



QUEERING TIME AND IDENTITY: GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND DESIRE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO* AND RADCLYFFE HALL'S *THE WELL OF LONELINESS*

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Abstract

This essay provides a thorough comparison of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), exploring how each work challenges traditional ideas of gender, time, and sexuality through its unique narrative techniques. Hall creates a tragic realist depiction of lesbian identity limited by heteronormative temporality, whereas Woolf uses a fantastical, nonlinear approach to celebrate gender fluidity and temporal elasticity. This study shows how these works express resistance to normative historical and biological narratives, offering alternative frameworks for comprehending identity and desire, through close textual analysis and engagement with theories of gender performativity (Butler) and queer temporal theory (Halberstam, Freeman). The study contends that both novels' radical reimagining of queer existence, in spite of their stylistic differences, fundamentally challenges early 20th-century sexual and temporal norms.

Keywords: Queer temporality, gender fluidity, lesbian identity, modernist literature, heteronormativity, gender performativity, nonlinear narrative, queer desire, sexual inversion, feminist literature

Introduction

A turning point in literary investigations of gender and sexuality was reached in 1928 with the release of *Orlando* and *The Well of Loneliness*. These novels share a deep involvement with queerness as a disruption of conventional time and identity structures, despite their stark differences in tone and methodology. While Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* presents a somber, realistic portrayal of a lesbian protagonist whose identity is glorified by early 20th-century society, Woolf's *Orlando*, a mock-biography encompassing three centuries, humorously breaks down fixed classifications of gender through its protagonist's abrupt identity transformation from man to woman.

In order to disrupt the linear, teleological progression of history, biography, and identity formation that forms the basis of heteronormative discourse, this paper looks at how both texts "queer" time. Drawing from Jack Halberstam's concept of "queer time" and Elizabeth Freeman's concept of "temporal drag," this analysis shows how Woolf and Hall propose fluid, nonlinear models of existence that defy assimilation into prevailing historical and social narratives, challenging strict binary distinctions of gender and sexuality. This comparison is important because it sheds light on two different but complementary ways that queer temporality is portrayed in modernist literature: one that is expansive and joyous, while the other is restrained but rebellious.

Queering Temporality in *Orlando*

One of modernist literature's most radical experiments with queer temporality is Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando*. Woolf creates a story that fundamentally questions heteronormative ideas of time, gender, and identity through its eponymous protagonist, who lives for three centuries and undergoes a sex change halfway through the story. By rejecting traditional biographical or historical sequencing, the novel's treatment of temporality is especially subversive, resulting in what Elizabeth Freeman might refer to as "temporal drag"—a queer resistance to normative time (Freeman, 2010).

"He - for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it" is the novel's opening, a famously ambiguous statement (Woolf, 1928, p. 13). Woolf's examination of identity as fluid rather than fixed is made possible by this opening, which instantly establishes gender as performative and contingent on history. Orlando's gender transition takes place with amazing ease as the story goes on: "Orlando had become a woman - there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (Woolf, 1928, p. 102). This passage, which foreshadowed Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity by several decades, is essential to comprehending Woolf's radical claim that identity exists independently of biological sex (Butler, 1990).

Woolf is equally revolutionary in the way she manipulates narrative time. Orlando is only thirty-six years old, but the novel takes place between the Elizabethan period and 1928. "Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect upon the mind of man" (Woolf, 1928, p. 67) is one of Woolf's uses of this temporal elasticity to critique the artificial constraints of linear chronology. Here, Woolf makes the argument that human consciousness defies the strict frameworks imposed by normative historiography by functioning in accordance with its own temporal logic. The novel's queer temporality is further reinforced by the way it handles desire. Orlando's relationships with Shelmerdine, Sasha, and the Archduchess/Archduke go beyond typical romantic paths. Orlando's statement, "I'm so tired of this specific self." They express a clearly queer approach to identity formation that values fluidity and reinvention in "I want another" (Woolf, 1928, p. 138). As a woman writer in 1928 with a complex marital status, Orlando represents what Jack Halberstam might refer to as "queer time"—an alternative to reproductive temporality (Halberstam, 2005).

The Well of Loneliness and the Tragic Temporality of Lesbian Identity

Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) paints a devastating picture of queer identity limited by heteronormative temporality, in sharp contrast to Woolf's joyous fluidity. Hall's novel follows what Halberstam refers to as "the time of inheritance"—a heteronormative temporality centered on marriage, childbearing, and generational continuity—while Orlando indulges in temporal and gender play (Halberstam, 2005). The life path of the main character, Stephen Gordon, shows how this temporal regime is violently imposed on queer subjects.

Stephen's gender nonconformity identifies her as being out of step with the times since she was a young child. The central tragedy of the novel is encapsulated in her father's conflicted acknowledgement of her difference: "You're neither unnatural, nor abominable, nor mad; you're as much a part of what people call nature as anyone else; only you're unexplained as yet - you've not got your niche in creation" (Hall, 1928, p. 362). Although Stephen's identity is legitimate, early 20th-century society is unable to accept it within its social and temporal framework. What Elizabeth Freeman refers to as "temporal drag"—the way queer subjects are drawn back into oppressive historical narratives—is best illustrated by this instance (Freeman, 2010).

The limitations of heteronormative time are especially evident in the novel's approach to Stephen's romantic relationships. Her connection with Mary Llewellyn is eventually laid down for temporal conformity, while her love for Angela Crossby is betrayed when Angela decides on a traditional marriage. The harsh application of reproductive temporality is made clear by Stephen's anguished awareness that "She must go onward, she must go onward - this was her punishment for having dared to love" (Hall, 1928, p. 437). The novel's famous final plea - "God," she gasped, "we believe; we have told You we believe... We have not denied You, then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!" (Hall, 1928, p. 446) - serves as a devastating illustration of the violence inflicted on queer subjects over time.

This tragic temporality is further supported by Hall's narrative structure. Stephen's heteronormative life course is reflected in *The Well of Loneliness*'s traditional linear progression, which contrasts with Woolf's whimsical chronology. The novel's main conflict between queer desire and normative time is highlighted by this formal decision.

Comparative Analysis

The *Well of Loneliness* and *Orlando* together show the range of queer possibility in early 20th-century literature. While Hall's realism records the harsh repercussions of existing outside of heteronormative temporality, Woolf's fantastical approach permits a radical reimagining of time and identity. These variations are most noticeable in how they address a few major themes:

Gender Performativity vs. Sexual Inversion:

Woolf portrays gender as performative and malleable, saying that "Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness" (Woolf, 1928, p. 118). The medicalized framework of inversion is used by Hall, who draws inspiration from modern sexology, to construct Stephen's identity: "And that night Stephen dreamed that she was quite young and whole... and all around her were stretched the sleeping bodies of men and women" (Hall, 1928, at 312).

Temporal Structure

"The true length of a person's life is always a matter of dispute" (Woolf, 1928, p. 213) is one of the ways that the nonlinear narrative of Woolf celebrates temporal fluidity. The limitations imposed by normative time are reinforced by Hall's linear progression: "The years stretched ahead in an unending procession" (Hall, 1928, p. 389).

Resolution

"She was a woman - yes, but a woman with a difference" (Woolf, 1928, p. 204): Orlando succeeds in achieving integration. "She was nothing but a freak abandoned on a kind of no-man's-land" (Hall, 1928, p. 441) describes Stephen's continued exile.

Conclusion

Two different but equally important approaches to queer temporality representation in modernist literature are represented by these novels. Woolf's *Orlando* offers a vision of queer existence that defies normative constraints by allowing for gender and temporal fluidity through its imaginative elements and lighthearted narrative structure. Restricted by its realist format and current medical discourses, Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* chronicles the harsh application of heteronormative time to queer individuals.

However, the relationship between time and identity is a significant theme in both books. While Hall illustrates how normative time excludes and disciplines queer subjects, Woolf shows how queerness can disrupt and reshape temporality itself. When taken as a whole, they demonstrate the variety of techniques modernist authors used to express non-normative experiences of gender, time, and desire.

Because they provide frameworks for comprehending how narrative form can either challenge or reinforce dominant temporal regimes, these texts continue to be crucial for modern queer theory. They serve as a reminder that queer experience and representation continue to be heavily influenced by the struggle over time—who gets to live in it, how it's measured, and what stories it can contain.

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