Perfect Love in a Better World

Same-Sex Attraction between Girls

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ABSTRACT

Victorian notions of the passionless female allowed for a wide latitude of socially acceptable relationships between girls in the nineteenth century that included crushes, romantic friendships, and, for women, Boston marriages. However, textual depictions of female sexuality were rapidly shifting in the early twentieth century. As sexologists’ writings moved toward a medical model focused on the prevention and treatment of homosexuality, the literature created and consumed by parents and school officials reflected growing anxiety about the potential sexual undertones of female friendships. The story of two women coming of age during this cultural shift humanizes the impact of shifting cultural norms on the lives of individuals and reveals the tragic consequences for those who resisted efforts to conform to heteronormative expectations regarding their future.

KEYWORDS

Boston marriage, crush, homosexuality, lesbian, romantic friendship, sexual identity

Margaret (Peggy) Spalding, the 17-year-old daughter of a Boston merchant, was one of the most popular girls¹ at Newton High School. As a cheer leader, class treasurer, and a member of the photograph and reception committee she was well-known for her enthusiastic personality and celebrated for her athletic abilities in dancing, basketball, and hockey. Spalding typically spent her summer vacations at Camp Quanset, a camp for girls on Cape Cod. The camp offered opportunities to enjoy the outdoors through swimming, canoeing, sailing, tennis, horseback riding, volleyball, and golf. Although Spalding had attended camp for several years, the summer of 1916 was different; she fell in love with Ethel Stanton.

Stanton was three years older than Spalding and much more reserved. Her family and friends described her as a generous, happy, and beautiful girl. She grew up in Los Angeles, later moving east to attend school. Perhaps inspired by a restless spirit, she had traveled the country extensively, visiting...
friends and studying at various universities. Stanton’s travels eventually led her to Camp Quanset where she met Spalding. By the end of summer, the two girls had clearly developed a crush on each other.

Spalding and Stanton’s crush, however, was developing in a historical moment when perceptions of relationships between girls were shifting. In the nineteenth century same-sex crushes were seen as a normal and natural part of a girl’s life. Since Victorians generally believed that females were passionless and devoid of sexual desire, same-sex crushes were considered mostly harmless. By the early twentieth century, however, views of female sexuality began to change as sexologists confirmed the existence of the female sex-drive and concluded that homosexuality was a naturally-occurring condition (Ellis 1901; Krafft-Ebing 1886). These sexologists’ texts moved the discussion to a medical model that focused on diagnosing, preventing, and treating homosexuality as an illness. The conversation about romantic friendships began to shift as parents, teachers, and administrators worried about the sexual undertones of female relationships.

Previous scholars (Chauncey 1983; Faderman 1981; Rupp 1999; 2009) have noted the predominance of crushes and romantic friendships among girls in the nineteenth century and the decline of these relationships in the wake of the findings of sexologists in the early twentieth century. However, few have considered how the larger cultural paradigm shift that cast female relationships under intense scrutiny had life-changing implications for girls. The story of Spalding and Stanton illustrates the effects of changing scientific and cultural attitudes on young women who were coming of age during this shift. Girls who remained committed to their same-sex crush, as girls of previous eras had freely chosen to do, now faced intense pressure to conform to heterosexual norms. Spalding and Stanton’s story, and others like it, would serve as moral lessons about the dangers of female love for successive generations of girls.

Two Lives Intersect

Perhaps it was their similar life experiences that first drew Spalding and Stanton together. Spalding was the daughter of Florence Atherton Faxon, a writer of music, and George Frederick Spalding, a Boston merchant. Stanton had a similar middle-class upbringing in Southern California as the daughter of Christobel M. Jones and Joseph L. Stanton, a passenger agent for a railroad company. Stanton’s parents divorced and her mother then married Thomas
Albert Snider, the founder of the Snider Preserve Company. After her mother and step-father died in a car accident, Stanton inherited a fortune that ensured her financial independence for life.

Shortly after meeting and falling in love with Spalding in the summer of 1916 at Camp Quanset, Stanton decided to enroll at the Garland School of Homemaking in Boston where Spalding was beginning the fall semester as a teacher-pupil in the physical culture department. Their emotional connection only deepened as they experienced the independence of college life.

Crushes

In the nineteenth century, same-sex crushes were recognized as a common part of school culture. A younger girl typically developed a crush on an older girl and would express her admiration with gifts, flowers, candy, poetry, and adoration. The older student could choose to reciprocate by inviting the younger student to luncheons, spreads, or sporting events. All-female dances further normalized romantic friendships on college campuses. Hugging, kissing, and cuddling were not uncommon between crushes. These relationships were a means of assimilating young women into the college culture. The relationship was generally viewed as mutually beneficial in helping girls to develop into more compassionate women (Faderman 1991; Inness 1995; Newman 2012; Smith-Rosenberg 1975).

The dominant perception of girls’ sexuality was based on the belief that females felt little sexual desire. Intense emotional relationships between girls were therefore seen as innocent. School officials rarely interfered with schoolgirl crushes. Many female faculty had had similar relationships in their youth and some had even continued these relationships into their adult life forming what were known as Boston marriages in which college educated and professional women formed same-sex households. Influenced partly by economic necessity and a desire to pursue a professional career, many women formed committed and loving relationships with a life-long partner. Contemporaries assumed that these relationships were devoid of any sexual component and therefore viewed Boston marriages as acceptable forms of female friendship (Chauncey 1982–1983; Faderman 1981; Inness 1995, 1997; Newman 2012; Rupp 1999; Smith-Rosenberg 1975).

However, by the early twentieth century schoolgirl crushes and Boston marriages were increasingly scrutinized after sexologists revealed the existence of female sexual desire and the alleged causes of homosexuality. Richard von
Krafft-Ebing, a Viennese psychiatrist, writing in the 1880s, defined same-sex desire as a symptom of sexual inversion, an inherited, congenital disease that he described as including a variety of sexual and non-sexual behaviors reflecting a complete inversion of gender norms. Through the book *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), Krafft-Ebing sought to document the range of human sexuality with extensive case studies. He concluded that homosexuality was a product of degeneration—a sort of physical, moral, and mental evolutionary deterioration resulting from widespread sexual immorality. Yet, Krafft-Ebing’s initial rather negative view of inversion shifted over his lifetime to a more sympathetic portrayal of homosexuals as victims of nature. Identifying inversion as a condition existing prior to birth suggested that inverters did not have a choice over their behavior. Krafft-Ebing eventually concluded that homosexuality should not be viewed as criminal behavior requiring punishment but as a disease requiring treatment. Still, he defined homosexuality in opposition to heterosexuality in terms of normal versus abnormal. Krafft-Ebing also continued to espouse the Victorian notion that so-called normal women generally had less sexual desire than men and that therefore only inverted or sexually deviant women demonstrated sexual desire akin to men. In popular thought then, the female homosexual identified by Krafft-Ebing posed a new type of sexualized danger by preying on normal women. (Chauncey 1982; Faderman 1981; Osterhuis 2000)

Havelock Ellis, a British sexologist, expanded on the ideas of Krafft-Ebing in both defining sexual inverters as abnormal and in recommending some degree of tolerance. Ellis’s marriage to Edith Lees, who was a lesbian, may have motivated his desire to understand the range of human sexuality and perhaps to remove the stigma surrounding homosexuality. Ellis collected case studies of sexual inverters and published his findings in his 1897 book, *Sexual Inversion*. Significantly, Ellis published first-hand accounts from female homosexuals. Like Krafft-Ebing, Ellis believed that sexual inversion was a congenital abnormality. However, Ellis recognized a distinction in female inversion between what he defined as (typically more masculine) congenital inverters and those (typically more feminine) individuals with a predisposition to inversion whom he believed could be seduced by congenital inverters. Ellis therefore warned of the dangers of environments, such as all-female boarding schools, that allowed opportunities for same-sex relationships to flourish. In the 1901 version of this book Ellis explicitly linked school-girl crushes to homosexuality and argued that they were problematic since all crushes contained a sexual element even if there was no overt sexual activity. Historian Sherrie Inness noted that this was a dramatic shift from
the nineteenth century view “that no crush has an erotic element to Ellis’s understanding that all crushes contain a sexual component” (1995: 50).

In the early twentieth century, Sigmund Freud (1910) proposed a theory that homosexuality stemmed from a failure to resolve psychosexual issues in childhood, thus resulting in a sort of arrested development in adolescent years. Freud challenged the theory that homosexuality is congenital, arguing that it was more of a product of environment. Freud’s research further cast suspicion on female crushes as evidence of lesbianism and emphasized the dangers of all-female environments in fostering homosexuality.

Despite their explicit intention of studying the range of human sexuality and demystifying the causes of homosexuality partly in an effort to dissociate it from its criminal or immoral taint, the sexologists had succeeded in implicitly associating same-sex love with disease and psychological abnormality. As this information filtered out to the public, people began to worry about the implications of the sexologists’ findings. So called congenital inverts were portrayed sympathetically to some extent but they were also viewed suspiciously, giving rise to a fear of what came to be called the lesbian menace. Romantic friendships between girls came under more scrutiny with revelations about the dangers of unrestrained female sexual desire and fears that homosexuals could seduce normally heterosexual girls in single-sex educational institutions. School administrators could no longer view same-sex crushes as normal or innocent (Inness 1997; Wilk 2004).

The textual discourse about same-sex love was changing. School officials began to actively discourage romantic friendships among students through lectures on hygiene and health, editorials in student newspapers, and shifts in school policies. Perhaps motivated by feelings of defensiveness, some female faculty sought to distinguish their own Boston marriages from those of so called real lesbians described as pathologically disordered in the sexologists’ writings. They distanced themselves from the definition of homosexual even as they remained committed to their own female partners. This defensiveness helped shape their responses to crushes among students (Faderman 1981; Rupp 1999).

School policies were also influenced by increasing pressure from concerned parents. Popular magazines and newspapers disseminated the sexologists’ theories and alerted parents to the possible dangers of certain types of romantic friendships. In 1898, Ruth Ashmore in the *Ladies Home Journal* condemned “overly romantic relationships” between girls insisting that there “is something wrong” with a girl who wants to spend her life with her “chum.” Ashmore’s writing also reflected popular fears that girl’s education
fostered a sense of independence that resulted in an unsexing or masculinization of girls and a growing antipathy for the male sex: “the ecstatic girl lover is invariably bitter against man. She regards him as her natural enemy” (20). The article’s central premise was that romantic relationships distracted girls from pursuing heterosexual relationships.

The potentially devastating long-term effects of same-sex relationships became a common theme in advice columns and articles. In “Your Daughter: What Are Her Friendships?” a writer for Harper’s Bazaar warned that a girl’s crush on another girl should be taken very seriously since it had the potential to “mar if not ruin her whole future career, both physically and morally.” The author placed responsibility on parents who neglected the development of their daughters and warned diligent parents to beware of the “mutual crush” where two girls tend to become obsessed with each other neglecting other friendships. The author warned that “a ‘crush’ of this kind frequently prevents a girl from marrying” (1913:16).

David Irving Steinhardt went even further by openly discussing the potential sexual aspects of female relationships. In Ten Sex Talks to Girls, Steinhardt focused on the sexual threat of romantic friendships, explicitly warning about the dangers of sharing a bed or cuddling with another girl: “Avoid the touching of sexual parts, including the breasts … and let your conversation be of other topics than sexuality” (1914: 60). In Steinhardt’s description, certain girls were portrayed as predatory sexual aggressors. This was a clear repudiation of earlier depictions of female sexuality that denied that females were even capable of sexual feelings; this new depiction was laden with fears about the need to contain female sexuality.

These fears regarding women’s and girls’ sexuality were not entirely unfounded, either. Later studies confirmed that sexual relationships between college girls were quite common during this era. As Sarah Stage (2013) reminds us, a study of female sexuality published in 1929 generated a scientific scandal by revealing the extent of sexual activity and especially homosexuality among so called good girls of the middle and upper classes. Katharine Bement Davis was a graduate of Vassar College who later earned a Ph.D. in political economy from the University of Chicago. Davis, as director of the Bureau of Social Hygiene, conducted a scientific study of female sexual behavior. She surveyed educated, middle-class women, asking frank questions about their sexuality in both their youth and in their adult life. Many of the 2,200 individuals surveyed had attended school during the same time period as Spalding and Stanton. Davis’s findings revealed that girls had very active sexual desires and had engaged in extensive sexual activ-
ity. Davis’s report (1929) also scandalously revealed that over 50 percent of the respondents reported having had intense emotional relations with other females in either their youth or adult life and in 26 percent of these cases the feelings were accompanied by sexual activity. Davis’s research also shattered the idea that same-sex institutions alone were culpable in fostering an environment that led to homosexuality in girls since many of the respondents had attended coeducational institutions. Davis’s conclusion that over 43.5 percent of the respondents had intense emotional relations with girls before college challenged the notion that universities were to blame for fostering homosexual thoughts and behavior.

The women interviewed in Davis’s study revealed candid details about their relationships with girls in their youth. One interviewee explained that sexual relationships among girls were more common than people were willing to admit. Sharing her own experiences of multiple sexual encounters with girls in college, she explained that these practices frequently occurred among what she called nice girls from cultured homes. This woman expressed her opinion that there was nothing inherently wrong with homosexual acts per se. Her main concern was when physical attachments moved beyond merely sexual encounters into deeper emotional connections. Some sexologists agreed. Dr. Bernard Talmey succinctly expressed this view in 1908, arguing that the distinction was one of perversity versus perversion. Engaging in a homosexual act (a perversity) did not necessarily mean that an individual was or would become a homosexual (the perversion). Like previous sexologists, Talmey thus made a distinction between congenital homosexuality and acquired homosexuality. The dangers of schools as breeding grounds for homosexual activities therefore seemed obvious. The concern was less about isolated sexual acts and more about a pattern of behavior that might become permanent and a fear that girls might choose to commit their lives to each other and reject heterosexual marriage.

Devoted Companions

Classmates described Spalding and Stanton as inseparable, frequently walking arm-in-arm. Henrietta Case explained, “Their attachment for each other was so sudden and fervid that it caused much comment among the girls” (Cincinnati Enquirer 1917). Other classmates described them simply as devoted companions. Stanton was rooming at 48 West Cedar Street at the Garland School. Although Spalding lived with her parents, she often spent
nights staying with Stanton. They clearly loved each other deeply and publicly expressed their desire to spend their future lives together.

Spalding and Stanton’s social standing provided them with benefits available only to individuals of their class. However, their membership in this elite group also confined them to a strict set of social expectations that rigidly dictated the future course of their lives. This was especially true for Spalding who remained financially dependent on her parents. The expectations for Spalding’s future were evident in the decision to attend the Garland School for Homemaking, a college for young women over eighteen. The school emphasized the central role of the homemaker in keeping the house and nurturing the family. Students took courses in household management, food, clothing, furnishing, and the family. Even traditionally academic subjects such as science, economics, and literature were focused on practical implications for the housewife. The mission of the school was to groom young women for their future roles as wives and mothers.

Fearing that their daughter’s relationship with Stanton threatened her future, Spalding’s parents began to object fervently to the girls’ friendship. Publicly they expressed concern that Stanton’s wealth and extravagant traits were a bad influence on Spalding and that the two girls were spending too much time together, thus excluding other friends. Spalding’s parents were likely very aware of the warnings about dangerous types of relationships between girls; they must surely have feared that the relationship would prove a moral detriment or prevent their daughter from pursuing what they would have thought of as normal relationships with men.

Suddenly in early March 1917, Stanton transferred out of Garland, enrolling in Dana Hall at Wellesley. Administrators at Garland publicly stated that they had noticed nothing out of the ordinary in the relationship between Spalding and Stanton. Their private thoughts may have been different but these were not recorded. School officials said that Stanton had come to them “nervous and somewhat excited” seeking advice. Stanton suffered some “lung trouble” (Cincinnati Enquirer 1917) and they suggested fresh air to improve her health. Perhaps also succumbing to pressure from Spalding’s parents, school administrators decided to recommend that Stanton transfer to Dana Hall. They immediately arranged lodging for Stanton in a private home in Wellesley. But the transfer out of Garland was clearly not entirely Stanton’s choice.

Classmates at Dana Hall confirmed the story that Stanton came to Wellesley to be in the “country for better air.” But they also noted that Stanton “was given to fits of melancholy that seemed to disappear only when
she was in the company of Peggy Spalding.” Against the wishes of her parents, Spalding frequently snuck away from Garland to see Stanton. When they parted, as students at Dana Hall noted, the two girls could barely handle the separation. They frequently overheard Stanton engaged in intense phone conversations pleading with Spalding to visit her. At one point, classmates heard Stanton begging Spalding to meet her: “I shall die if you don’t come to me at once” (*Cincinnati Enquirer* 1917). The students at Dana Hall gossiped about the intense devotion between the two girls and this information spread to Spalding’s parents.

**The Reaction of Outsiders**

Societal rejection of same-sex relationships and the responses of family, friends, educators, and doctors dramatically influence an individual’s sense of identity and self-worth. Davis concluded in her 1920s study that public attitudes against homosexuality led some girls to feel abnormal or ashamed of their same-sex relationships. One interviewee described the intensity of affection and sexual attraction between her and her female partner. Yet, they were also ashamed of their feelings and tried, often unsuccessfully, to suppress their sexual expressions seeking to “overcome it … without losing a sincere and genuine love for each other” (1929: 285). By projecting an image of respectability, rejecting their sexual desires, and embracing their love for each other they sought to distance themselves from the deviant label of homosexual and distinguish themselves from the mannish women whom they perceived as real lesbians (Rupp 1999).

Another woman who had engaged in same-sex relationships in college and who had by the mid-1920s adopted the increasingly common notion that such desires were not normal, looked back with regret. She warned that girls must “know that this thing exists and should guard against its faintest expression.” She explained, “In my own case the strength of my love [for a woman] swept me off my feet, but I never believed that it was right or decent.” The biggest negative impact she noted was her delaying marriage by tying herself emotionally to a woman whom she could never marry. She later married a man, conforming to societal expectations of “right and decent” (Davis 1929: 324)

However, not every woman abandoned her same-sex partner or viewed her relationship with shame. Some people embraced the new label of homosexual or regarded homosexual behaviors as harmless or even natural. Just
as negative perceptions from outsiders could lead to negative feelings of self-worth, support from outsiders could lead to a positive sense of self and affirmation of one’s homosexual identity. One anonymous woman interviewed by Davis explained how societal responses to her sexual preference affected her emotionally. She had had a variety of sexual and non-sexual relationships with females until the age of 25 when she began to have anxiety that her feelings were “out of the ordinary.” She consulted a female physician who explained that it was all “quite natural with some people.” This advice was comforting and allowed her to resume her life free from anxiety. Ten years later, she was in a happy committed relationship with a woman. She described it as a love that had made her “life inexpressibly richer and deeper” (1929: 283).

Unfortunately, Spalding and Stanton experienced little support for their relationship. Spalding’s parents put increasing pressure on her to abandon the friendship. Echoing warnings heralded in the texts of popular magazines, they told her that Stanton was a bad influence and was monopolizing her time. The pressure to break off the friendship escalated even further when Spalding’s older brother called Stanton on several occasions warning her to stay away from his sister. According to the Cincinnati Enquirer (1917), he told Stanton that the family did not want her to associate with his sister. Finally, Spalding’s father ordered her to break off the friendship permanently and forbade her from seeing Stanton ever again.

**A Portsmouth Cafe**

These efforts to break apart the relationship drove the two girls to desperation. On 21 March 1917, Spalding and Stanton took a train to Portsmouth, New Hampshire and checked into the Rockingham Hotel. The next evening they dined a block away from the hotel. Around 10:50 pm, two simultaneous shots rang out in the crowded cafe. A brief moment of chilling silence was quickly followed by frenzied chaos as people rushed to the booth. They discovered the bodies of the two young women, each with a self-inflicted bullet wound in her temple.

A note revealed the motive for their suicide: “We have experienced perfect love for each other and cannot bear the thought of separation. So we will end it all.” They asked their parents to forgive them and not to be grief-stricken since “they would all be happy and peaceful when reunited in a better world.” Their last request was that they be laid in the same grave,
buried together as they would have chosen to live. An unfinished love poem composed by Spalding lay nearby. The family never revealed the full text of the poem (Cincinnati Enquirer 1917; Oakland Tribune 1917; Portsmouth Herald 1917).

The press immediately went on a search for answers. They attempted to explain Stanton’s behavior by suggesting that she was not mentally well, describing her as “thin, somewhat anemic, evidently on the verge of nervous decline” (Oakland Tribune 1917) and having a “delicate constitution” (New York Times 1917). However, Stanton’s close friends expressed shock at the suicide and repeatedly told the press that there was never any indication of any kind of mental illness. Judge Charles F. Malsbary, Stanton’s attorney and friend, also told reporters that he never saw any sign of serious mental problems in Stanton. He said that the girl had suffered from some lung trouble but that she was overall happy and had no reason as far as he knew to kill herself. In other newspaper reports, Malsbary is reported to have concluded that Stanton’s frail physical health was the most likely cause of her suicide (Boston Herald 1917).

Stanton’s father confirmed that Ethel had struggled with health issues as a result of an earlier attack of typhoid fever (Los Angeles Times, p. 3). He explained that his daughter had a positive outlook on life and was rarely troubled: “She was not the type to take life seriously … she was of a happy disposition, studious, although not of robust health” (Boston Globe 1917: 14). Responding to pressure from the press to identify a cause for the suicide, he suggested that perhaps his normally happy daughter had fallen victim to a “temporary mental aberration brought on by over-study” (Cincinnati Enquirer 1917: 8). This statement echoed the sentiments of critics who decades earlier had opposed girls’ education on the grounds that it was too taxing on girls. Education was often associated with a wide variety of conditions that were said to afflict females, including anxiety, depression, feminism, and lesbianism (Clarke 1884; Gordon 1987; Sahili 1979).

While Stanton’s suicide was attributed to physical sickness, mental illness or over-study, there appeared to be no logical explanation for Spalding’s. She was described as a young, healthy girl with a strong sense of independence. Sexologists tended to associate athleticism with lesbianism. Female congenital inverts were frequently described as mannish, displaying a preference for rough sports, male clothing, or masculine mannerisms. References to Spalding’s athletic abilities in contemporary texts may have been an attempt to identify her as mannish. However, Spalding’s family and friends countered those implications by emphasizing her striking feminine beauty and social
grace. The *Boston Evening Globe* reported that Spalding “had innumerable friends, both boys and girls, and has always been very prominent in the younger social life of this city” (*Boston Evening Globe* 1917: 4). Whereas sexologists had defined the homosexual female as inherently unhappy, Spalding’s closest friends described her as a joyful, socially well-adjusted girl.

Although they never explicitly said so, reporters clearly suspected that the relationship had sexual undertones. In response to apparent inquiries about Stanton’s sexuality Malsbury commented, “I never knew her to consider the attentions of young men seriously” (*Cincinnati Enquirer* 1917). A reporter posed a similar question alluding to Stanton’s sexuality to her father who said, “As far as I know she never had a love affair with any man.” Perhaps out of fear that this would be taken as evidence that Stanton was a man-hater, he defensively added, “Although she seemed to enjoy men’s company” (*Cincinnati Enquirer* 1917).

Unable to firmly categorize Spalding or Stanton as insane, masculinized, or man-hating sexual inverts, the press seemed at a loss to explain the double suicide. A reporter ultimately concluded that the motive was “family interference in the progress of the ‘affair’” (*Cincinnati Enquirer* 1917). Their love for each other and the demand from Spalding’s family that they stop seeing each other was too much for the young couple to handle. The Portsmouth Police officially concluded that the “fear that perhaps the family would finally succeed in separating them” compelled their suicides (*Boston Post* 1917). In the end, their love was labeled as aberrant and relegated to the margins of normality by the press who described it as “mystic” and “strange.” One writer insisted that the “infatuation was strong as it was weird” dismissing it as “one of these strange and consuming attractions found weirdly scattered through the love history of the world” (*Oakland Tribune* 1917). Their dying wish to be together in death was ignored. Spalding was interred in Massachusetts and Stanton laid to rest in California.

**A Better World**

Intense societal pressure drove Spalding and Stanton to desperation. Their relationship was condemned not only by Spalding’s family and school officials but by the larger community that labeled female romantic friendships abnormal. A schoolgirl crush that a few years earlier would have been seen as harmless was now deemed dangerous. Whereas in a previous generation women who chose to commit their lives to each other could form a Boston
marriage without any suggestion that their relationship was abnormal, by 1917 the notion that Spalding and Stanton might choose to spend the rest of their lives together was viewed as deviant. Their story reflected fears of unrestrained female desires, of the extremes of sentimentality, and of female aspirations left unchecked. Despite all the advantages that education and financial independence afforded them, the two girls found themselves confined by the expectations imposed on young women of their social class. They felt trapped with only one choice—to abandon each other and conform to rigid heterosexual standards of acceptable female relationships.

To future generations of girls, Spalding and Stanton’s suicide, along with other similarly ill-fated female relationships, served as a warning about the dangers of same-sex desire. One of the anonymous college graduates who responded to Davis’s sex questionnaire in the 1920s admitted that she had a number of sexual relationships with other girls. Ultimately, however, she concluded that heterosexual marriage was the only “sane” option. She alluded to the case of Spalding and Stanton as proof, saying, “The girl I adored is still unmarried and still has her train of women adorers. Sometime one of them will blow out her own brains with a revolver, as two girls I know of did, for hopeless love of each other … I ‘thought through’ my experience to a sane conclusion; but not all women can” (Davis 1929: 322). Thus, Spalding and Stanton’s sad story became an enduring moral lesson for this woman and countless others of her generation and beyond. Girls who loved girls were warned that their only logical option was to acquiesce to heterosexual marriage or fall victim to their own passions.

Spalding and Stanton’s tragic story, and others like it, were dramatized in the press. In literature and film, the lives of real human beings were converted into characters and then into caricatures. A new trope of the unhappy suicidal lesbian entered the mainstream from the 1920s onward (Inness 1997). In Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) Jamie kills herself after her lover, Barbara, dies. In Mary Lapsley’s *Parable of the Virgins* (1931) Mary Nugeon commits suicide after the school physician chastises her as an “immoral influence” and her girl lover abandons her. In Lillian Hellman’s play, *The Children’s Hour* (1934), Martha Dobie and Karen Wright, two teachers in a girls’ boarding school are accused of lesbianism. Martha shamefully acknowledges that she does indeed have feelings for Karen and ends her humiliation by shooting herself in the head. The obscenity laws and censorship rules that regulated the content of literature and film (such as the 1930–1968 Motion Picture Production Code) mandated either the complete invisibility of same-sex relationships or the unsympathetic portrayal
of suspected homosexuals and a condemnation of homosexual behaviors. This often resulted in stories that ended in the conversion, punishment, murder, or suicide of a homosexual character. The suicidal lesbian thus became a well-known fictional character in popular culture and has endured to the present day (Beirne 2012; Russo 1987).

Although Spalding and Stanton lived in a different era, the challenges they faced in loving each other are similar to issues faced by girls who love girls today. Their story reverberates through time, revealing the crippling impact of social pressure and the danger of stigmatizing homosexual relationships in both the past and present. Recent studies reveal that LGBTQ youth are at a higher risk for suicide. Rejection from family plays a significant role in those suicides (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016; Ryan et al. 2009). In preventing the suicide of LGBTQ youth, family acceptance, supportive peer groups and school environments, and access to medical and mental health professionals are crucial. Positive representations of successful LGBTQ people and relationships in popular culture are also essential. In their 2017 report GLAAD (formerly the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) called for an end to the decades-long trend in television of killing off lesbian and bisexual characters insisting that these “harmful tropes” essentially “exploit an already marginalized community” (6).

Scholars have noted that although we must acknowledge the reality of lesbian suicide among girls and continue to work to counteract it, the fictional suicidal lesbian character is especially dangerous in that it perpetuates a view of LGBTQ youth as abnormal in comparison to heterosexual youth. The stereotype, in ignoring the diversity of experience, casts LGBTQ youth as victims and denies them a sense of agency (Bryan and Mayock 2017).

So much has changed since Spalding and Stanton’s suicides in 1917. The LGBTQ movement has achieved significant gains in the past century. Protests, marches, and legal challenges have expanded the visibility and political equality of LGBTQ people. Queer youth have access to a stronger social support network. Although there is still much work to do in moving toward full equality for LGBTQ people, the majority of Americans today support homosexual relationships and girls who fall in love may choose to spend their lives together and legally marry. Peggy Spalding and Ethel Stanton did not have that choice. Since they could not live together, they chose to die together. They hoped instead to meet again in a “better world” (Oakland Tribune 1917). We can continue to work together to build the better world that they were seeking.
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Notes

1. Although we would call her a young woman, an unmarried female was then described and regarded as being a girl.
2. Sherrie Inness used this phrase in the title of her 1997 book, *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and the Representation of Lesbian Life*.

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