

# ***"good book it made me want to die": The affected and affective readings of a controversial early-20<sup>th</sup>-century queer tragedy***

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**Abstract:** Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) was published during a period marked by tensions between modernity and conservatism. The novel's sentimental style and dramatically tragic conclusion have drawn both criticism for its excessive melodrama as well as appreciation for its emotional resonance. The intense affectivity at the centre of many conflicted readings makes the book a useful point of reference through which we can examine the reactions that a contentious text can create in both professional and non-professional readers. This paper explores the present-day lay readers' reception of *The Well of Loneliness* on the book-reviewing website Goodreads and highlights how they express strong affective reactions in their written reflections in a distinctly non-professional way. The colourful, impressionistic and often performative language used to describe embodied emotions presents fascinating discussion points about how people engage with literature and each other.

**Keywords:** *The Well of Loneliness*, queer literature, Goodreads, online book reviews, lay reading

## **1. Introduction**

Radclyffe Hall's infamous novel *The Well of Loneliness* was first published in 1928 and subsequently banned for its earnest plea for the acceptance of people with non-normative sexuality and gender. Written at a time when modernist views on literature clashed with the post-WWI British government's interest in censoring publications with perceived harm to the national consciousness, the book became a rallying point in the fight against the increasing censorship, but, at the same time, it was criticised for its "middlebrow" oversentimental narrative style. The overall heightened emotional quality of the story, combined with the theatrically tragic ending, has both invited derision for its artless melodrama and admiration for its emotional impact. Since then, the novel's intense affectivity, alongside its controversial depiction of sexuality, has been at the centre of many conflicted readings. This makes *The Well of Loneliness*, in several ways, an excellent frame of reference through which we can examine the divergent reactions that a contentious text can create both in the past and present, particularly with references to the different expectations of literary criticism and everyday reading.

The questions of professional vs. lay reader, or "good" and "bad" reading, have been extensively debated in English language literary theory in the last decades (e.g., Emre 2017; Felski 2020; Guillory 2022). It has become a point of interest how non-professional readers are often referenced in literary studies but seldom studied directly. The common reader habitually remains an impersonal and abstract hypothetical, construed of the author's own perception of an amateur audience – personal experience or generalised strawman figures are utilised for the purposes of cultural critique. At the same time, the multiplicity of real reader-response is left unaddressed due to its complexity. Because of this, researchers are increasingly interested in how to study everyday lay reading, especially to discover how it is

different from and similar to professional literary critique. While the latter is distinct in its grounding in theory or historical awareness, both types of reading are characterised by how the reader identifies with the text (Halpern 2008). What does distinguish the two, however, is the genre-based principles on which the production of the different types of reader-response operates. Since it is difficult (if not impossible, in this context) to examine what happens inside a person's head, the study of the process of reading is usually possible only through the retrospective product of the reader's reflections. Expectations of professional detachment govern the writing of literary analyses, whereas lay reading is often represented by its openness to emotion-based responses. Consequently, in the context of this paper, lay reading is not considered so much as a stable identity (i.e., someone is a lay reader), but as an *act* that a person engages in, no matter their professional background, that results in a particular mode of expression defined by genre conventions as well as their interpretive communities.

For the purpose of exploring lay reading, the book cataloguing website Goodreads offers unprecedented access to an intimate account of readers' engagement with literature. In contrast to the reviews on the site of its parent company, Amazon.com, Goodreads book reviews are more "content-oriented" and "journalistic", focusing on the experience of reading rather than being just "purchase-oriented" product reviews (Dimitrov et al. 2015). Despite the increasing influence of external factors on the site's book reviewing culture (such as the various commercial interests of the publishers, or the platform itself, that can result in strategic review manipulations), the user-generated content on Goodreads is still an advantageous source for the study of reader-response and, as Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo (2019, 248) demonstrate, it provides an opportunity for

researchers to encounter emerging forms of discourse. Additionally, Goodreads is not only a website for independent book cataloguing, where its users can add books to their own virtual libraries, but it is also a site for social networking, where people can interact with each other and discuss what they have read. The user-generated reviews are not just personal notes but form a basis for the site's main functionality of providing book recommendations. In this sense, all Goodreads book reviews exist as a part of a communal project, created *by readers for readers*, a site for "socially networked reading" (Nakamura 2013). The generic features of Goodreads reviews are, accordingly, influenced by the social nature of the online platform where they are published. The combination of lay reading's emotional and experiential engagement with literature and the attention-oriented nature of 21<sup>st</sup>-century social book reviewing creates a fertile ground for the development of unique affective registers, which become especially apparent in the reviews for culturally significant sentimental tragedies like *The Well of Loneliness*.

Different readers' responses to the aesthetics of this queer classic have long contended on the artistic value of this work, dividing people's opinions beyond social and political standpoints. After briefly tracing the controversial reception of Radclyffe Hall's queer classic from its publication in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this article will explore the present-day lay readers' reception of the novel to discover how people express their reactions to the work's heavy emotional content. The discussion is based on a qualitative analysis of 1629 online book reviews posted on Goodreads from April 2007 to October 2024 and forms a part of a broader project examining the 21<sup>st</sup>-century reception of *The Well of Loneliness*. The data was manually tagged in an inductive and open coding process to map emerging categories while recognising the individuality of different readings. A small

selection of the findings is analysed here. How people perceive the novel's emotional tonality and aesthetic style, what responses are elicited, what attitudes are evoked and what stances the readers take – these aspects are some of the main questions that people set out to address when writing reviews and are thus central to the online review genre as a whole. The discussion will particularly focus on how readers express strong affective reactions in their written reflections, triggered by identification and empathy. The term affect is used here to underline the interconnected nature of both mind and body in experiencing emotions both as conscious mental reactions and autonomic embodied sensations. What happens when readers leave themselves exposed to the full impact of an emotionally loaded literary text instead of striving for analytical detachment? The colourful, impressionistic and often performative language used to describe seemingly indescribable embodied emotions demonstrates a distinctly non-professional approach to reading and presents fascinating discussion points about how people engage with literature.

## **2. The controversial affect of *The Well of Loneliness***

Soon after the publication of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* in the summer of 1928, the book was banned after a notorious court case under the United Kingdom Obscene Publications Act of 1857. According to the so-called "Hicklin test" applied in these cases, a publication is obscene when it has the tendency "to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences" (Williams 1955, 632). The legislation had been created in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to stop the spread of pornography imported from the continent, but because of its very vague definition of obscenity, the Act could be used to exert targeted

social control in a broad range of ways (see, e.g., Potter 2013). Many readers who pick up *The Well of Loneliness* today are surprised (and some, disappointed) to find an utter lack of explicit sexual content that one might assume to find in a work labelled as “obscene”. Indeed, the novel is seen as unexpectedly old-fashioned and chaste. The content that was considered so immoral as to be banned by the conservative censors in 1928 was the topic of gender non-conformity and homosexuality. As James Douglas (1928, 10), a conservative journalist, infamously wrote in response to the novel after its publication: “I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body, but moral poison kills the soul.” Calling for the Home Secretary to prosecute this work of fiction, Douglas’s incitement drew polemicised attention to the otherwise well-received book, which, in turn, prompted an unprecedented examination of women’s same-sex desire in public discourse, establishing the work’s notoriety and popularity, as well as cementing the novel’s status as the “lesbian bible” for years to come.

*The Well of Loneliness*, unlike other novels at the time that featured women’s same-sex desire, was banned precisely because of its clear articulation of the issue, which left no doubt about its intention and interpretation. It was crafted to promote tolerance for the people labelled as immoral by Douglas and his conservative peers – a “propaganda novel”, as Hall herself called it (Roche 2019, 81). The book retells the life story of a British aristocrat named Stephen Gordon, who feels ostracised from society because she does not feel comfortable with social expectations for women: she dresses in masculine fashions, engages in pastimes that were popular among men in this period, and she feels passionate love towards other women. By conveying Stephen’s struggles, Hall wanted to introduce the readers to the misfortunes of sexually non-conforming people, to

invoke sympathy and argue that “sexual inversion” – as the contemporary medical science called it – should be accepted in society. She cries out to her readers:

How long would God sit still and endure this insult offered to His creation? How long tolerate the preposterous statement that inversion was not a part of nature? For since it existed what else could it be? All things that existed were a part of nature! (Hall 2014, 368)

The novel is emotionally heavy-handed, deeply religious, and conveys anguish and desperation. Despite Stephen finding a community and love with a woman called Mary, the book ends on an unhappy note, with Stephen sacrificing their relationship so that Mary could live a more socially acceptable life by marrying a man. In the final paragraphs, Stephen has a vision of a horde of ghostly inverts pleading for acceptance and compassion:

‘God,’ she gasped, ‘we believe; we have told You we believe... We have not denied You; then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, O God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!’ (Hall 2014, 399)

The earnestness of *The Well* and the mode in which it was delivered, using a virtuous main character and a traditional romantic bildungsroman style, the format of which was easily digestible and understandable to the general reader, was precisely what made the novel so dangerous in the eyes of the prosecution. Hannah Roche (2019, 16, 81–82) argues that Hall uses the “domain of the heterosexual and familiar” for the queer content of the novel in a tactically successful ploy to advocate her message. Indeed, the 1929 defence of the book in American courts succeeded precisely because it emphasised the role the novel’s oversentimental Victorian narrative played in moderating its disagreeable aspects (Taylor 2001, 275). The

presiding magistrate in the UK case recognised that “this book has some literary merit”, which makes the “poison” of the novel all the more “palatable” and “insidious” (Biron 2002, 41). Even James Douglas (1928, 10) admits that the “veil of sentiment [flung] over their depravity”, the book’s “cleverness” and “seductive” nature increase its “moral danger”. Interestingly, during the court proceedings, it was not the author, the publishers or any of the forty literary professionals willing to come to the witness stand that dictated the meaning and value of *The Well of Loneliness* as a work of literature. Their statements were deemed inadmissible before they could be voiced, and the authority of interpretation was wholly in the hands of the court officials, who relied on the retelling of the text, the Home Secretary, and other conservative opinion leaders – people who we might call, in this context, amateur readers of literature.

It is ironic how the novel found opponents on both sides of the political spectrum: conservatives, while appreciating its literary qualities, found its sexual politics unacceptable, and more liberal literary figures, while vehemently defending Hall’s right to publish her book, were put off by the conservatism of the text itself. Obviously, the Victorian sentimental style with its elevated emotional intensity was not exactly what the modernist literary critics considered good quality “highbrow” literature at the time (on ‘the battle of the brows’ see, e.g., Brown and Grover 2012). Virginia Woolf famously described it as follows:

At this moment our thoughts centre upon Sapphism – we have to uphold the morality of the Well of all that’s stagnant and lukewarm and neither one thing or the other; *The Well of Loneliness*. (Woolf 1978, 555)

She is referring to how the novel aspires to be a work of the highest artistic quality but really is a middling novel for the “middlebrow”

masses. It is, in her words, a “meritorious dull book” (Woolf 1980, 193) – laudable for its depiction of a topical issue, worthy to be defended on principle, but, nevertheless, a dreary and uninteresting read. Leonard Woolf (1928, 593) had expressed a similar sentiment in his published review in *The Nation & Athenaeum*, that Hall demands to be judged by high standards and, according to those, the novel is a failure: it is “formless” and “chaotic”. He describes how

It is emotionally that the book loses way, and a sign of this is Miss Hall’s use of language. (...) [A]s the book goes on, life and emotion die out of the language, and Miss Hall drops into journalese or the tell-tale novelist’s clichés, when she wants to heighten the emotion. (Woolf 1928, 593)

The criticism here is not that the novel has a heightened emotional tone, but that the way that Hall conveys this emotion is formulaic. This response is in line with the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernist literary criticism’s focus on intellectually engaged reading, which did consider affective responses in cultivating aesthetic judgements but emphasised the active and rational role that a reader should have in the process, instead of remaining a passive recipient of formulaic ideas (see, e.g., Pease 2000, 166–72). While the overall feedback to the novel at the time, other than the conservative, homophobic moral outrage, often complimented the work’s earnestness and beauty, it is this kind of criticism of the book’s style that has persisted and is quoted to this day.

Since the original publication and reception of *The Well of Loneliness*, the book has gone through a varied and often controversial history. Because of its reputation as an important part of a queer literature canon, its primary readership has developed into one looking for identification. The novel has been variously described by many lesbian readers as a foundational text, becoming a central

object for critical discourses concerning lesbian culture and identity formation, regardless of whether it is presented as a subject of criticism or praise. As Doan and Prosser note (2002, 16), it is considered to be one of the most famous representations of lesbianism in literature, while at the same time being also seen as an “infamous misrepresentation” that solidified homophobic and misogynistic ideas about lesbianism in the popular consciousness. With the rising lesbian feminist movements in the 1970s, the book was heavily criticised for its depiction of lesbianism as a morbid case of female masculinity, but also for its failure to imagine sustainable relationships between women (e.g., Rule 1975; Faderman and Williams 1977) – it was seen as “a narrative of damnation” (Stimpson 1981, 364). Subsequent analyses have taken more complex standpoints regarding how to position the text in its contemporary historical context (e.g., Newton 1984; Whitlock 1987), have recognised its innovation in developing a literary language of lesbian eroticism (e.g., Gilbert and Gubar 1989) and have introduced crucial butch and transgender readings of the novel (e.g., Halberstam 1998; Prosser 1998). Nevertheless, the discomfort created by the author’s explicit anti-Black racism, privilege blindness and her utilisation of 19<sup>th</sup>-century pathologising and heteronormative medical sexology has remained a backdrop for most critical readings.

The aesthetics of *The Well of Loneliness* have not been examined as extensively as its conceptualisations of gender and sexuality, but the established contrast with modernism has highlighted chiefly the novel’s artistic qualities as lacking (e.g., Scanlon 1996). Terry Castle’s (2002, 394–95) exclamations in the afterword of a critical collection on the book reflect a widespread conflicted reading of the text’s form, calling it “monstrously

overwrought” with its “enunciatory awfulness” where “specimens of gruesomeness abound”:

How bad, bad, bad is Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*? Like many bookish lesbians I seem to have spent much of my adult life making jokes about it, as if to fend it off once and for all. After all, it *is* quite possibly the worst novel ever written, crammed full with so many ghastly passages one is hard-pressed to choose one's favourite hideousness among them. (Castle 2002, 394–95)

The stylistic aspects only seem to emphasise the novel's handling of non-normative sex-gender subjects as “miserable, unwanted people, who have no right to love, no right to compassion because they're maimed, hideously maimed and ugly” (Hall 2014, 186). Looking at the general attitudes towards the book today, the critique raised in the 1970s of the negative portrayal of lesbian relationships still finds some resonance in the broader cultural climate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where people believe that queer fiction should emphasise positive representation instead of constantly reproducing stories that end in tragedy.

### **3. Lay readers' attitudes**

Lay readers' book reviewing, as established, operates on principles different from professional literary criticism and academic research. The success of a novel as a work of art, in this context, is grounded in a subjective attunement to the text, not necessarily the intellectual appreciation of its language-use or narrative structure. Looking at online book reviews, thus, often gives us a more immediate, intimate and deliberately *self*-reflective account of a reader's engagement with literature. People's opinions of *The Well of Loneliness* naturally vary from laudatory praise to utterly damning indictments. However, examining a larger scope of reader-response

allows researchers to detect broader trends in a book’s reception. By the numerical ratings alone, *The Well of Loneliness* has an average rating of 3.76 stars on a 5-star scale by over 19 thousand Goodreads users (at the time of writing, September 2025), indicating that the overall response to the novel is mostly more positive than negative. To gain more insight into what opinions lie behind these assessments, I tagged various attitudinal markers that readers used when examining the dataset of 1629 Goodreads reviews. In summarising the findings, I utilised a categorisation system inspired by Martin and White’s (2005) framework for mapping attitudes, modifying the semantic groupings according to this dataset’s particularities. For example, a useful distinction in the book review genre is between the affect that readers *ascribe* to the work that they are reviewing and the affect that they feel like the work *evoked* in them while reading. The presentation of the examples in **Table 1** demonstrates one possible way to summarise the wide range of attitudes expressed towards a book in a corpus of reader-response.

**Table 1: Examples of how readers’ attitudes towards *The Well of Loneliness* are described in the Goodreads reviews. The number of coded segments with these descriptors is shown in the brackets.**

Category	Examples
<b>Affect</b>	
<b>ascribed affect</b>	<p>“sad*” (138), “tragedy/-ic*” (96), “powerful” (38), “miserable/misery” (28), “melodrama*” (23), “drama*” (21), “pain*” (22), “emotional” (18), “bleak” (15), “melanchol*” (12), “angsty” (9), “sentimental” (9), “intense”(7), “cheesy” (5), “drippy/-ing” (5), “hopeless*” (5), “passionate” (5), “dreary” (4), “hopeful” (4), “pitiful” (4), “brutal” (3)</p>

<b>evoked affect</b>		<i>"depress**" (113), "heartbreak*/-wrenching" (107), "cry" (43), "moved/moving" (42), "pain**" (22), "frustrat**" (37), "sad**" (33), "touch**" (26), "annoy**" (22), "devastat**" (19), "tear" (16) "hurt" (14), "upset**" (14), "tiring/tire**" (13), "sympath**" (11), "empath**" (9), "anger/angry" (8), "comfort**" (8), "sob" (7), "uncomfortable" (7), "disturb**" (6), "insufferable" (6), "mad" (6), "irritat**" (5), "exhaust**" (4), "unbearable" (3), "emotional" (2), "hopeful" (2)</i>
<b>Judgement</b>		
<b>novelty</b>		<i>"first" (61), "(still) relevant" (34), "dated" (29), "groundbreaking" (29), "outdated**" (26), "modern**" (22), "revolution**" (17), "pioneer**" (16), "timeless**" (16), "ahead of its time" (14), "old-fashioned" (11), "landmark" (9), "old**" (9), "refreshing" (7), "breakthrough" (3), "milestone" (3), "trailblazing" (2)</i>
<b>normality</b>		<i>"universal**" (14), "strange" (10), "unique" (10), "weird" (9), "cliché**" (8), "bizarre" (4), "rare**" (3), "odd" (3), "unusual" (3)</i>
<b>tenacity</b>		<i>"brave**" (40), "courage**" (34), "bold**" (9), "daring" (6)</i>
<b>authenticity</b>		<i>"real**" (51), "honest**" (33), "auto-/biograph**" (30), "accurat**" (14), "raw" (14), "explicit**" (10), "frank**" (8), "straightforward**" (6), "open**" (5), "sincere" (5), "forthright**" (3)</i>
<b>propriety</b>		<i>"racist/-m" (111), "classist/-m" (18), "misogyn**" (17), "privileged" (16), "homophob**" (15), "problematic" (15), "sexist/-m" (12), "feminist/-m" (7), "flawed" (7), "heteronormative" (6), "transphob**" (3)</i>
<b>Appreciation</b>		
<b>reaction</b>	<b>engagement</b>	<i>"interest**" (185), "boring/bor**" (67), "fascinat**" (61), "relate/relat**" (59), "dull**" (28), "compel**" (23), "tedious**" (20), "engag**" (18), "resonat**" (14), "connect**" (12), "grip**" (9), "charm**" (8), "thought-provoking" (8), "evocative" (4), "haunt**" (5), "immers**" (5), "entertaining" (4) "en-/thrall**" (4), "mesmerising" (3)</i>
	<b>partiality</b>	<i>"love" (129), "enjoy**" (115), "like" (82), "great" (65), "glad" (60), "dislik*/not like" (33), "favourite" (29), "hate" (29), "disappoint**" (23), "good" (25), "the best" (23), "grateful" (19), "nice" (10), "bad" (9), "thankful**" (7), "shit/crappy" (6), "terrible" (6), "dissatisf**" (4), "horrible" (4), "the worst" (4)</i>

<b>composition</b>	<b>style</b>	"repeat*/repetiti*" (28), "poetic" (22), "dense" (18), "over-written/wrought-blown" (15), "meander*" (13), "clunky" (10), "flat" (10), "heavy-handed" (9), "(overly) descriptive" (8), "flowery" (6), "purple" (6), "dry" (5), "rambling" (5), "stilted" (5), "wordy" (5), "clumsy" (4), "lyrical" (4), "stiff" (4), "awkward" (3), "monotonous" (2)
	<b>length</b>	"slow*" (71), "drag*" (40), "too/over(ly) long" (32), "slog*" (14), "lengthy" (12)
	<b>complexity</b>	"complex" (17), "difficult*" (16), "easy" (14), "confus*" (13), "hard" (13), "readable" (9), "accessible" (8), "complicated" (3)
<b>value</b>	<b>general quality</b>	"importan*" (133), "well-written" (49), "amaze/-ing*" (39), "wonderful*" (39), "excellent*" (36), "significan*" (30), "incredible" (27), "brilliant*" (26), "fantastic*" (15), "impact" (11), "masterpiece" (11), "value/-able" (9), "impressive" (7), "outstanding" (7), "awesome" (5), "worthwhile"(5), "extraordinary" (4)
	<b>aesthetic quality</b>	"beauty/-ful*" (185), "lovely" (21), "poignant*" (20), "vivid" (17), "gorgeous*" (13), "insightful" (13), "profound*" (11), "sweet" (8), "stunning" (5)

According to various readers on Goodreads, Hall's novel has not lost its relevance even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On the one hand, when we look at the category of composition, many people still describe it as, for example, "*repetitive*", "*overwritten*", "*clunky*", "*clichéd*", "*purple*"; the novel is seen as an "*overly long*", "*dense*" and "*slow*" book that "*drags*". This, consecutively, leads to their reactions of boredom and disappointment. If the book is criticised, it is usually done so for (apart from its ethical issues with racism, classism and other "*outdated ideologies*") its perceived deficiencies in form. To some reviewers, however, the novel is also very "*accessible*" and it "*is written in such an easy, readable style*" that "*encapsulates a lifetime's worth of experience in crisp, clear language*", when considering the complexity of the composition. They perceive it to be "*honest*" and "*accurate*" in terms of authenticity, often influenced by their interpretation of the novel as an autobiographical account of Radclyffe Hall's own life experience,

which, in turn, makes them appreciate it as a "*brave and poignant piece of writing*". Many readers recognise that the book fulfils its purpose as a plea for equality even now. As one user writes: "*What makes this book so good is not necessarily the story, though the story is well written and engaging, but the emotions it provokes. This is what I think allows it to age so well.*" The reader's affective resonance with the text is what makes it memorable, allowing them to experience intense reactions that, while not always positive, certainly make the reading unforgettable.

The way people identify with the text and the characters plays an important role in the way this resonance is developed during reading. Using Rita Felski's (2020) categorisation, four strands of literary identification can be differentiated: alignment, allegiance, recognition and empathy. When people express their alignment with the narrative and its characters, their accounts of their engagement with the story are highlighted when they, for example, describe being "*compelled*" by the main character, seeing things through her eyes and feeling "*connected*" to the story, or, conversely, describing it as "*myopic*" or "*random*". The main influence in this aspect is the work's length, structure and descriptive style, especially when it concerns the introduction of new characters and the readers' attunement to their perspectives. People's value-based allegiance to the story's moral messaging is often determined by their preexisting beliefs and moral judgment – almost none of the readers who choose to review *The Well of Loneliness* express overt homophobia, though some people criticise, for example, the "*emotional arm-twisting*" of the book, which seems over the top and makes the conflict seem more artificial. Many reviewers, however, convey their support of the main character, frequently expressing their personal connection through domestic imaginaries, "what if" scenarios or direct addresses to the characters

or situations, instead of intellectual argumentations. Quite predictably, many readers relate to the book's message through their own (queer) identities, but several people also use this as a basis to critique the novel's representation of marginalised people, its misogyny, chauvinism, snobbishness and racism. Even when they are in allegiance with the book's message about sexual minorities, they are repelled by its numerous problematic attributes that undermine positive beliefs about social justice. Though the lack of moral allegiance affects many readers' engagement with the story, a large part of the readership has, nevertheless, found recognition in the novel – they see it as "*relatable*" and "*feel seen and understood*". Many of these descriptions of identification give the impression of intense affective responses and are thus some of the most memorable aspects of these reviews. The formation of these types of connections speaks to how literature solidifies and makes comprehensible specific modes of being and feeling – words on a page can become credible human beings through the processes of recognition, aided by imagination and self-reflection.

Throughout these different strands of identification, the question of empathy has always remained central in the reception of *The Well of Loneliness*. However, even if people rationally concur with the message of the story and believe its main characters should be pitied, they are not necessarily fully resonating with the story and experiencing the intended compassionate affective reactions. Not all readers are receptive to the text's affective manipulations: they may be sympathetic (i.e., *feel for* someone), but not necessarily experience an empathetic response (i.e., *feel with* someone). One reader, for example, describes the main character as "*a morose, depressed ... and depressing ... character whom it is difficult to like because of her dreary unhappiness but easy to pity because of why she's unhappy*".

Representations of sympathy are, admittedly, not as intriguing as representations of empathy, particularly in the genre of online reviews where examples of the latter are notably prevalent.

In analysing the categories of ascribed and invoked affect (see **Table 1**), we can see how the boundaries between them are very much blurred. On the one hand, some of the ascribed affects can create adverse reactions. For example, the perceived emotional tone of *The Well of Loneliness* as over the top, "*melodramatic*", "*cheesy*", "*drippy*" or "*dreary*" can evoke frustration or irritation, tiredness or even anger in the reader. On the other hand, an absorbed reading can create a particular resonance with the affective developments in the book to the point that the reader experiences them at the same time. In this case, when the book is seen as a "*tragic*", "*painful*" and "*sad*" novel, then this, in turn, creates sadness, depression, upset and pain in the reader. Many of the descriptions of evoked affect are very intense: e.g., a painful heartbreak that can even result in crying, a consequence of being moved by the story. Readers compliment the novel on its ability to convey and inspire "*great emotion*" in them (e.g., "*I was so consumed in this book and she writes it with so much description, that I felt like I was there and was feeling the emotions of Stephen*"). Even when these emotions are ostensibly negative, the readers express their enjoyment of this aspect of literature that can make them feel intense feelings and see it as a mark of skilful writing. They call it "*wonderfully, beautifully depressing*" or exclaim that "*it hurt so good*" – the painful emotions are welcomed and seen as aesthetically pleasing. The reviewers' aesthetic appreciation and valuation of the novel are closely connected to their empathetic affective responses. This is characteristic specifically of lay readers whom I studied, who use many unique devices to convey their empathetic reactions.

#### 4. Affected and affective reviews

Empathetic reactions to *The Well of Loneliness* expressed in the online reviews are often tied to the affective weight of the vocabulary used. Some reviews explicitly verbalise the emotions that readers felt when reading the book, utilising commonly used emotion-related vocabulary. Many reviewers, however, have used much more figurative language to describe the various affective journeys the literary text has taken them on. For example, when a reviewer writes that “*nobody speak to me for several business days i’m so upset*”, they are utilising an amusing formulaic phrase that activates the reader’s imagination; this, in turn, expands on our understanding of the “*upset*” that the reviewer is feeling, amplifying its intensity. Similarly, saying that “*If anyone needs me, I’ll be crying in my room and eating ice cream all day*” adds a humorous dimension to the grief that the novel has created, depicting an emotion through a culturally recognisable trope that allows us to visualise its impact. When a reviewer comments that the book “*made me so sad that i went for a walk in the rain to cry and get me knees wet on ferns and what have you*”, they are not just telling their readers that the book induced a feeling of sadness in them but the specific imagery evoked with the imaginative scenario invites others to experience this emotional state, as if it were an especially melodramatic cinema reel that expresses a character’s melancholia. It also reflects the melodramatic style of the novel itself, both showing the effect it had on them while also ironically joking about it. It is evident how the writing of online reviews takes on a particularly performative function, especially when utilising humour for engagement. The irony is highlighted by the citational references to cultural tropes. Describing highly subjective responses can thus become quite a creative endeavour since the reviewers not only want

to convey their own emotional reactions, but they also want to create some second-hand affective associations in their audience that, in turn, can generate social capital through promoting engagement. The review then simultaneously expresses the reader's affected reading of the novel as well as being an affectively loaded text of its own.

In expressing this affective load, specific stylistic phrasings stand out – physicality, in particular. Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo (2019, 254) note that the use of body metaphors is characteristic to the “Goodreads vernacular”, which illustrates how the development of social connections on the site is influenced by descriptions of embodied reactions. On numerous occasions, the reviewers' reactions to *The Well of Loneliness* are conveyed through expressions that refer to violence, physical ailments, illnesses, aggression or destruction. According to the reviews, the book can variously “cut”, “punch”, “hit”, “slap”, “smack”, “strike”, “shatter”, “rip” and “tear” at you, your heart, your soul and even your face and gut in various ways (e.g., “tore my heart to pieces, then sewed them back together, then shattered it completely; stung in many awfully familiar ways”). It can “destroy” you, “fuck [you] up”, “mess [you] up”, “ruin [your] life”, “[blow you] away”, and have you “in absolute shambles”. The text can make you “physically ill” and “ache”, make your “blood boil”, cause “emotional damage”, have you “REELING”, “rolling around on the floor and screaming”, or give you a “literary hangover”. It can even “literally” kill you. Some readers have even felt so affected by the novel that they express the desire to throw the book either against the wall or out of the window in anger or frustration at the state of things (e.g., “It really is the kind of book that the more you read, the more miserable you get, the more you think ‘FUCK GENDER’ and want to heave the whole fucking thing at the wall just for something to smash”). One reader admits that their empathetic

resonance with the plight of the characters in the novel has inspired the desire for a passionate revolt against the system: *"at the end of this book after I went looking for some rocks, I was overcome with a sense of empowerment; screw the establishment, screw what people think and above all screw being the martyr!"* None of these descriptions are meant to be interpreted literally. The aim of these often very violent and physical imageries, however, is to figuratively convey the immense intensity of the complex affective responses to the novel that cannot be expressed the same way with simple emotion vocabulary. At the same time, this striking language of aggression grabs the readers' attention. It is, thus, inevitably part of the performative nature of the review writing on an online platform because it makes the reviews resonate especially forcefully.

It is clear then that *The Well of Loneliness* provokes powerful responses in people that are often related to intense negative feelings of sadness. Several readers have thus indicated what kind of effect this affective state might have on one's psychological well-being. According to the reviews, the book can *"[give you] depression"*, make you *"want to die"*, *"hate [yourself]"* or not *"glad to be alive"*. One reader reflects that *"if i read this in a slightly worse place in my life i genuinely would've ended my shit i can't even lie"*, and one notes that you should not be reading this book when reducing your antidepressant dosage as it might cause your mood to worsen and even make way for suicidal thoughts. This adverse effect on the reader's self-perception or well-being is sometimes related to their views of the book's queer representation, making people note, for example, that *"we shouldn't take the book word by word and fall into a pit of despair"*. Other times, however, it is a part of the aesthetically appreciated feeling of hurt that accompanies a relatable tragedy. One reviewer writes: *"I found this gut wrenching, self-pitying, and entirely too*

*emotionally accurate. I could not read this again as it brought me to an all together dark and familiar place; but, the writing was phenomenal".* Despite this type of appreciation, people generally suggest reading the book when you are in a good mood, so as not to internalise the negative affectivity.

While these recommendations might be meant as genuine warnings to people with vulnerable mental states, the overall tone of some of these remarks also implies that they are meant half in jest, especially if you look at the exaggerated definitiveness of adverbs like "*genuinely*" and "*literally*", as well as the interesting combinations of compliments and morbidity (e.g., "*good book it made me want to die*"). This can be seen in, for example, five-star reviews that simply state "*this is so fucking sick and twisted*", "*This book can go to Hell*", or as one reader notes, emphasising the irony of the positive assessment stemming from an affectively negative state, "*Maybe this book should be banned because I felt SAD and I WEPT and I didn't LIKE THAT! Five stars.*" In these ironic ways, the readers tend to convey serious ideas that reflect their opinions and feelings when reading the text, as well as their recommendations to other potential readers who might struggle with handling their empathetic responses. At the same time, the irony of these remarks allows them to keep a certain distance and not put themselves in an entirely vulnerable position where they discuss deeply personal issues. It can also imply that the readers are not entirely convinced by the sentimentality of the novel, in which case, the irony is one way to make fun of the embellished and amplified emotional tone. The dry exaggeration and dark humour are a means through which to performatively articulate what otherwise might remain an unattractive combination of "it was very sad".

## 5. A queer affective archive

While readers on Goodreads do criticise *The Well of Loneliness's* composition, its clunky style that veers into overwritten melodrama and that can create strong aversion in the reader, for many reviewers, it is precisely the novel's blatant and easy-to-understand affective manipulations that make the sorrows of the characters feel immediate even in the 21st century. People can find themselves unsettled by historical depictions of queer sexualities – because of their conceptual otherness or for imagining non-normative sexual expression as ultimately unsustainable – and wish to counter them with modernised narratives of liberation and affirmation. Yet, many readers still value engaging with these intense aspects of negative queer feeling because they are open to an emotionally loaded reading experience. They invite the catharsis of tragedy that allows them to become immersed in what they see as a social reality for many people or allows them to process an already familiar sense of social rejection. Although positioning the novel within the traumatic queer *past* on the imagined timeline of linear progress, reviewers recognise its continued topicality, how it is “*still relevant*” in today's culture. This recognition of an enduring social struggle of marginalised people, but mainly the familiar affect of dejection that accompanies this on an individual, human level, makes the fictionalised struggle seem universally relatable.

Heather Love (2007) has discussed at length how the affective power of negative queer representation still compels queer readers in ways that more positive stories do not. This “backwardness” with its focus on the bleak conflicts accompanying the development of modern sexual identities forms an important body of affective remembrance that reflects the lived experience of many queer people and has become an important motif in queer culture. Love (2007, 4)

describes it as an essential “archive of feeling”, applying Ann Cvetkovich’s (2003, 7) concept to describe works such as *The Well of Loneliness* that act as “repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception”. The emotional resonances in the Goodreads reviews speak to the tangled nature of past and present as well as public and private, blurring the distinctions. Issues of non-normative sexualities addressed openly in the past still resonate both intimately and socially in the present, not only because of perceived affective universalities but also because of people’s desire to see themselves as a part of a history, to build a queer genealogy and kinship, to “feel historical” (see Nealon 2001, 8). Thus, a public history is processed on the level of personal feelings. At the same time, as Wallace (2016, 71) argues, contemporary reading practices can make queer readers “feel public, even in private”. The public displays of affected and affective readings of *The Well of Loneliness* on Goodreads are a next step in socialising the already paradoxically shared yet private nature of reading.

The unique conditions that have cultivated the online book review genre have aided in the development of a curious new language for expressing intimate emotional reactions for a broader audience. The reviews are not just written for personal reflection but for other readers, making the reviewer employ tools that attract attention and convey an affective load of their own. The figurative language surrounding violence and strong physical reactions especially stands out in creating this impact. One cannot help but consider this theatrical mode of expression as a part of a distinctly queer reader-response. The use of shock and self-aware irony, after all, as important components of poking fun at both the dramatics of the novel as well as the reader’s own reactions to it, can be compared

to a camp performativity, the frequently citational language being a characteristic of camp sensibility (see Harvey 2002). Invoking the notion of campness also allows us to position these readings in the context of “the battle of the brows”, where the emotionally heavy-handed sentimental novel is seen as a “lower”, less-intellectual form of art that gratifies the (mass-culture) reader through a sensation-oriented experience (on the relationship between camp and the ‘middlebrow’ see Humble 2012). Though Hall’s novel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century certainly has more cultural prestige as a historically significant queer literary classic, the unreasoned affective engagement with literature is still perceived to be an inferior form of aesthetic appraisal, irrespective of whether one considers *The Well of Loneliness* heteronormative or queer, conservative or modern(ist). In this case, the responses that aloofly claim “*Well rip my freaking heart out I guess*” or exaggerate an emotional response in a camp manner give an indication of the readers’ cognisance of how this type of engagement is positioned, using this attitude to create distance between the expressed empathetic reaction and their truly intimate feelings. This language of exaggeration is its own unique form of queer parody.

I have demonstrated how readers of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* on Goodreads have expressed their emotional engagement with the novel in a mode I believe to be unique to lay reading. These particular examples are only one small part of a diverse body of reader-response, notable in the way they represent an intriguing openness to the tragedy of the story, which has been criticised as melodramatic and over-written. This oft-critiqued sentimentality is instead seen as a welcomed aesthetic experience that allows the reader to empathise with the social message of the novel, to feel the pain and sadness of the main character’s struggles

and relate to the plight of marginalised people in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as it is universalised through fiction. For these readers, looking back in this way is not just a matter of reconciling past grievances, but it is a way of relating and reflecting their own emotions through the medium of fiction, a way of being affected in a powerful way. Additionally, the genre of online book reviews and recommendations has cultivated a platform for a collective engagement with literature that produces its own language of performativity. To convey the intensity of the embodied affect that the reader's find themselves immersed in, they use creative, figurative expressions that echo the intensity of the original text. If a reader embraces reading a tragedy, they will revel in having their heart ripped out and crushed as an essential part of the journey and they will let you know about it in their review in a way that invites you to experience it yourself.

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