

THE LITERARY CANON AND ITS SOCIOECONOMIC BARRIERS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE POETRY OF HAZEL HALL

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Submitted April 2018; Reviewed May 2018; Accepted May 2018

Copy Edited by Jake Casson

ABSTRACT

Hazel Hall, an early 20th Century American poet, produced many high-quality poems throughout her lifetime. A working-class woman from Oregon, Hall suffered from a bad bout of scarlet fever, consequently causing her to rely on the use of a wheelchair. Hall, due to her disability, was largely confined to her room; her vivid poetry, however, expresses an intensely imaginative inner life, often inspired by her profession as a seamstress. Despite the popularity she received in her lifetime – with the publication of three collections – Hall drifted into relative obscurity for several decades after her death. In recent years, her poems have gathered revived interest. Nonetheless, she continues to go unacknowledged by many contemporary literary enthusiasts. This research seeks to address to what extent socioeconomic factors play a part in Hall's otherwise unwarranted disappearance. Furthermore, it will address the way in which her experiences positively influenced and coloured much of her writing. In doing so, this research should express the need for a revision in uncovering literary works which have been forgotten due to external factors. In bringing Hall's collections out from obscurity, her remarkable poems will continue to inspire and bring joy to her readers. They will also help to create a foundation for contemporary writers, for whom the perceived barriers faced by Hall may well resonate with their own.

INTRODUCTION

For the first time, *The Collected Poems of Hazel Hall* (2000), edited by John Witte, brings together all three of the collections that early 20th Century formalist poet, Hazel Hall (1886-1924), had published; these are *Curtains* (1921), *Walkers* (1923) and *Cry of Time* (1928). Renowned in her lifetime, Hall won several awards. Her poem 'Three Girls' was recognised as one of the best poems of the year in 1920, and a group of her poems on needlework won the Young Poet's Prize from *Poetry* in 1921. Yet the name Hazel Hall may not be at all familiar to the contemporary reader or poetry enthusiast. At the age of 12, Hall suffered a debilitating case of scarlet fever, which led her to rely on the use of a wheelchair and consequently confined her, largely, to her room. A working-class woman from Oregon, she depended on her career as a seamstress both financially and as inspiration for much of her writing. Despite her lack of mobility, Hall's poetry expresses an intensely imaginative inner life. She creatively brought together her limited physical experiences, such as the pulling of thread and the people walking outside of her window, and made them expansive, transcendent moments.

The talent evident in her poetry has, in recent years, gathered revived interest. Yet Hall's disappearance into relative obscurity for several decades after her death is both disappointing and surprising. Numerous critics have attempted to discover why this might be the case. Beth Bentley, in her introduction to *Selected Poems* by Hazel Hall (1997), states that: 'The most likely cause for [Hall's] neglect [...] was her sequestered life.' (Bentley 1997: iii). Similarly, Witte notes the practical barriers to Hall's success, who's confinement would have meant that 'Hall lacked the supporting circle of friends and literary connections that often propel a career.' (Witte 2000: xxvii). In an article about Hazel Hall, Alex Sheremet also proposes that the direction of women's studies is to blame, with

Hall being 'helpless and [...] dependent — a big no-no when you're trying to celebrate "resistance" in others, for there is no oppression, no points to be scored, no battles. There's only you, the common denominator of every failure or success.' (Sheremet 2014: para 5).

In contrast to this point of view, I will address to what extent cultural and socioeconomic factors played a part in Hall's otherwise unwarranted disappearance. In doing so, my aim is to examine the way in which accessibility is as much a cultural issue as it is a physical one. Furthermore, rather than view Hall's experiences as rendering her 'helpless and dependent', I will suggest that Hall's unique circumstances positively influenced, as well as shaped, her writing.

THE LITERARY CANON

The books and poems that comprise the literary canon hold an authoritative place in the way in which we deal with literature. These are works of literature that have been identified as influential and important, and that get taught in schools and university courses, whether it is Shakespeare's plays or the stories of James Joyce. The criteria for entering the literary canon, however, is notably unclear. There has been much critical debate around the benefits and issues with established canonical works. In his book *Critical theory and the Literary Canon*, E. Dean Kolbas (2001) brings varying theories about the canon under critical analysis. Kolbas examines the liberal notion that the canon has excluded certain works of literature due to social factors, such as gender or race. Yet Kolbas argues against the idea that neglected works of literature ought to be brought 'into' the canon to make it more rich or diverse.

Kolbas' book helps define my approach to reading Hall as outside of the canon. He discusses theorists such as Charlotte Pierce-Baker, Paul Lautner, Toni Morrison and Marilyn Butler;

all of whom suggest that we ought to read canonical works alongside noncanonical works in order to get a broader view of the social issues or literary characteristics of any given period or genre. Similarly, these theorists suggest that we should read canonical works differently, within their historical contexts: 'Rather than simply debunking the traditional canon [...] these proposals aim to nurture a critical sensibility responsive to cultural pluralism and more conscious of a literary work's social and historical context.' (Kolbas 2001: 40).

This article will follow this line of thought with regard to how Hazel Hall can be introduced and read alongside canonical works. Thereby, I aim to shed light upon a different perspective in relation to late 19th to early 20th Century American life. That is, the perspective of a disabled, working-class woman, as well as the effect that this had both on her writing and on the way in which this continues to shape how readers perceive her work to the present day.

READING DISABILITY

Critical writing on disability in literature during the mid-19th to the mid-20th Century has primarily focused on the depiction of disabled characters, such as the 'invalid' or the 'consumptive'. For example, Alex Tankard, in his book *Invalid Lives: Tuberculosis and Disabled Identity in Nineteenth Century Literature* (2018) undertakes a convincing examination of several disabled characters in popular fiction, including Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* (1869). Tankard argues that:

'most nineteenth-century texts depicted people dying of consumption, but rarely acknowledged the fact that they lived with it [...] Rather, the disproportionate literary (and critical?) focus on the consumptive's final days suggests a widespread evasion of [...] the socio-economic and cultural structures that restricted the day-to-day lives of people with chronic illness, limiting their participation in public life and confining them to the deathbed and to the role of placid, pious "invalid".' (Tankard 2018: 2).

Tankard's stance on the depiction of consumptive and disabled identities in literature is a good example of reading canonical works differently. That is, he examines the presentation of disability in popular literature and contrasts it to the real 'day-to-day lives of people with chronic illness' in that period.

Furthermore, Tankard defines disability using the 'social model', which:

'locates disability not in the individual body but in a society that makes inclusion conditional upon a level of physical functioning impossible for some of the population to attain: disability is not a medical condition but a social situation.' (Tankard 2018: 3)

In other words, whereas disability has often been defined as a 'physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities; [and] the fact or state of having such a condition' (OED 2008: 2), Tankard asks us to take social responsibility for where these 'limitations' lay. For example, a ramp does not cause physical limitations for a person using a wheelchair, whereas stairs do.

Grasping the social model for disability is important when assessing how much these notions of disability influence the way we might read Hazel Hall critically. Sheremet's description of Hall as 'dependent' and 'helpless' is a striking example of diminishing a person's autonomy due to a disability, as well as shirking responsibility for how much our own prejudices can

demean the value of a work. Although Sheremet praises Hall, he also implies that her talent is 'despite it all', and laments that she did not have the 'opportunity to experience things a little differently' (Sheremet 2014: para 1-2). It is precisely this line of thought that helps bring into question the cultural attitudes that restrict accessibility to canonisation. In a similar vein, Witte claims that Hall's work may have been 'mistakenly identified in the minds of many with the domestic, and forgettable, "women poets" who wrote sentimental verse on subjects such as sewing.' (Witte 2000: xxvii). It is difficult to see on what grounds Witte differentiates Hall from these 'forgettable women poets.' His statement is, instead, very revealing on cultural attitudes toward women and 'women's work' (such as sewing), and how seriously these would be taken by an audience in a literary setting.

Tankard does important work in his book on assessing the different ways disabled identities were depicted in the 19th Century. By focussing on Hall and her poetry, we can further learn how a woman who lived with a disability chose to present her own experiences. Hall's writing is particularly useful in that she uses a form of lyric poetry. Lyric poetry, made popular by writers such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, uses the first person in order to express personal feelings and emotions, offering direct insight into the world of the poet.

THE POETRY OF HAZEL HALL

Hazel Hall's poetry can perhaps be divided into two central themes: those which express a sense of confinement, restriction, limitations and resentment; and those which capture optimism, appreciation and liberation through an imaginative voice.

The first theme offers insight into the problem of accessibility. For example, in the poem 'Stairways', Hall imagines stairs 'With a rush of hurt surprise', finding them representative of the ability to walk, where the 'wonder of old footsteps' may have tread. (Hall [1921a] 2000: 12). Now, stairs instead serve to confine her, and make 'rooms [...] prison places' where 'corridors are cold'. (Hall [1921a] 2000: 12). The alliteration in this poem, with the repetition of the letter 'p' in 'prison places' and 'c' in 'corridors' and 'cold' makes the language in the poem move heavily downward, as if we were hearing, alongside Hall, the sound of someone treading downstairs. The poem ends on a wistful note, the longing for 'yesterday's renown - / *Laughter that might have floated up, / Echoes that should drift down.*' (Hall [1921a] 2000: 12 [emphasis hers]). 'Stairways' thus shows us the way in which Hall has acknowledged a personal feeling of constraint. The stairs 'challenge' her, and yet she admires them, because she knows that for others they are passageways for 'Laughter.'

Likewise, the poem 'June Night' depicts Hall's room as cold and confined. She describes it as full of 'shadows' and as trapped in an 'eternal winter'. (Hall [1921b] 2000: 3). It is this 'eternal winter,' Hall speculates, that frightens away the month of June. Personified as a woman and embodying various elements of nature, June arrives with '[a] band of stars caught up [in] her hair' and garments which were 'patterned from the leaf-laced air'. (Hall [1921b] 2000: 3). Unlike her room, June is summery, warm and capable of giving things life; but her 'faint footfall' quickly disappears from Hall's room with 'fear' (Hall [1921b] 2000: 3). A sense of longing and of isolation is once again emphasised. Hall feels trapped and unable to befriend June. The poem serves to act both as a metaphor for exclusion from the outdoors, as well as from social circles and female friendship. Beth Bentley notes Hall's lack of literary friends, describing an instance where she 'hoped vainly for a visit from another Western poet, Vachel Lindsay, who was living in

Spokane, and was crushed when this did not materialize.’ (Bentley 1997: iii). Unable to leave her room, Hall’s social activity was reliant on whether people would visit her. Much like she waits and is disappointed by the arrival and then quick disappearance of June, Hall was also made to feel isolated from the lack of visitors and communication with fellow writers.

But Hall is also capable of expressing a deep optimism and appreciation for the things around her. As Eleanor Berry claims in her ‘Re-reading Hazel Hall’, ‘The constriction is palpable, but equally so is an extraordinary intensity of sensuous experience.’ (Berry 2014: para 7).

Often, Hall’s optimism is found through transcending that which is physical – that is, by using imaginative language, she is able to step out of her own physical condition – and describe herself as liberated, something which appears most commonly in her sewing poems. For example, in ‘Finished To-Night’, she describes how she has ‘unleashed [her] hands, like hounds’ (Hall [1921c] 2000: 52) and in ‘Sewing Hands’, she claims ‘My hands are motion; they cannot rest. They are the foam upon the sea’ (Hall [1921d] 2000: 55). In these lines, Hall estranges her hands from herself and allows them to run off and outside of her room. They embody swift movement; the running of hounds and the waves on the water. They are connected to nature, and unlike how she writes about feet, they do not suggest a boundary or the potential for exclusion.

Finally, in her poem ‘Paths’, Hall uses her sewing needle to travel through the scene of a picturesque wood:

Needle, you make me remember things...
A path through a wood that ran like wine,
A turn, and the bubbling smell that clings
Close as breath to the lips of springs
Where the sun is sprinkled fine.

Needle, you have a path to run
Where never the boughs of trees have met

And never has seeped the rain of the sun;
But long is the way you have just begun...
Needle, you make me forget.

(Hall [1921e] 2000: 62)

This poem captures beautifully Hall’s rich imagination, experiencing ‘the earth and sky and sea more vividly than most of us experience them directly.’ (Berry 2014: para 7). Through the sewing needle, which allows Hall to ‘unleash’ her hands, she also finds the ability to ‘remember’ the joy of the woods, the ‘lips of springs’ and the ‘sprinkled’ sun. The needle is also able to ‘run’, making it fast and unburdened by physical limitations. She concludes ‘Needle, you make me forget’, aiding to this sense of both remembering what she must have experienced as a child, and forgetting her current sense of loneliness and restraint.

DISCUSSION

In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), Rosemarie Thomson asks us to look at the critical discourse that surrounds disability, so that we can:

‘expand our cultural construction of bodies and identity by reframing “disability” as another culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider

along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality.’ (Thomson 1997: 5)

Like Tankard, Thomson looks at the social model of disability to question the extent to which our assumptions about different bodies are defined by our cultural concepts. In this case, ‘the accepted notions of disability [is] as an absolute, inferior state and a personal misfortune’ (Thomson 1997: 6) – something that Thomson attempts to counter in her book.

These notions have real life consequences. The themes of restriction and isolation in Hall’s poetry show the way in which she felt herself to be secluded by her disability – ignored by the summer months, and by other people. At the same time, critical writers on Hall, such as Alex Sheremet, have approached her poetry with the impression that her ‘misfortune’ limited her poetic scope. However, Hall’s ability to experience the sun, the woods and the rain, as well as socialise with fellow writers, was not limited by her ability to walk. Rather, these things were not made accessible to her. As discussed, stairs, a common reoccurrence in Hall’s writing, constantly symbolise a barrier which flat surfaces, ramps, or (for example) a modern-day stair lift would not. Being aware of our own cultural notions of disability should help remind us of how to continue working towards a more accessible world.

CONCLUSION

Hazel Hall’s writing was clearly shaped by her experiences with confinement and loneliness due to the limitations placed on her through living with her disability. However, following Tankard’s ‘social model’ of disability, it is important to ‘read differently’ and be aware of how the factors that influenced Hall’s poetry and life similarly shape our understanding of her poems.

One of the primary explanations for Hall’s disappearance from literary renown was the inability to form social circles with fellow writers. Her needlework also ‘set her apart from other women poets of her generation, few of whom found it necessary to work for a living.’ (Bentley 1997: iv). Hall was thus excluded on many grounds: she could not leave her room and socialise due to lack of access with her wheelchair, she was unable to relate to other women as a result of relying on her needlework for income, and she may have been dismissed as a ‘sentimental woman poet’ (or, simply, a woman) – as Witte claims – all socioeconomic factors that would have led to her being excluded from the literary canon.

The quality of Hazel Hall’s poetry was not undermined by the limitations placed upon her. However, the attention we have given to that poetry has been. To read her with disappointment on what potential Hall might have had as a writer who was not confined to her room is useless. Instead, it is important to trace the brilliance of what these limited experiences could bring out in a person who undoubtedly had remarkable talent. I hope that bringing continued recognition onto Hall’s poetry will shed a light on the vast experiences of writers in the 19th to 20th Century, and will allow contemporary readers to question the authority behind the literary canon and be willing to search for literary works outside of it. In doing so, they may find reassurance and confidence in their own voice. At the same time, we should take steps in adjusting the way in which we think about what it means to have access – whether physically, from one room to another – or socially, in literary circles, and in access to materials.

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