the early 1900s. Lister gives the reader a look into her world with secrecy, explicit details and coded language about real Sapphic bonds. She chose to write in code to express that the "disguised & hidden nature that suits not with the world" was invaluable (Whitbread 15). In her diaries, no one could judge her, nor intrude on her thoughts. Anne was also more open and advanced surrounding her sexuality than what was typical of the Victorian lesbian. With Edna, it is necessary to analyse her behaviour, her thoughts and words in order to attempt to discover a lesbian identity. Edna's story is similar to Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* (1952), in which a married woman falls in love with a female photographer. The 60-year gap between the two novels, and the difference in how the main characters in Highsmith's novel actually act on their sexual desires for one another, could be due to the more developed lesbian identity. However, their similar plot strengthens the assumption that Chopin's novel portrays a miserable, but awakened lesbian with an urge to explore her new identity.

Chapter Three: The modern lesbian in *The Well of Loneliness*

Written in the decade which symbolized the struggle of sexuality, *The Well of Loneliness* exhibits the progression of the lesbian identity in the early twentieth century. The novel was written in 1928 by the British author Radclyffe Hall, who herself was a lesbian who lived together with Una Lady Troubridge. The novel tells the tale of Stephen Gordon, an upper-class Englishwoman who struggles as a lesbian with the confines of society. Her parents wanted to have a boy so that he could be a heir, but instead they got a girl who was "narrow-hipped, wide-shouldered little tadpole of a baby" (Vicinus 216). They called the girl Stephen, and she was born in the shape of a mannish girl, and nurtured as a son. Stephen is Hall's heroine, and has the virtues of the abnormal: she is intelligent, high strung, courageous and creative.

In the novel's treatment of identity, it illustrates a model common to both Victorian

and modern novels of development, a model in which identities are not merely described by, but rather rooted in, literary narrative, through the protagonists' intertextual identifications (Green 280). According to Jacques Lacan's revision of Freudian theory, identity is formed through a series of aspirational and ultimately unachievable identifications: what we call "identity" always becomes a fantasy of identity and a projection of self (280). The novel, written in 1928, understood how important heterosexual intercourse was in the maintenance of male domination. Additionally, sex reformers saw women-loving women as problems after its publication. This was due to that she was not incorporated into the normal female-male relations organized around heterosexual activity. The same year as *The Well of Loneliness*, a range of other books had lesbianism as a theme, for instance Compton Mackenzie's satire *Extraordinary Women* and Elizabeth Bowen's comedy, *The Hotel*.

Stephen Gordon's exploration of her lesbian identity signifies the embracement of both sexes (Vicinus *Intimate Friends* 163). Initially, she identifies with what Martha Vicinus argues is the "adolescent boy", because she combines male and female elements. During the end of the nineteenth century, boys were seen as less a figure of adventurous sexual exploration, more of preternatural understanding and spiritual purity (163). Gordon, the upper-class Englishwoman who grows up being nurtured as a son, challenges society's perception of what should be expected of a woman. The heroine has virtues of the abnormal, making her intelligent, gorgeous and creative. She suffers from being hypersensitive, and is classified by Hall as an "invert". Some feminist critics disagree with labelling Stephen as an invert, since that allegedly makes Hall support the heterosexist "trapped soul" theory that lesbian women actually are men trapped in women's bodies (Skinner 19). Other critics suggest that Stephen's inversion could be classified as a transsexual or transgender identity.

On the other hand, giving people an identity without their own recognition of it can be problematic, which raises the question whether or not everyone need an identity. Stephen's inversion could be just his means of expressing himself, perhaps she does not want to be put in a box. Roger Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argue how the term identity has been overused in order to conceptualize identities as something that all people have and seek (Brubaker & Cooper 2). They exemplify with how identity does not require its use as a category of analysis. According to them, it is the same as discussing 'nation', "one does not have to take a category inherent in appeals and claims (5). They question if we really need this heavily burdened term, which is somewhat true. In one way, categorizing people can dissociate them even more from society, because they can feel like they do not belong in the heterosexual world. On the other hand, it can be positive because then people finally feel like

they belong to a community or a group of other people that are just like them. They can share the same values, respect one another, and be compared to the sensation the gay and lesbian people felt when they were classified as different in the nineteenth century. However, the question is difficult to answer, and the main goal should be to make everyone feel comfortable with themselves regardless of what they identify as.

Radclyffe Hall had to invent her own language, as the concept lesbian identity was something that did not arise until the mid-twentieth century (Oram 1). Alison Oram explains how lesbians before this only understood their sexuality within the social context of their time. Radclyffe Hall wrote out of own experience, which is why she takes an open and polemic stand on the subject of female homosexuality. This endeared her to neither the lesbian nor the heterosexual community (Whitlock 555). Along with the sex reformer Havelock Ellis, she argued on the fact that women do not become lesbians by choice or by circumstance, they are rather born with an affliction which they called “congenital inversion”. In Stephen’s case, it seems as though she identifies with the masculine sex, which leads her to feel desire for women. However, that places her outside of her Edwardian social milieu. Hall’s knowledge and experience about Sapphism make *The Well of Loneliness* a work of fiction that could be relatable for any modern lesbian. She paints the picture of the lesbian as an outsider quite well, even Stephen’s own mother condemns her of her sexual acts: “This thing that you are is a sin against creation” (Hall 328). Stephen is then objectified as a “freak”, and is told she is “unnatural” by her family and neighbours. That comes to show that despite its progression in the early twentieth century, the lesbian identity in general still had a long way to go before getting its recognition and acceptance.

Shelly Skinner proposes the image of the house in the novel as a symbolic space for lesbian identity (Skinner 19). The reason for this is its function as a metaphor for the self, society and Morton. For Stephen, she finds understanding and receives her identity from the house. It is here where she understands her compulsion for the other sex, and creates a safe environment for her sexuality. It seems like Stephen realizes she is an outsider from both the heterosexual and lesbian world, which is why she somewhat accepts her description as an invert. In the middle of the book, she questions herself and who she is. In addition, she says: "I do not know if there are any more like me, I pray not for their sakes, because it's pure hell" (Hall 323). Just as Lister could question herself and who she was, it seems like Stephen also struggles with this. They are both selfless, they choose reason over love, and are willing to give up the love of their lives. It seems to be a central theme in Victorian and early twentieth literature. The lesbian identity did not flourish, she had to experience difficulties from many

angles.

The Well of Loneliness have made a tremendous impact on the lesbian community. After its publication, Hall received a lot of letters from other lesbians at the time who thanked her for addressing lesbianism (Oram & Turnbull 183). It continues to be a story of inspiration, as it created a space where it could challenge, debate and posit alternative lesbianism. Mr. Havelock Ellis said that it was the first English novel which presented “one particular aspect of sexual life as it exists among us-today” (185). Moreover, the novel along with its trial put lesbianism in focus, making for the first time the idea of the lesbian as a specific identity (Jennings 1906). What this demonstrates, is how important this novel was for people in the early twentieth century, because it put to words those sentiments which were previously unspoken.

Conclusion

The goal of this bachelor thesis was to recognize and understand the development of the lesbian identity through literature from the late 1800s to early 1900s. Evidence supported in this thesis illustrates how the lesbian identity was left unnamed in the nineteenth century, it was not until the midst twentieth century that it became common knowledge in society. The tensions in Victorian society led women to find their own voices, unify and understand their significance apart from men, marriages and their role as housewives. Furthermore, female friendships were seen as more important than heterosexual relations, but their intimacies were to be put aside after marriage. Scholars still find it difficult to trace the lesbian historiography during these two periods because of the secrecy surrounding sex and lesbianism. Additionally, the normality of touching, kissing and calling a friend dear names makes the distinction even harder. However, Anne Lister’s diaries and Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* have proven how intimate women could be with another, in addition to have provided scholars with a framework for studying the behaviour of lesbians in nineteenth and early twentieth century. They have demonstrated how the relationships between women-loving women were similar to the ones we have today, but clearly these women lived more difficult lives. Women were often too afraid to act on their feelings towards other women, and they could also experience judgement from society if they did. Due to that reason, some women decided to marry men for financial security, but kept on having lesbian affairs, such as Mariana Belcombe, who was Anne Lister’s first girlfriend. Even though Lister’s diaries were not shared until the 1980s, they got wide public recognition, and continue to inspire lesbians to this very day. Lister’s diaries along with Chopin’s *The Awakening* represent how

the lesbian identity was non-existent in the nineteenth century, which is why they had to invent their own. They are also written in coded and metaphorical language due to the little knowledge and understanding of lesbianism in contemporary time.

Since the lesbian identity was non-existent, lesbians during this period often felt alienated, and lacked a community to which they belonged. Edna, Anne and Stephen all display a crisis within themselves on multiple levels, which affected their mental health. Stephen and Anne illustrate a common trait of lesbians in the nineteenth century until the early twentieth century, namely the desire to dress masculine. Some lesbians liked to be perceived as a man, despite the fact that they hated men and the idea of the woman as second best to him. Therefore, it comes to show lesbians wanted to create their own relationships and identities without the influence of heterosexual norms. Edna on the other hand, could be a representation of how many lesbians felt trapped in marriages with men, and were too afraid to act and acknowledge their sexual orientation.

The three works discussed in this thesis are also significant in the evolution of lesbian identity because they were all sought to be banned at one point or another. This represents the difficulties lesbians had at this time period. They could not openly disclose their feelings for other women without facing some sort of repercussion. Thus, their voices are of great importance because they tried to put to focus on the unnameable lesbianism. Chopin, Hall and Lister continue to be role models within the lesbian community, because of the way they went against what society ought was best for women to do. Lastly, their works are considered landmarks of lesbian literature because they have provided the world a better understanding of lesbian historiography.

To summarize, lesbian identity is still in its infancy and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future. We live in a society where the emphasis has begun to move toward identities, and it is becoming more open and inclusive than ever before. I consider myself fortunate to be able to love whomever I want, but I believe it is also critical that people are aware of the circumstances for lesbians a few decades ago. However, it is clear that Victorian and early twentieth century lesbians still found a way to each other despite the difficulties they went through. If that does not prove that love conquers all, I do not know what does.

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