

Couperus, Louis (1863–1923), Dutch writer. Couperus was born in The Hague into a leading colonial family. He spent part of his youth in the capital of the Dutch East Indies, Batavia (now Jakarta, Indonesia). Many of the topics he would later write on stemmed from his experiences in the East Indies. He did not follow in the steps of his family, but chose a career in literature, becoming the most famous Dutch novelist of his time.

His first experiments with poetry were not successful, whereas his first novel, *Eline Vere* (1889), was an immediate best-seller. He later conceded that this story of a sensuous woman actually offered a self-portrait. The second novel, *Destiny* (1891), is about two close friends: Bertie, described as a weakling, is in love with Frank and when Frank is on the verge of marriage, Bertie destroys that relationship with a forged letter. When he later tells this to Frank, the latter kills the weakling. After having served his prison term, Frank returns to his fiancée, and they marry. But their relationship is doomed and together they commit suicide. The novel is a decadent play on a degenerate theme.

After 1900, Couperus wrote mainly classical novels. The most famous is *De berg van licht* (*Mountain of Light*, 1905–1906) on the androgynous polysexual Roman emperor ELAGABALUS. As in his later work, *Iskander* (1920), on ALEXANDER the Great, Couperus showed the struggle between East and West, between sensuousness and morality. In the end, sensuality has its Pyrrhic victory and the main characters die an early death. For his general perspectives, Couperus used Lucien von Römer's theories on homosexuality and androgyny. Critics were so harsh on *De berg van licht* that Couperus considered writing a pamphlet on their attitude towards homosexuality, but failed to do so. For some time, he wrote no more novels, only articles for newspapers. Some of his short stories of this period have a sensuous homoerotic quality.

Couperus enjoyed travel, and stayed for

long periods in the Mediterranean and in the East Indies. During World War I he was forced to remain in Holland, where he began a successful career as a dandy speaker. His pink satin dress-coat still stands out in the museum devoted to him in The Hague. When he died, he was, according to his decadent successor Gerard Reve, probably still a virgin, having neither consummated his marriage with a cousin nor fulfilled his passions for masculine men. What remained unsatisfied in his life is portrayed with great elegance in his novels.

The work of Couperus is still regularly reprinted and his complete works were published in the past decade. Some of his novels have been adapted for television. He has a secure place among the classics of Dutch literature and still attracts many readers. A very active fan club started a museum in his honour, edits books and newsletters devoted to him, and organises guided tours in Couperus's The Hague.

F. Bastet, *Louis Couperus, een biografie*, Amsterdam, 1987.

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