

# **“What a Strange Girl”:**

Characterizations of “the Lesbian” in *The Price of Salt*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to look at the topoi surrounding lesbian literature and existence and how lesbian literature historically both has played on and subverted these set narratives. I will focus on *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith and examine how the story, the characters and the setting are influenced by the topoi of traditional lesbian literature, but also subvert them. My two chapters are constructed around two main concepts. The first chapter follows Elaine Marks's theory of the "lesbian fairytale" to analyze the stock characters which often appear in lesbian narratives. By actively using this model to examine the characters in *The Price of Salt*, I find that the characters are implicitly characterized through their inclusion in a lesbian literary tradition. In the second chapter, I delve deeper into the analysis based on concepts and understandings from Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," which explains how, in American society, heterosexuality is both assumed and enforced. I find that the lesbian pulp genre of the 1950s was integral in creating and enforcing a picture of what a lesbian looked and acted like and worked as a key enforcer of compulsory heterosexuality. I prove that Highsmith's utilization of stock characters and situations from lesbian pulp novels is essential to accomplish the original and subversive ending the novel has become known for.

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## Introduction

Therese Belivet, the protagonist of *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith, is the appointed “strange girl,” the girl “flung out of space” (53). She is the girl who, in 1950, rejects negative characterizations of lesbian love, and accepts her infatuation with Carol Aird without question. In the conversations surrounding *The Price of Salt*, however, she receives little to no attention. Therese has been described as an author’s surrogate; some even going as far as describing the novel as a “wish-fulfillment dream” (White 8; Castle 5). However, when examining the story from a historical literary perspective, it becomes clear that Therese’s characterization is influenced by a set lesbian literary tradition. This lesbian literary tradition is heavily dependent on societal views of lesbians throughout history; coupled with lesbian imagery from French writers and German sexologists from the late nineteenth century (Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* 355). These narratives often end tragically, so as to discourage the reader from seeing lesbianism as a real “option”. Thus, *The Price of Salt* has gained its status as subversive due to its happy ending, where the two women end up together by the end. Therefore, I find it interesting to examine how the socially constructed figure of “the lesbian” serves to characterize Therese in *The Price of Salt*, and how her rejection of this characterization adds to the subversive nature of the novel.

When exploring lesbian literature, certain stock characters and situations occur repeatedly. At least, this seems to be the picture when examining works that reach a wider audience; the same story has been told for over a hundred years. Recently, these narratives, which earlier were mainly produced by independent film producers and publications, have reached the mainstream, particularly there have been several lesbian period dramas produced by larger production companies (Mahoney; Specter; Rude). There has been little academic writing on the subject, but there has been a focus in social media and in media publications on what fans believe to be the same story being told again and again. Although many of these films, such as *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *Ammonite*, are both critically acclaimed and beloved by film watchers, the questions of (1) why the same story is being told; and (2) where this story comes from, are relevant to explore. This stereotypical representation has gone as far as to be parodied on *Saturday Night Live*, where the skit revolved around a fictional movie trailer for a lesbian period drama. This period drama supposedly has “twelve lines of dialogue” for a two and a half hour running time, “the world’s saddest flirting”, and “a drawing scene” (*Saturday Night Live*). The two lesbians are often two beautiful, white



women: one blonde and the other brunette. One takes on the seducer role, and the other is seduced. By the end, one of them dies or their love is thwarted by patriarchal heteronormativity.

Taking this into account, I find it interesting to look at the question of lesbian representation in this thesis. Although I will not be determining once and for all what good representation is, the focus of this debate obviously revolves around it. When taking a course on gay and lesbian literature at the University of Oslo, *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith was included on the syllabus. This novel, which in 2022 seems like a historical romance, had, at the time of publishing in 1952, a contemporary plot. The film adaptation, *Carol*, from 2015, however, largely fits in with the picture painted above: The period drama with two white lesbians, one brunette, and one blonde. Mey Rude from Out Magazine asked: “Why is this the only story straight people want to tell about us? . . . How many times will I have to watch two beautiful white women stare at each other for two hours until one of them dies? How many times do we need to see women who can’t be lesbians because of their controlling husbands?” (Rude). This comment suggests that the question of which narratives are told is highly connected both to societal values and cultural hegemony. Lesbian narratives have always been affected by “straight people” – or rather the heteronormative and patriarchal societies they have been written in. This is not new. Within both literary theory and queer theory, there exists scholarly writing regarding both lesbians’ place in society, but also theories regarding their representations in literature. These theories are intrinsically linked.

The modern perception of lesbians is an accumulation of historical understandings of sexuality and gender, and literary representations of lesbians. Lillian Faderman writes about this in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, a book that, in her own words, traces “the evolution of love between women as it has been experienced in twentieth-century America” (6). Here, she starts in the nineteenth century with the concept of “romantic friendships” between middle-class women. As these friendships reached a point where their existence threatened the institution of compulsory heterosexuality, some of the women “constructed an identity and a subculture . . . frequently discouraged – by psychiatrists, the law, and public and familial pressure) in which they could express their love for other women” (Faderman 6). As the twentieth century progressed, these subcultures existed on different planes of society. Women’s colleges, the military, and women’s bars all represented spaces where lesbians might experience a reprieve from the marginalization they encountered in society at large. However, the girls’ school, which women’s colleges can be seen as an extension of, were not new in the twentieth century, although women in the military and women’s bars were. Martha

Vicinus writes of friendships between women in “Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships,” especially highlighting the power imbalances these relations often involved. Often the younger girls would become infatuated with an older girl or a female teacher at the school. Vicinus examines the “social origins, its various phases, and its impact on both the younger woman and the older recipient of her love” (601).

Therefore, despite the idea of the girls’ school as a breeding ground for romantic friendships between girls not being new in the twentieth century, it was still popularized in those years. In 1979, Elaine Marks, a scholar on women’s literature and French literature, wrote a chapter in *Homosexualities and French Literature* focusing on lesbian intertextuality. She explains how the school locus produces a marginalization of the lesbian experience. She bases this exploration in something she calls “the Sappho Model” (356). The Sappho model, which is heavily based on myths surrounding the historical figure of Sappho, can be said to be the blueprint for lesbian narratives. “Sappho and her island Lesbos are omnipresent in literature about women loving women, whatever the gender or sexual preference of the writer and whether or not Sappho and her island are explicitly named” (Marks 365). Therefore, despite “no evidence in Sappho’s poems” of her having a school, the school setting has been heavily utilized since the eighteenth century in texts that deal with lesbian desire. Marks continues with a definition of what she calls the “lesbian fairytale,” which is an accumulation of different tropes, stock characters and situations which appear in lesbian narratives. The reasoning behind using the word “fairy tale” is to accentuate the “distance from an apparent, transparent ‘real’ and to insist on structural similarities between diverse fictions” (358). Through Marks’ description of the lesbian fairy tale, it becomes apparent that a literary tradition related to the portrayal of lesbian desire not only exists *now* but has been prevalent for some time. Marks explains the lesbian fairy tale as the following:

the gynaeceum, ruled by the seductive or seducing teacher has become, since the eighteenth century, the preferred locus for most fictions about women loving women. The conventions of this topos are simple and limited, signifying in their constraints the marginal status of lesbians and lesbianism. In general men play secondary roles as fathers, spiritual advisers, or intrusive suitors. The younger woman, whose point of view usually dominates, is always passionate and innocent. If, as is usually the case when the author of the text is a woman, it is the younger woman who falls in love, the narrative is structured so as to insist on this love as an awakening. The older woman as object of the younger woman’s desire is restrained and admirable, beautiful and cultivated. If the older woman plays the role of seducer-corrupter, as she does in texts written by men, she is intense and often overtly hysterical (although this does not prevent her from being admirable in her intensity). Whoever plays the aggressive role, the exchanges between the older and the younger woman are reminiscent of a mother-daughter relationship. The mother of the younger woman is either dead or in some explicit way inadequate. Her absence is implied in the young woman’s insistent need for a good-night kiss. The gynaeceum, particularly when it is represented by a school, also controls time . . . Temporal structures reiterate the almost universally accepted notion that a schoolgirl crush is but a phase in the emotional development of the young woman, something that will pass. (Marks 357-358)

Although Marks presents the gynaeceum as the locus for the lesbian fairy tale, it does not need to be physically present in lesbian narratives to be narratively important. In *The Price of Salt*, the main character, Therese, is nineteen years old and works in a department store as she tries to book jobs as a set designer. However, despite her job, apartment, and supposed “adulthood,” Therese as a character is intrinsically tied to the locus of the girls’ school. She spent most of her childhood and adolescence in a catholic boarding school, due to her mother remarrying and starting a new family with Therese’s step-father. In addition, other characters in the novel allude to the schoolgirl narrative in response to Therese’s infatuation with Carol, an older woman. Through this, we see that the gynaeceum is an omnipresent literary presence in lesbian narratives, and to some degree, in lesbian lives. However, as remarked by Marks, the model pertaining to the older woman seducing the younger woman was discarded by Greek and Latin literature, and in later European texts, due to being less palatable to “the transmitters of a patriarchal code” (357). This shows that societal hegemony, in this case, represented by patriarchal codes, has always had an impact on which lesbian narratives have been told – and if they have been told at all.

Representations of minority groups in literature will always affect the way those groups are viewed and treated in their society, at the same time as the way a minority group is perceived in society will affect their representations in literature. This is not only true with lesbians but can be seen in depictions of any minority group. A common example is the “blackface” minstrel tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States. In this circumstance, blackface denotes actors and comedians who applied “coal-black makeup made from burnt cork” and mimicked what they believed African Americans were like (Stephen Johnson 2). Johnson presents an argument to be made for intent, “whether blackface performance was integrationist, working class, and populist, parodying and complaining about those in power . . . or whether it was segregationist and derogatory, reinforcing a white status quo of superiority and dehumanizing a clearly delineated population. Or both” (3). The blackface tradition was influenced by the racist society it sprung from and further affected the way that society perceived Black Americans.

Similarly, historically, there exists a picture of “the lesbian”. Lesbians were exceptional, not intrinsic (Rich 296); both innately homosexual and a product of social conditions (Vicinus 469); and in Sigmund Freud’s eyes lesbians could be lesbians simply due to ambition, failure to be passive, or athletic interests; no interest in women required (Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 130). These social perceptions of what it meant to

be a lesbian have heavily influenced which stories are told. In the 1950s, the public perception of lesbians was, arguably, at its all-time low. In the United States, where the two goals of its post-war period were (1) to make sure the soldiers who fought in WWII had jobs when they came back, and (2) to fight off the “communist threat,” the idea of lesbians was frightening. A prerequisite for the men getting their jobs back was that the women who held those jobs during the war gave them back. Therefore, the lesbian was seen as both dangerous and sick. The feminine lesbian was a threat, as she could “pass” as heterosexual, just as communists could “pass” as capitalists. As argued by Lillian Faderman, “A society that agreed once again that woman’s place was in the home saw feminists as a threat to the public welfare, and lesbians, the most obvious advocates of feminism, once more became the chief villains. The social benefits of curing lesbians, who were all sick anyway and needed curing, were unquestionable” (*Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 134).

Due to these social perceptions, over the years there have been several caricatures of the different types of lesbians. A study on lesbian stereotypes based on answers from American female nursing students in 1992 found that the general perceptions of lesbians within that group included “lesbians’ seduction of heterosexual women, lesbian ‘boasting,’ and the ‘masculine aura’ of lesbians” (Eliason et al. 131). Butch lesbians of the 1940s and 1950s were wrongly seen as gender inverters, who tried but ultimately failed to imitate heterosexuality within their own relationships with other women (Kennedy 2). The working-class butch presented a threat through her ability to seduce or be violent toward other women (Gutterman 476). However, the butch, despite her visibility, was not the only lesbian character. After WWII, during the cold war, there were pseudoscientific studies made based on the figure of the dangerous, seducing “femme”. “It’s happening in your neighborhood and mine. Outwardly she appears to be a loving wife and mother . . . Nevertheless, she inhabits another world . . . that dark, little understood, only whispered about domain of the female homosexual” (Foster Craddock qtd. in Gutterman 475). This lesbian character has several names, such as “the lesbian wife” and “the cold war femme” (Gutterman 475; Corber 1). The lesbian wife was a threat through her “ability to impersonate normative femininity,” which rendered her as dangerous as the communists; this focus worked as a way to “instill the belief that gender and sexual nonconformity were un-American” (Corber 2). She “imperilled her children’s welfare, her marriage’s future and the household’s sanctity. The building blocks of the nation’s post-war political and economic systems” (Gutterman 476). Through these descriptions, it is made clear that the lesbian wife, or the cold war femme, was a figment

created by societal angst connected to the place of women in society and the feminine lesbian's supposed ability to corrupt other suburban wives.

Through looking at both the Sappho model and the stock character of the lesbian wife it is made clear that there has always been a mutual relationship between societal ideas of lesbians and the characters and events of lesbian narratives. Because of this, it is no surprise that simultaneously as the lesbian wife was presented as a social threat in the post-war period, she also appeared in lesbian pulp novels which rose in popularity in the 1950s. The lesbian pulp genre is contentious in scholarly writing regarding lesbian literature. There have been made arguments both for and against the genre. Lauren Jae Gutterman talks of how, in lesbian paperback originals, the lesbian wives flee adult responsibilities and emasculate their husbands (489). The idea was that suburban wives, due to benefitting from the post-war affluence, turned lesbian because of laziness and "time on their hands" (490). Although some of these novels were written by men, for the enjoyment of men, some of them were written by lesbian women, who depicted these lesbian characters as sympathetically as they could, given the restrictions they were under (Mitchell 159). Both Ann Bannon and Valerie Taylor wrote of lesbian women who left their husbands to live more authentically to themselves (Gutterman 491). And in *The Price of Salt*, Carol argues that "the rapport between two men or two women can be absolute and perfect, as it can never be between man and woman" and "to live against one's grain, that is degeneration by definition" (256). Faderman writes that lesbian pulp fiction was designed to "titillate while upholding conventional values," and that the paperbacks mirrored the familiar images: "sadistic and inexplicably evil lesbians . . . or confused and sick lesbians . . . The novels rely heavily on the lesbian imagery supplied by the French writers and German sexologists" (*Surpassing the Love of Men* 355). Terry Castle, when writing the anthology, *The Literature of Lesbianism*, went as far as skipping the 1950s in her review. However, both Faderman and Castle mention *The Price of Salt*, reckoning the Highsmith novel to be the exception to the rule: A novel where the lesbian characters "end happily together" (Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* 355). However, despite *The Price of Salt* being reckoned as an outlier of the lesbian pulp novels, the characterization, plot, and tension heavily build on conventions from the Sappho Model, pulp novels, and pseudoscientific understandings of lesbians from the 1940s and 50s.

In the 1970s, lesbian feminists, whose aim was to create a separate space from men, worked to reclaim the word "lesbian" from the "psychiatric and moral morass into which it had fallen" (Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 219). During this time, Adrienne Rich authored the essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," which was

published in 1980. In this essay, Rich states that ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ is an institution which is enforced in patriarchal societies to suppress and control women. She directs her essay towards feminist scholars and implores them to join her in examining the effect compulsory heterosexuality has on the oppression of women. Many of these feminist scholars suggested an intrinsic heterosexuality in most women. Rich, through this essay, means to dispute this notion. Therefore, she explores how the bias of compulsory heterosexuality, as a social institution, sees lesbian existence “on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible” (13) and how this affects, not just lesbians, but women overall. Though compulsory heterosexuality, in the first place, refers to a social paradigm, one of the essay’s focus areas is the connection between representation and the upholding of compulsory heterosexuality. “Heterosexuality has been both forcibly and *subliminally imposed* on women. Yet everywhere women have resisted it, often at the cost of physical torture, imprisonment, psychosurgery, social ostracism, and extreme poverty” (30; emphasis added). Through this, it is relevant to examine the impact compulsory heterosexuality has on lesbian narratives, and the diverse ways it manifests itself in these stories. Lesbian characters in lesbian stories may resist compulsory heterosexuality, but that does not negate the negative impact the concept has on both fictional- and real-life lesbians.

When setting out to examine the connection between Patricia Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt* and other lesbian narratives, the first and most obvious place to start is with the lesbian pulp genre. As this genre was contemporary to Highsmith’s novel, it presents as the most natural starting point. *The Price of Salt* has previously been called both a pulp novel and an outlier when it comes to American lesbian novels of the 1950s (White 8; Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* 355). These contradictory views bear witness to a duality in the novel. The novel is both salacious and boring; both groundbreaking and conventional (Castle; Perrin 392). Although the novel was first printed in hardback, it was first as a paperback that it had its commercial success (Perrin 392; White 8). The paperback edition had a cover depicting two women: one sitting, the other standing above with one hand on the sitting woman’s shoulder. Her other hand holds a cigarette. Behind them, on the dark horizon, there is a man reaching out his hand toward the women. This shows that, despite not meeting all the criteria of a pulp novel, *The Price of Salt* at one point was marketed as one. The question becomes: how, if it differs from the genre, was this possible? What was the intention? In reality, simultaneously as *The Price of Salt* exists as a subversive work, it is also written into an existing literary tradition of lesbian narratives.

Therefore, as texts are not produced in a vacuum, I have an interest in examining *The Price of Salt* through the lens of established lesbian narratives. I want to explore how the events and characterizations in the novel subscribe to the lesbian fairy tale, the lesbian wife, lesbian pulp novels, and compulsory heterosexuality, and then see how it ultimately subverts these ‘set’ literary traditions. My main interest throughout this thesis is to examine how the character of Therese Belivet, despite her passive character traits and the infantilization she endures from the other characters, subverts how a lesbian heroine in the 1950s was supposed to behave. Due to this focus, I will spend some time examining how she initially fits in with the stereotypical heroine: the young girl, who as she becomes older, is supposed to reject lesbianism, and start prioritizing men. Through the Sappho model, the trope of the lesbian wife is intrinsically connected to the trope of the young, inexperienced lesbian. Therefore, I will look at how Carol also initially fits into the role of the femme seducer, at least on the surface. However, despite their appearances, it becomes apparent that the roles are reversed, as Therese actively takes on the role of the pursuer throughout their relationship.

My main interest in this thesis is therefore to examine how Patricia Highsmith integrates set lesbian narratives in *The Price of Salt*, then subverts them – and the effect this has on characterization and plot. This thesis will mirror the plot of *The Price of Salt*, effectively following the progression of the plot from beginning to end. I have noticed that a lot of the scholarly writing pertaining to this novel examines Carol’s character, challenges, and role as a queer mother (Nair; James). My focus will be on Carol and Therese’s place within the literary tradition of lesbian literature, and through my analysis, I will prioritize Therese’s characterization. A lot of what has been said about her previously paints her as a passive, “character-free” protagonist, and “puppet-like” (White 8; Castle 3). I would argue that, although Therese at times can be seen as passive, her choice to pursue Carol, despite her lack of understanding of her own lesbian sexuality, is a clear example of character motivation and a character acting on that motivation. These aspects, when tied together, reveal the sui generis status of Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt*.

To be able to explore this topic effectively, I have split my thesis into two main parts. Although the two parts are tied together through some of the same themes and aspects, there is a difference in focus. The first part will examine how *The Price of Salt* fits in with the lesbian fairytale, as presented by Marks. I will look at Therese’s relationship with older women, the dynamic between Therese and Carol, the infantilization of lesbians in literature, and Therese’s emergence into adulthood. By connecting the narrative and characterization in *The Price of Salt* to the lesbian fairytale, or the Sappho Model, it becomes clear that

Highsmith's writing is influenced by traditional lesbian narratives. In the second part, I want to explore how the concept of compulsory heterosexuality manifests, both in the plot of the novel, but also in the individual characters. My overarching goal is to look at how Therese's characterization is influenced by traits of the social conception of "the lesbian" in historical scholarship and fictional literature.



## **1 The Lesbian Fairytale: The Influence of the Sappho Model on the Development of Therese Belivet's Characterization**

As mentioned, *The Price of Salt* resembles a lesbian fairy tale based on the Sappho model, which presupposes a romance between an older woman and a younger woman. Generational gaps are not uncommon in relationships – gay or straight. However, it is interesting to examine how generational gaps became a prerequisite in the portrayal of lesbian relationships in literature. Although there are correlations between the lesbian fairy tale and non-fictional experiences of actual lesbians, the features of the lesbian fairy tale are better to be regarded, such as the image of Sappho, as an accumulation of assumptions from Greek comedies, Italian novels, and French pornography (H. N. Parker 312). Therefore, as Marks explains, calling it a “fairy tale” emphasizes the textual aspects and culture the telling is set in, and its abstraction and distance from reality; accentuating “the distance from an apparent, transparent ‘real’ and insisting “on structural similarities between diverse fictions: the stock characters and stock situations” (Marks 358). In this chapter, I am going to examine how Therese’s youth is emphasized by Highsmith’s description of her as well as the secondary characters’ treatment of her; how her physical transformation towards the end signifies her emergence into adulthood; and how both her youth and her sudden adulthood seems to indicate, when following Marks’ theory, a temporal window in adolescence which allows for lesbian existence. However, as Therese grows up by the end of the narrative, and still picks Carol, the novel emphasizes that these are two adult women who consciously choose each other.

*The Price of Salt* is interesting as, initially, the execution of the plot mirrors the qualities of the lesbian fairy tale. Despite being set outside of the gynaeceum, the stock characters and situations are included: the naïve and youthful protagonist, the older and admirable woman of desire, the intrusive suitors and spiritual advisors. Therese is a young woman – only nineteen at the start – who is passionate, innocent, and lacks a realistic streak. She has recently, only one or two years before, left her Catholic boarding school, where she had a crush on a nun, Sister Alicia. She was put in the boarding school by her estranged mother, who remarried after her father’s death and got a new family. Therese reckons herself as an orphan with a mother (69). She works in a department store, where she catches the eye of an older woman and falls in love immediately; this is reckoned as an awakening. Carol, the subject of her desire, is restrained, admirable, beautiful, and cultivated. However, she also has

a melancholy streak and is prone to sudden mood changes. Their initial relationship is reminiscent of a mother-daughter relationship. As Therese grows up, the contemporary readers of the novel would have an implicit understanding that she, as the young protagonist, will grow out of her infatuation with Carol and return to heterosexuality.

Marks states that she chose the term “fairy tale” to emphasize the stock characters and stock situations “the rude or blissful awakening of sleeping beauty; the lesbian as good or bad fairy who is fate. The system or relationships in lesbian fairy tales, the reiterated system of stereotypes based on a synthesis of religious and psychological dogma” (358). In the 1950s, the hegemonical psychological dogma related to lesbian sexuality saw it as intrinsically linked to illness. The lesbian was pathological, sick, and dangerous (Mitchell 159; Faderman 146). In *The Price of Salt*, Patricia Highsmith utilizes these stock characters and situations to “trick” the reader, before subverting the traditional plot. By utilizing lesbian stereotypes, she was able to reel her implied reader in, before highlighting the universality of Therese and Carol’s situation. Therefore, *The Price of Salt* has been seen as “an attempt to show how ordinary (and thus unthreatening) lesbianism could be” (Perrin 392). And, for the lesbians of the 1940s and 1950s, it must have been a relief to be portrayed, not as a caricature, sordid and pathological, but as everyday human beings. Despite the novel subverting the stereotypes and tropes of its contemporary lesbian pulps toward the end, there is still an argument to be made that Therese, as a character, is initially defined and characterized by the stock characters and stock situations of the lesbian fairy tale. Therefore, in the following sections I am going to examine how Therese is characterized through her relationships with the older female characters of the novel; how both her relationships with Mrs. Robichek, Sister Alicia, and Carol, and her relationship with Richard are marked by an infantilizing view of Therese; and in the end look at the symbolic meaning of her physical transformation and emergence into adulthood.

### **1.1 The Impact of Women in Therese’s Initial Characterization**

Therese Belivet, as a character, is mostly characterized by her relationship dynamic with the people around her. She cannot be described as the driving force of the plot; rather, the plot happens to her. As a protagonist, Therese is passive. Because of this, there is little to no internally prompted character progression. Phyllis Nagy, the screenwriter of *Carol*, the 2015 adaptation of *The Price of Salt*, described Therese as a “character-free” protagonist and as a stand-in for Patricia Highsmith (White 8). Nagy then goes on to argue that this is not a

problem for the main character in a novel, but that it is not possible for the protagonist in a film adaptation. I would argue that this interpretation of Therese's character ignores specific characterization that happens in her relationships with other female characters in the novel. In the following pages, I am, therefore, going to examine Therese's relationship with two key characters who were excluded from the film adaptation: Mrs. Robichek and Sister Alicia.

The movie rejects the more complex characterization of Therese that happens through her relationship dynamic with other women than Carol, in favor of a character motivation to identify with a glamorous woman. Patricia White argues that the title of the movie, *Carol*, gives the audience "Therese's desire with which to identify. Carol is the name of her obsession. So the film's initially disappointingly bland title refers emphatically to both women, to subject and object of desire, gaining in the direct embrace of lesbian desire what it loses in pulpy portent" (White 8). Therefore, by changing the name from *The Price of Salt* to *Carol*, the novel's historical placement within the pulp tradition is repressed (Mitchell 160). Due to this, certain aspects of the novel, such as Therese's unsettling meetings with Mrs. Robichek and Therese's submissive attitude towards Carol, are cut out or heavily reduced in the film adaptation, hinting at a reluctance to "engage with the kinkiest, hardest-to-resolve aspects of Highsmithian psychosexual fantasia" (Castle 4). Since I believe that a lot of the characterization of Therese resides specifically in her passivity, I find it relevant to examine aspects of the novel that was excluded when the film adaptation was made. While the film starts almost directly at the initial meeting between Carol and Therese in the department store, the novel does not introduce Carol until the third chapter. Therese's characterization in the three first chapters highlights her desire for connection with older women, even before she meets Carol. The discourse of the story is made up of an unknown voice, with Therese as the focalizer. Due to the heterodiegetic identity of the narrator and their omniscient view into Therese's mind, the details, feelings, and judgments of the story seem to come from her mind. Therefore, the inclusion and exclusion of speech or detail says something about Therese as a character. These instances with Mrs. Robichek and Therese's recollections of her schooldays are a part of the initial exposition in the novel and are meant to situate Therese in a setting. By including this, Highsmith makes it seem as though there is a pattern to Therese's actions. This pattern shows a lonely girl who wants to connect with other women. However, in the first three chapters, Therese's urge for connection with other women seems to be problematized by the grotesque language utilized.

Highsmith uses both exaggerated language, and symbols from fairy tales to emphasize Therese's feelings towards the people around her. Therese's ambivalence towards the women

she encounters is shown through the figurative language utilized. In Therese's mind, there seems to be two types of women: desirable or frightening. It is mostly when the women become frightening, that narration reverts to the fairy tale rhetoric. The characterization of these women is not necessarily static, as a slight movement or change in demeanor can change Therese's view of them. The first moment reflecting this is her meeting with another salesperson at Frankenberg's, Mrs. Robichek. The description of Mrs. Robichek is reminiscent of a fantastical creature. During Therese's lunch break at Frankenberg's, someone sits down next to her, and Therese thinks that she does not have to look up, as she already knows what they look like: "It would be like all the fifty-year-old faces of women who worked at Frankenberg's, stricken with an everlasting exhaustion and terror, the eyes distorted behind glasses that enlarged or made smaller, the cheeks splotched with rouge that did not brighten the grayness underneath. Therese could not look" (14). The effect of this passage comes through the exaggerated figurative language used. The women are not described as "tired," but have faces that have been "stricken" as with a sword or a curse, "with an everlasting exhaustion and terror". Through this, the narrator/Therese is emphasizing that working at Frankenberg's is not just a job, but instead a life-long curse. By using this language, Highsmith is laying the groundwork for the on-edge mood of the novel.

The inclusion of Mrs. Robichek conveys two things to the reader: (1) Therese tends to dramatize her fear; and (2) Therese has a paradoxical view of older women as grotesque, simultaneously as she has an inner motivation to gain their favor. As the woman speaks to her, Therese recognizes her as "the face whose exhaustion had made her see all the other faces. It was the woman Therese had seen creeping down the marble stairs from the mezzanine at about six-thirty one evening when the store was empty, sliding her hands down the broad marble banister to take some of the weight from her bunioned feet" (15). In this passage, the narrator continues to present this woman as a sort of creature "creeping" and "sliding" as she moves. In one way, this passage reflects Therese's fear of how her future could turn out if she were to continue working at Frankenberg's. This passage, therefore, functions to highlight Therese's ambition to distance herself from the women at Frankenberg's. This is shown to be a motivator for Therese. The description of Mrs. Robichek also exemplifies her ambivalence when it comes to older women. While she sees them as grotesque creatures, she also craves their attention and acknowledgment. The woman introduces herself and shows Therese some kindness, "If you want to ask me anything' – the woman said with nervous uncertainty, as if she were trying to deliver a message before they would be cut off or separated – 'come up and talk to me some time. My name is Mrs.

Robichek, Mrs. Ruby Robichek, five forty-four” (15). Through this short conversation, Therese’s view of Mrs. Robichek completely changes: “And suddenly the woman’s ugliness disappeared, because her reddish brown eyes behind the glasses were gentle, and interested in her” (15). By inserting a comma, the clause “and interested in her” comes as an add-on, which betrays the importance of the statement for Therese. From being described as a creature “creeping” and “sliding” as she moves, Therese’s image of Mrs. Robichek turns almost maternal in its description, as her eyes turn ‘reddish-brown’ and ‘gentle’. Therese is not necessarily interested in the individuality of the women she meets – her interest lies in their display of affection or interest in her.

Mrs. Robichek is not the first to get this treatment, which shows that there is a pattern to Therese’s approach to relationships. In these first three chapters, the reader is also introduced to the character of Sister Alicia, a nun who worked at Therese’s boarding school. The introduction of the two characters, Sister Alicia, and Mrs. Robichek, have two different, distinct narrative functions. Because of this, the two characters are also introduced differently in the narrative. Thus, we can see how Highsmith’s form of writing influences the plot and characterization in the story. Therese’s encounter with Mrs. Robichek is of importance, as the scene utilizes direct speech. All of Mrs. Robichek and Therese’s utterings are reported directly, thereby grounding the scene. This is significant, as Mrs. Robichek is the first woman the reader encounters at the same time as Therese. On the previous page, Therese reminisces of Sister Alicia, who is only introduced through Therese’s recollections. Although it is made clear that Sister Alicia was formative in her school years, the reader is not privy to a scene where the two interact. The reader is informed of Sister Alicia’s importance through the description and memories Therese has of her. Uncertainty is instilled within the reader as the narrator’s recollections are less impactful than the directly reported speech employed in depicting Therese’s encounter with Mrs. Robichek. Despite this uncertainty, the visuals are described with particular care, especially the physical features of Sister Alicia.

Although Therese’s recollections are subjective and represent her own experience of the situation, the blunt descriptions imply that she does not observe the other characters through rose-tinted glasses. The physical features of the characters often align with their personality traits. Sister Alicia is described as “bony and reddish,” which are not features that are stereotypically regarded as beautiful. However, it is through Therese’s comparisons that we see her affinity with the person she is describing. Therefore, although Sister Alicia is “bony and reddish,” as Therese remembers her, she envisions her face as “bony and reddish like pink stone when the sunlight was on it” (14). It is through Highsmith’s use of similes we

can see the effect Sister Alicia had on Therese. Pink stone is said to be a stone that represents unconditional love. Thus, we can see that Therese perceived Sister Alicia as a safe adult. There is also a focus on being *seen*, as Therese remembers: “Sister Alicia in a thousand places, her small blue eyes always finding her out among the other girls, seeing her differently, Therese knew, from all the other girls, yet the pink lips always set in the same line” (14). Sister Alicia is not presented as especially affectionate, but she is shown to care. As already pointed out in the case of Mrs. Robichek, outward appearance becomes a symbol of who they are as characters in connection with Therese and therefore what they signify to her. The emphasis on these women *seeing* her, therefore influences her view of them. Despite the initial blunt and non-flattering description, their ability to perceive Therese, even as she remains passive, causes her to attach herself to them.

As Mrs. Robichek shows Therese attention, Therese likens her to the same sort of figure in her life as Sister Alicia, instead of appreciating Mrs. Robichek as her own individual. This highlights her need for female validation. After a few days without contact, Therese encounters Mrs. Robichek as they are both finishing work. Throughout this encounter, which spans a few pages, Therese’s anxiety and will to submit are highlighted in her responses to Mrs. Robichek. As they meet, Therese is disappointed when Mrs. Robichek does not meet her with enthusiasm. “Hello,’ said Mrs. Robichek, so indifferently that Therese was crushed. Therese did not dare look at Mrs. Robichek again” (19). This meeting is emblematic of Therese’s tendency to project images onto the women she meets. When they do not live up to that image, her view of them deteriorates. “Her voice was dreary, not as it had been that day in the cafeteria. Now she was like the hunched old woman Therese had seen creeping down the stairs” (19). As Mrs. Robichek does not continue to show explicit, high-energy interest in Therese, Therese regresses to her original view of Mrs. Robichek as a woman with a hunched back and creeping tendencies, almost likening her to a witch (Castle 3). This accentuates that Therese’s view of women is split into two categories: women who can be desired, and women who frighten her; desired in the sense that she can get some sort of satisfaction from them – sexual or relational.

Throughout the novel, Highsmith uses descriptions of rooms to characterize the secondary characters. As Therese comes into Mrs. Robichek’s house, we see how the description of the setting is meant to mirror Mrs. Robichek’s melancholy and lonely demeanor. The house is described as dark and gloomy, with no lights in the hall, and when the lights are turned on Therese can spot that it is not clean. She can see that the bed is not made

and wonders “Did she get up as tired as she went to bed” (20). As they talk, Therese spaces out:

What happened was that Mrs. Robichek edged away from her strangely, as if she were in a trance, suddenly murmuring instead of talking, and lay down flat on her back on the unmade bed. It was because of the continued murmuring, the faint smile of apology, and the terrible, shocking ugliness of the short heavy body with the bulging abdomen, and the apologetically tilted head still so politely looking at her, that she could not make herself listen. (Highsmith 20)

This exemplifies Therese’s anxiety related to the setting, which leads her to shut down completely. The exaggeration of Mrs. Robichek’s figure paints a frightening picture. Instead of being a motherly figure, which is what Therese initially projects upon her, Mrs. Robichek ends up being Therese’s hypothetical captor. “Mrs. Robichek was the hunchbacked keeper of the dungeon. And she had been brought here to be tantalized” (23). As Therese continues to be paralyzed, she reckons that if she does not fight against it “The chains would lock, and she would be one with the hunchback” (25). Mrs. Robichek ends up feeding her something with a spoon, which Therese swallowed obediently “not caring if it were poison” (25). This continues the characterization of Mrs. Robichek as a witch, whose motive is to trap the unsuspecting princess. This scene is significant, as it sets the stage for Therese’s meeting with Carol. As pointed out by the literary critic Terry Castle: “The atmosphere becomes suffocating, Robichek ever more witch-like, and Therese, having ingested something ‘sweet and burning,’ ends up falling into a sort of coma in an overstuffed chair . . . It also uncannily prefigures Therese’s first visit, only a few pages later, to Carol’s house” (Castle 3-4). This scene implies that Therese is easily seduced; the seduced in relation to the character of the “seducer-corruptor” (Marks 357). Therefore, despite Mrs. Robichek’s seemingly good intentions, Therese interprets her actions as nefarious, and thus, Therese is further characterized by her incapability to reject or refuse the older woman.

As Therese, even before her meeting with Carol, becomes categorized as “the seduced,” Carol implicitly receives the role of the seducer-corruptor. As mentioned, in post-war America, there was an implicit fear of feminine lesbians, as the feminine lesbian was seen as a threat through her supposed ability and desire to seduce straight, suburban housewives. Through this we see that Marks’ “seducer-corruptor” and the “cold war femme” are intrinsically connected. In the following paragraphs, I am going to present how the characterization of Carol fits in with the prominent trope of the “lesbian wife,” and how Therese’s rejection of the role as the seduced subverts this characterization. The main difference between *The Price of Salt* and other popular lesbian pulps of the 1950s is the subversion of the set trajectory at the end. This subversion gains its revolutionary status

precisely because Highsmith utilizes set tropes and stereotypes which predict an ending consistent with the established lesbian narratives. As mentioned, the lesbian wife was prevalent, not only in literature, but also in popular pseudo-scientific non-fiction as well (Gutterman 479). Lauren Jae Gutterman presents the character of the lesbian wife as “almost always white, middle-class and conventionally feminine in appearance, the imagined lesbian wife suggested that although a household might appear ‘normal’ on the outside, it could shelter perversions imperceptible even to those within it” (476). As Therese sees Carol for the first time, she is described as “tall and fair, her long figure graceful in the loose fur coat that she held open with a hand on her waist. Her eyes were gray, colorless, yet dominant as light or fire, and caught by them, Therese could not look away” (Highsmith 39).

Carol is introduced as “Mrs. H. F. Aird”. As she is referred to by her husband’s name; is shopping for her child, Rindy, in the middle of the day; and is described as wearing a fur coat, Carol is presented as the prototype of an upper-middle class, suburban housewife. However, not long after her introduction, the reader is made aware that she is in the middle of a divorce from her husband Harge. Moreover, Carol implies that the divorce is her choice: “I didn’t want any more children, because I was afraid our marriage was going on the rocks anyway, even with Rindy” (83). It is also implied that Harge still wants her back: “I’ve never done anything to embarrass him socially, and that’s all he cares about really” (131). Through this, we can see that Carol’s inherent qualities challenge the societal glue of the 1950s. Gutterman summarizes the threat of the lesbian wife as the following: “the lesbian wife imperilled her children’s welfare, her marriage’s future and the household’s sanctity: the building blocks of the nation’s post-war political and economic systems” (476). These are the allegations against Carol from the start, even before she meets Therese. Frank Caprio, a psychoanalytic psychiatrist in the 1950s, warned that the real danger of lesbianism “was not homosexual sex itself, but in the words of one Dr Richmond, these ‘homosexual attitudes toward life’” (Gutterman 481). What “homosexual attitudes” encompasses seems to be a rejection of the heteronormative and an acceptance of controversial societal institutions, such as divorce. Therefore, when examining the novel through the eyes of the contemporary readers in 1952, we can see that Carol is shown, both in appearance and attitude, to be an embodiment of the “lesbian wife”.

By including Mrs. Robichek, Highsmith is highlighting the perceived danger of the conventional attractiveness of the lesbian wife. Although Carol and Mrs. Robichek’s scenes mirror each other, Therese has vastly different reactions to each situation. The correlation between the scenes seems to suggest that Therese has the proclivity to be “seduced” into a



“lesbian lifestyle,” but that it does not happen before a conventionally attractive, seemingly straight woman, takes an interest in her. This interpretation hinges on homophobic understandings of lesbians as predators, which was a prevalent belief at the time. Highsmith uses this to her advantage in the characterization of both Carol and Therese. There is a similarity between Highsmith’s crime novels, such as *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and *The Price of Salt*. While *The Price of Salt* does not involve murder, the crime being reported in the novel is the emergence of Therese’s lesbianism and her relationship with Carol. “Lesbianism is the ‘crime’ here, and has the same giddy, anxious, plot-driving role that murder, stalking, extortion, voyeurism, and other criminal tropes play in the classic Highsmith thrillers” (Castle 2). Lesbians, in the same way as communists, were argued to be great in number and disguised as “normal” citizens (Gutterman 479). Following this reasoning, Therese and Carol through their characterization as conventionally attractive young women are the biggest threat to the status quo of post-war America. Therefore, their budding lesbian relationship acts as a tension builder in the book, as their relationship is not only a threat to the men in their lives, but also to the societal glue which was supposed to hold American society together after the war.

However, although Carol’s characterization indicates her role as the lesbian seducer, Therese, despite her passivity, is the one who initially pursues Carol. However, due to the characterization of Therese in the first three chapters, this act reads as a subversion. Therese comes across as a passive character, who is unable to take life into her own hands. Despite this, after their brief meeting in the department store, Therese writes Carol a Christmas card and signs with her employee number instead of her name (44). By not signing her name, Therese is deflecting from the fact that she is a woman, and she is subconsciously, through this act, positioning herself as a viable option for Carol. Therese takes on a non-gendered or even masculine persona to be able to pursue Carol. Carol ends up calling the store, asking for the employee. As they talk Therese thinks, “she had thought it was from a man” (47). This moment in the story is a “make-or-break”-moment, as a probable reaction from Carol would be to say “thank you” for the letter and end the conversation, but instead, Carol asks her out for a cup of coffee. When they meet, Therese utters this thought aloud, “I’m sure you thought it was a man who sent you the Christmas card, didn’t you’ ‘I did. . .’ ‘I’m sorry.’ ‘No, I’m delighted.’ She leaned back in the booth. ‘I doubt very much if I’d have gone to lunch with him. No, I’m delighted” (51). Both Therese, by making the choice to pursue Carol, and Carol, by taking the initiative to meet, take on “masculine” roles in their relationship. Despite their feminine appearance, their queerness makes them subvert gender roles. Therese later remarks

this, “She had heard about girls falling in love, and she knew what kind of people they were and what they looked like. Neither she nor Carol looked like that” (98), suggesting that the only women who could be lesbians were butch women. When Carol meets Therese’s boyfriend, Richard, for the first time, Therese becomes jealous of how Carol sees Richard, “She likes him, Therese thought. . . the gangling young man with unruly blond hair, the broad lean shoulders, and the big funny feet in moccasins” (105). This description shows how Therese assumes Carol perceives Richard. Thus, by describing Richard, Therese subconsciously displays her insecurities as a woman who is interested in another woman.

Therese and Carol’s relationship is made more complex as their lack of framework for what a lesbian relationship looks like, results in a pattern characterized by violent language and mother/daughter dynamics. There is a societal fascination with the “taboo” which permeates *The Price of Salt*. Highsmith writes the relationship between Therese and Carol as a careful combination of voyeurism, power dynamics, and desire. Therese submits herself to Carol as soon as they meet, conveying at several separate times that she would allow Carol to do anything to her: “not caring if she died that instant, if Carol strangled her, prostrate and vulnerable in her bed, the intruder” (66). At this moment, Therese has not yet acknowledged her desire for women. Therefore, the language of violence she uses when thinking of Carol can be interpreted as a substitute for desirous language towards women that she does not yet possess. In addition, this sort of language suggests anxiety related to the idea of intimate relations between women. Therese, who does not understand her own desire for Carol, expresses in this instance an urge to be close to Carol, simultaneously as she subconsciously regards her own desire to be deplorable, and criminal. This follows Castle’s statement that lesbianism is seen as criminal, and that in *The Price of Salt* lesbianism has the same plot-driving role as murder has in other Highsmith novels (2). Therefore, as these characters lack a reference to real lesbian love, Highsmith writes characters who fumble in the dark as they grow closer. As a result, they resort to pictures of violence and lesbian stereotypes to define their relationship and desire. In the following paragraphs I am going to show how Highsmith’s initial characterization of Therese and Carol’s relationship as a mother/daughter replica, places *The Price of Salt* into a lesbian literary tradition.

In the lesbian fairy tale, the mother of the younger woman must be absent in some way or other. “The mother of the younger woman is either dead or in some explicit way inadequate. Her absence is implied in the young woman’s insistent need for a good-night kiss” (Marks 357). This was the primary understanding of feminine lesbian relationships in pulp novels, “beautiful, sophisticated types who temporarily take innocent girls as lovers in a

mother/child-type relationship” (Keller 389). By excluding the mother from the narrative, the mother-daughter dynamic which emerges between the lovers becomes less unnerving. To the same effect, we see that the exclusion of Carol’s daughter, Rindy, from the narrative, creates a more comfortable space for the reader to root for Therese and Carol’s relationship.

“Highsmith is scrupulous never to give Rindy any narrative or emotional airtime. Therese sees her only fleetingly, in a photograph. Rindy is, after all, the real threat to Therese’s happiness: her covert rival in what could rapidly emerge as a primal battle for Carol’s love” (4). Despite Rindy being the personification of “the price of salt,” Highsmith does not grant her a big presence in the narrative. In *Carol*, this is reversed, as Carol’s custody battle takes center stage in the narrative. In *The Price of Salt*, although the custody battle is mentioned, through seeing the narrative through Therese’s eyes, the focus is much more on how Carol’s custody battle affects Therese. Therefore, their roles become Therese as an orphan with a mother, and Carol as a mother without a child. Initially, this leads to a dynamic where the two aim to fill the roles required by the other.

The most unsettling and clear example of the pseudo-incestuous dynamic between Therese and Carol is a scene where Therese is ushered to bed by Carol, followed by Carol making warm milk for Therese, which she drinks in bed. In this scene, both Carol and Therese play into the mother-daughter dynamic. The milk is a representation of this dynamic. When Therese drinks it, she notices a “mélange of organic flavors. The milk seemed to taste of bone and blood, of warm flesh, or hair, saltless as chalk yet alive as a growing embryo. It was hot through and through to the bottom of the cup, and Therese drank it down” (67). The words the narrator uses when describing this act of care, pervert the intention. By using words that relate to the body, there is an implication that Carol is giving Therese breast milk. “Bone and blood”, “warm flesh” and “hair” all indicate that the milk brings Therese a closeness to Carol’s body. This is further emphasized as the milk is likened to a growing embryo – which heightens the association to the act of birthing.

As Therese drinks the milk, she becomes drowsy and begins to tell Carol things she would never tell in a fully conscious condition: “She heard her voice rise suddenly in a babble, like a spring that she had no control over, and she realized she was in tears” (67). This scene mirrors Therese’s experience in Mrs. Robichek’s home, and again Therese feels as though she has been drugged or poisoned. “Therese drank it down, as people in fairy tales drink the potion that will transform, or the unsuspecting warrior the cup that will kill” (67). This leads Therese to tell Carol about her mother, despite her insistence that “she did not want to talk about her mother. Her mother was not that important” (68). In this scene, Therese’s

lack of a mother figure becomes directly connected to the figure of Carol. This becomes mingled, as Therese equates her feelings for Carol to the lyrics in Billie Holliday's "Easy Living": "... *I never regret . . . the years I'm giving . . . They're easy to give, when you're in love . . . I'm happy to do whatever I do for you . . .* That was her song. That was everything she felt for Carol" (136). Therefore, although Therese is starting to realize that her feelings for Carol are romantic, her actions are still implicitly connected to the lack of a mother figure in her life – which is emphasized when she asks Carol "Can I kiss you good night?" (137).

## 1.2 Infantilization of Lesbians in Literature

Although Therese and Carol's relationship takes place after her schoolyears, Therese is still a teen – only nineteen at the beginning of the story: "At nineteen, she was anxious" (13). The narrative spans only a few months, but by the end, as Therese is asked her age by a glamorous actress, she answers "I'm twenty-one" (284). Although this is a false statement, it exemplifies Therese's personal need to be perceived as an adult – a need that grows throughout the novel. Following the assumption which was established in nineteenth-century novels, "that these [same sex] loves would be superseded by heterosexual attachments» (Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* 300), Therese's love for Carol is conflated to be a schoolgirl crush by the other characters in the narrative, which will subside as she becomes an adult. This belief is heavily based on the patriarchal indulgence of adolescent women. A young woman is not seen to know what she wants or understand how life works. Therefore, if she shows a 'preference' toward other women as a child and teenager, a patriarchal society does not necessarily see this as a threat to heteronormativity, as they believe that she will end up prioritizing men as she reaches adulthood. Therese's response to this characterization varies throughout the narrative.

In *The Price of Salt*, Therese is characterized through the infantilization she endures from the people surrounding her. She is not only infantilized by the male characters, but also by Carol and Carol's former girlfriend Abby. This infantilization serves not only to portray society's view of queer women but also as a motivator for Therese, as she works to escape the role of the "schoolgirl" which has been assigned to her. By the end of the narrative, the characters who earlier have remarked on her youth, observe Therese's physical transformation from schoolgirl to a young adult woman. The implicit understanding is that as Therese transforms from girl to woman, her priorities will shift from women to men. As remarked by Marks: "a schoolgirl crush is but a phase in the emotional development of the young woman, something that will pass" (358). However, this is subverted, as Therese returns to Carol at the

resolution of the plot. In the following paragraphs I am going to show how Therese is infantilized by Richard, and how his view of her as a ‘helpless girl’ causes him to take on a role of patriarchal protector.

As Therese lacks any family of her own, the roles of parental figures end up being substituted by other people in her life. As we have seen, Carol initially fills the maternal role, and Richard, although not as explicitly, also takes an initiative to parent Therese. The characters in *The Price of Salt* all have a perception of the concept of lesbians. This ranges from believing lesbianism to be a temporary phase, regarding it as pathological, and looking at lesbians as corrupting forces in straight women’s lives. Richard subscribes to the idea of the schoolgirl-crush, which is shown through his infantilization of Therese. He first states that Therese has “a hell of a crush on her [Carol]” (153) and then asks “Don’t you think it’s pretty silly? It’s like a crush that schoolgirls get” (154). If only looking at the surface of the narrative, it can seem as though Highsmith is hinting at some sort of truth to these words. By adding certain known stereotypes such as the lesbian seducer and the seduced schoolgirl, Highsmith misdirects the reader. Thus, when the two lovers end up together in the end, the reader is surprised. This is especially clear regarding the inclusion of Sister Alicia. When Therese has her first date with Carol, she “did not mention Sister Alicia whom she adored and thought of so often . . . Because since yesterday morning, Sister Alicia had been thrust far away, far below the woman who sat opposite her” (49). Therese’s impulsiveness is received as childishness, as she replaces one schoolgirl crush with another. However, Richard’s statement is seemingly said in hopes that Therese would reject the position of the schoolgirl in love with her schoolmistress. Instead, Therese says, “You don’t understand’ . . . ‘I’m wide awake. I never felt more awake” (154), insisting on her autonomy and sound state of mind.

Richard’s understanding of lesbian relationships plays right into the popular idea of the lesbian wife chronically seducing younger women, and by extension, he looks at the younger woman as a victim. As explained by Julie T. Guth: “It is the seducer image which, in large part, provides society with the justification for isolating lesbians from the social mainstream” (6). This understanding of lesbian sexuality is what prompts Richard to view Carol as a criminal, whose aim is to corrupt Therese. “I’ll tell you one thing, I think your friend knows what she’s doing. I think she’s committing a crime against you. I’ve half a mind to report her to somebody, but the trouble is you’re not a child. You’re just acting like one” (155). Therefore, Richard’s perception of Carol as a lesbian seducer cements his view of Therese as a petulant child.

Effectively, Richard's character is the antithesis of Therese; his function in the narrative is as a person Therese can rebel against. Their attitudes differ – not only when it comes to their view of her budding relationship with Carol, but also in their philosophical outlook on the world. Richard is condescending towards Therese. Despite Therese's constant rejection of Richard throughout their relationship, he continues to believe that Therese will “come around”. When he questions their ability to go on a trip together, since Therese rejects his invitation to his house for Sunday dinner, he says, “We aren't getting very far, are we?” he said, suddenly earnest. ‘If you don't even want to spend Sundays with me, how're we going to spend months together in Europe?’ (57). To this, Therese responds with “Well – if you want to call it all off, Richard” (57) and “All right – I know. I'm not in love with you' . . . ‘If you ever want to call the whole thing off – I mean, stop seeing me at all, then do it.’ It was not the first time she had said that either” (58). Despite this, Richard asks “Do you love me at all, Terry? How do you love me?” to which Therese answers “I don't love you, but I like you. I felt tonight, a few minutes ago,’ she said, hammering the words out however they sounded, because they were true, ‘that I felt closer to you than I ever have, in fact” (58). Richard takes this as a sign to make a sexual advance toward Therese, which she shamefully rejects. When she says that she cannot go to Europe with him because she does not want to sleep with him, Richard's reaction is to laugh it off, saying “I'm sorry I asked you. Forget about it, honey, will you? And in Europe, too?” (59). His unshakable belief in heteronormativity makes him inclined to think that it is just a matter of time, despite tangible evidence of the opposite.

Even before Therese meets Carol, Richard is established as a character who disregards Therese's statements and actively talks over her. Although he initially supports her career as a set designer, he is less than convincing in the role of supportive boyfriend, as the extent of his support does not go that far. Richard is much more interested in the support he can receive from Therese than help her further her artistic endeavors. Despite this, he views Therese as someone he has a responsibility for, more like a child than a grown woman. Richard sees Therese's steady rejection of him as a sign that she has not yet come to her senses, rather than acknowledging her statements to hold genuine conviction.

Therefore, as Richard gets wind of Therese's budding friendship with Carol, his condescension reaches new heights. His initial condescension toward women is paired with a homophobic fright of the ‘lesbian wife’ corrupting his young, and by default innocent, girlfriend. Richard's initial role of the intrusive suitor – the man constantly pursuing one of the lesbian characters despite her perceived indifference towards him – is at one point superseded by the ‘father’ role. Although Richard has no familial ties to Therese, his gender

allows him to take on the role of the patriarchal figure in their relationship dynamic. This dynamic reveals itself in the chapters after Richard meets Carol. His inquiries follow the strain of whether Carol drinks, what type of car she drives, and where she intends to bring Therese while on their trip. As Richard and Carol converse about the trip, Therese becomes impatient. “Why did they sit here having a conference about it? Now they were talking about temperatures, and the state of Washington” (148). While Therese interprets Richard’s questions as a revelation of his indifference towards Carol, I would argue that Richard’s questions are meant to help him gauge Carol’s character and whether he should ‘allow’ this trip to take place. Despite having no real power over Therese’s actions, he acts as though he does. This conviction becomes more apparent as his suspicion toward Therese’s sentiments and Carol’s intentions heightens.

Richard’s understanding of himself as Therese’s savior is emphasized as she pulls away. When he understands Therese and Carol’s relationship to be romantic, he reacts with anger. His last letter to Therese is stacked with negative adjectives and similes. He describes her relationship with Carol as “sordid and pathological” and “rootless and infantile” (248). Further, he says that Therese’s “choice” of being with Carol is “like living on lotus blossoms or some sickening candy instead of the bread and meat of life” (248). The act of eating candy instead of real food is often connected to children. By using this simile, Richard, again, likens Therese to a child. The mentioning of lotus blossoms acts as a reference to Homer’s *Odyssey*, where Odysseus’ crew lands on an island where they are offered lotus to eat by the natives. “Now none who consumed the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus any longer had the urge to bring news back or continue the voyage, but were set upon staying right there, with the Lotus-Eaters, munching lotus, their homecoming all forgotten” (Homer 140). It is clear through the inclusion of the act of eating lotus flowers and through his statement that “I wish I had acted then before it was too late, because I loved you enough to try to rescue you. Now I don’t” (248), that Richard positions himself in the role of Odysseus – the hero of the story. Consequently, Therese becomes the child, the subordinate who would need saving. As a result, Therese’s romantic affection for women comes to be regarded to be the same as being drugged, docile, and in need of saving.

### **1.3 Therese’s Physical Transformation: An Emergence into Adulthood?**

Through this characterization of Therese and the focus on her development and change, it seems as though Highsmith intends the story to end with Therese having grown up – having

shed her lesbian interests as a snake sheds its skin, and by extension, left her childish whims in the past. This is emphasized as the story elements of *The Price of Salt* correlate with the lesbian fairy tale, where the time aspect of the schoolgirl-plot hints at a natural end of the lesbian experience of the main character; the end of the school year means the end of the lesbian experience. Effectively, due to the frequency of the Sappho model in other lesbian narratives, there was an assumed understanding between the author and the reader that the schoolgirl will turn straight by the end of the narrative. As an extension of this, by using the bildungsroman story structure – where the idealistic hero goes on a journey, has a realization, and subsequently comes back home with a more realistic vision of how to achieve their goal – the reader can be led to believe, through familiarity with the genres, that Therese truthfully has returned to the heterosexual realm by the story’s denouement.

Therese’s inner development is highlighted by the focus on her physical transformation. There is an understanding, which is shared with the reader, that physical transformation begets an inner transformation. After being left by Carol, Therese meets up with Danny, a good friend of hers who previously tried to kiss her, while she was in a relationship with Richard. Both Therese herself and Danny remark on her appearance. “He smiled, looking at her hair, her lips, and it occurred to her Danny had never seen her with this much makeup on. ‘You look grown up all of a sudden,’ he said. ‘You changed your hair, didn’t you?’” (268). In contrast to Danny’s tone of nonchalance, when Carol says, “And now – you’re all grown up – with grown-up hair and grown-up clothes” (275), there is a melancholy tone which is underlined through Therese’s description of Carol’s eyes, which were “more serious now, somehow wistful, too, despite the assurance of the proud head” (275). Therese and Danny’s conversation veers towards Therese’s interest in women:

“I’m not going to see her [Carol] again. I don’t want to.” “But somebody else?” “Another woman?” Therese shook her head. “No.” Danny looked at her and smiled, slowly. “That’s what matters. Or rather, that’s what makes it not matter.” “What do you mean?” “I mean, you’re so young, Therese. You’ll change. You’ll forget.” She did not feel young. (Highsmith 269)

These conversations, with both Danny and Carol, draw straight lines between age, maturity, and same-sex attraction. Paired with Therese’s post-breakup-glow-up, Danny saying that Therese is young, and will forget, seems to suggest that the reader is supposed to think that Therese has grown past her interest in women. This perception is strengthened as Therese remembers that Carol once said that “every adult has secrets” (269). The understanding is that



Therese has grown up, and through that regained her interest in men; her dalliance with lesbianism is therefore regarded as her “secret”, bringing her into adulthood.

Following her conversation with Danny, Therese realizes she wants to change her wardrobe completely. “Everything she had now, the clothes she remembered in her closet in New York, seemed juvenile, like clothes that had belonged to her years ago. In Chicago, she had looked around in the stores and hungered for the clothes she couldn’t buy yet. All she could afford was a new haircut” (271). When she is back in New York, she buys a sixty-dollar dress which she wears to meet Carol. When they meet, Carol wears the same clothes she wore the first time they met: “the same fur coat, the same black suede pumps she had worn the day Therese first saw her, but now a red scarf set off the blonde lifted head” (274). Carol wearing the same clothes as the first time they met denotes a nostalgia on her part – implying that she has an intention with her look. Wearing the same outfit is a way of reminding Therese of what she was intrigued by the first time they met at Frankenberg’s. As she repeats the outfit, with one alteration, the alteration also gains meaning. The headscarf is not necessarily important, but the specification of the color is of significance. Red is often known to represent both love and passion. In this case, it becomes a physical sign that Carol is not ready to let Therese go – as is made clear later as she says: “I was hoping you might like to come and live with me, but I guess you won’t” (278). Carol sees the physical change in Therese as a sign that Therese has given her up – “You know, you look very fine,” Carol said. “You’ve come out all of a sudden. Is that what comes of getting away from me?” (275). As argued by Tom Perrin: “This change, as much as her changes in clothes, makeup, and hair, signifies Therese’s coming of age. She has “all of a sudden” (257) [268] become ‘all grown up - with grown-up hair and grown-up clothes’ (264) [275]” (394). Therefore, through this scene we see that the interaction between the characters is heavily affected by their outward appearance; the direct physical characterization of both Therese and Carol is symbolic of their inner lives.

Therese’s sudden emergence into adulthood is a cultural sign which suggests a rejection of lesbianism. Despite this, I would argue that Therese’s adulthood is a prerequisite for Therese and Carol’s happy ending – as it is just at the end, when Therese has gained her realistic streak, that a relationship between the two could be plausible. However, as Therese meets Carol at the bar, seemingly for the last time, it seems as though Therese buys into the cultural assumption of lesbianism as an adolescent trait; that Carol was the only woman she could be interested in. This shows how comprehensive the institution of compulsory heterosexuality is in the subconscious. This rejection of lesbianism is not an isolated incidence which only occurs in Therese’s case. It is not just a literary phenomenon. Internal

rejection of lesbianism often stems from negative perceptions and depictions of lesbians in literature, film, and pseudoscientific studies. In the next chapter, I am going to discuss the question of how compulsory heterosexuality is displayed in *The Price of Salt* and look at the contingent relationship between fictional literature and public opinion.

## 2 Compulsory Heterosexuality: Therese's Acceptance and Rejection of Lesbian Sexuality

As mentioned in the introduction, the idea of “compulsory heterosexuality” hinges on the presupposition that popular literature and culture are major influences on the psyche and attitudes of the public. Erica B. Edwards and Jennifer Esposito aimed to define popular culture in their book *Intersectional Analysis as a Method to Analyze Popular Culture: Clarity in the Matrix*. In it they refer to different theorists, and put forward two definitions: (a) pop culture is “produced by lay people to express their shared cultural and social interests”; and (b) “popular culture is an ideological institution that exists to transmit and maintain power and control” (8). These two definitions are not mutually exclusive. However, when I connect the idea of pop culture influencing the minds of the public with Adrienne Rich’s “compulsory heterosexuality,” my focus is on the ideological institution of popular culture, and not individual authors and filmmakers. In authoring her famous essay, one of Rich’s concerns in coining the terms compulsory heterosexuality was the erasure of lesbian desire even by feminist scholars aiming to explain the oppression of women. “Heterosexuality is presumed to be the ‘sexual preference’ of ‘most women,’ either implicitly or explicitly. In none of these books, which concern themselves with mothering, sex roles, relationships, and societal prescriptions for women, is compulsory heterosexuality even examined as an institution powerfully affecting all these, or the idea of ‘preference’ or ‘innate orientation’ even indirectly questioned” (Rich 285). Rich presents the reluctance to acknowledge compulsory heterosexuality as a contributor to the oppression of all women, not just lesbians. The presupposition that the norm is to be heterosexual, and that anything else is brought on by outside influences, was a prevalent thought in studies surrounding queer people in the first half of the twentieth century. Psychoanalysts of the 1940s and 50s believed that lesbian sexuality was abnormal and curable (Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 135). Their motivation to promote this belief was brought on by the widespread emphasis on “normality”, which permeated American society after World War II. With this as a background, in this chapter I am going to look at four distinct aspects of *The Price of Salt*; their relation to compulsory heterosexuality and examine how these various aspects influence Therese’s character. Firstly, I will elaborate on the interconnectedness between societal repression of

non-straight sexualities and the consequent literary representations created in tandem with those heteronormative dogmas.

Despite the societal fascination with the taboo growing simultaneously as the widespread pocketbook industry of the 1950s, lesbianism was still an underground sexuality (Gutterman 479). This means that even though the “menacing” figures of the “lesbian wife” and the “butch” appeared in literature and pseudoscientific journals, most of society did not acknowledge or pay mind to any type of lesbian sexuality. This followed the general proclivity to ignore the existence of women’s sexuality. As in any hetero-dominated society, the lesbian in 1950s United States was then “ascribed the contradictory positions of the invisible presence” (Jackie Stacey qtd. in Vicinus 468). Due to the idea of external influence being the cause of lesbian sexuality, it was in the interest of the nation to suppress information about non-heterosexual identities. The result of this was seen in both film and publishing, although neither of these industries were directly restricted by the United States government. The Motion Picture Production Code, which was enforced in Hollywood studios from 1934 to 1961, proclaimed that “sex perversion or any inference of it is forbidden” (Noriega 22). The censorship of literature was enforced by the United States Postal Service. In 1873, following the Comstock Act, it was made illegal to send “obscene, lewd or lascivious,” ‘immoral,’ or ‘indecent’ publications through the mail” (Burnette). Novels which were seen to promote an ‘unhealthy lifestyle’ were therefore at risk of being sent back to their publishers. Because of this, as mentioned earlier, most of the novels written about lesbians involved lesbians committing suicide, going to mental hospitals, or “turning straight” (Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* 355; Mitchell 161). This was not necessarily due to homophobia on the part of the publishers, but often simply because their main objective was to make money. However, “lesbian expert” Frank Caprio used these tragic endings to argue that lesbians were pathologically unhappy and that any signs of happiness were only surface level. “He pointed to several instances of lesbian suicide in fiction” and tried to make the point that lesbians were simply different from other humans. Their problems were to be seen as a “manifestation of their perversity,” instead of a “part of the complex human condition” (Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 131). This case in point exemplifies the circularity of oppression of minority sexualities. Societal ideas regarding the immorality of lesbian sexuality led to censorship, which affected which lesbian narratives were told, which in turn led the public to believe that being a lesbian was an inherently tragic faith. Representations in literature affect the culture the literature is created in, at the same time as culture influences the literature written in that same culture.

However, literature written by lesbians did exist in the 1950s, which is explicitly mentioned in *The Price of Salt*, as Richard questions how Therese could have read Gertrude Stein and not James Joyce (38). This implies Therese's insight into the existence and lives of lesbians. This insight, albeit limited, is not a given. This is shown later, as Therese reflects upon having seen two butch lesbians. Initially, she does not understand lesbians as "women loving women", but rather as gender "inverts": "She had heard about girls falling in love, and she knew what kind of people they were and what they looked like. Neither she nor Carol looked like that" (98). Later in the narrative: "The two girls at the end of the bar whom she had noticed before, and now that they were leaving, she saw that they were in slacks. One had hair cut like a boy's. Therese looked away, aware that she avoided them, avoided being seen looking at them" (146). In the first half of the twentieth century, the existence of gay people was acknowledged, but their proclivity of loving the same gender was not seen as a result of an innate sexuality, but rather as gender confusion. As mentioned, if one follows Freud's thinking, although women had no signs of sexual preference towards other women, they could still be categorized as lesbians due to stereotypically "masculine" attributes. "Those attributes were a failure to adjust properly to the female role as his culture knew it" (Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 130). Freud believed that homosexuality was not something that could be cured, but that the goal should be to "help the homosexual find harmony, peace of mind, and full efficiency" (Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 134). Many psychoanalysts in the 1940s and 50s, maintained that the main goal of psychoanalysis in the case of a lesbian was to cure her of her 'illness' – same-sex attraction. This attitude was not reserved for just lesbians, as gay men were also regarded as 'inverted' men, therefore, not really men. Therese's initial belief that lesbians could only be 'butch', fits in with the reigning narrative of lesbians as inverted women. On the surface, Gertrude Stein would fit into this narrative, as she was famously known for her short hair and masculine style of self-presentation.

The idea of lesbians as masculine women, who were distanced from femininity and womanhood, was integral to upholding the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. Rejecting the womanhood of proclaimed lesbians worked to dissuade women from looking at lesbianism as a viable option. In the 1950s, there was an idea of what being a lesbian entailed. This understanding of lesbianism as outside of the norm, as cases of gender inversion, creates a society where young women dismiss their intimate feelings toward other women as platonic and exaggerate their platonic feelings toward men. Through this lens, I am going to first

examine how Therese's relationship with Richard is influenced by the idealization of heterosexual marriage.

## **2.1 The Intrusive Suitor: Therese's Road to Heteronormative Bliss**

Therese's choices and interests are heavily influenced by the forces of compulsory heterosexuality. Her choice to be with Richard is the most blatant example of this. The relationship between Therese and Richard is one of convenience. Therese herself says that she prefers Richard to other men, "she still wasn't in love with him, not after ten months, and maybe she never could be, though the fact remained that she liked him better than any one person she had ever known, certainly any man" (33). There does not seem to be any serious affection there. Therese is constantly both indifferent towards and annoyed at Richard. In one of the first scenes, where we see their interactions as a couple in a group setting, Richard both talks over and ignores Therese. "A comedy?" Therese asked. "Comedy. Three acts. Have you done any sets so far by yourself?" "How many sets will it take?" Richard asked, just as she was about to answer. . . Disappointedly, Therese heard their conversation settling down on Georgia and Rudy and other people she didn't know" (31). Several times, Therese tries to reject Richard, but when he is not discouraged, she simply gives up. Therese never follows through with ending it with Richard before Carol appears in her life. Therefore, through this section, I am going to look at how the societal idealization of heterosexual marriage convinces Therese that Richard is the best option for her, despite her indifference to him and her repulsion at the thought of being intimate with him.

Therese recognizes that she is not in love, as she remarks her feelings toward Richard "bore no resemblance to what she had read about love" (32). Despite this, Therese does not end their relationship, presumably because of the practicality of the relationship. Therese is not particularly enthusiastic about anything in her life – except her creative work. Due to her lack of interest in men in general, Richard seems to be the best fit for her life and aspirations. He does not want a "square" life and aspires to be a painter. Therese has no conviction that he will stick with it but does not challenge him as he fantasizes about it. She takes both her incapability of loving Richard and her interest in Carol in stride.

In a six-page scene in chapter 8, set on Christmas day, Therese and Richard first meet at his parents' house and then go to a park to fly a kite Richard has made. Therese describes the kite as a Russian kite with a cathedral painted on the back. This scene is one of the first scenes where Therese's feelings are described as unequivocally happy: "She was happier than

any of them. Happiness was a little like flying, she thought, like being a kite” (94). This is the first inclusion of the kite as a literary image and motif, and the kite is directly tied to her happiness. Her joy is connected to her new relationship with Carol, but at the same time it is not diminished by being in the company of Richard and his family. We are brought along as Therese wonders about how her and Richard’s life would be after they marry, Richard’s place in his family, and her own sentiments towards Mrs. Semco, Richard’s mother. The scene is effectively split into three different focal points: Therese’s joy, Richard’s family, and Richard cutting the string of the kite.

In this scene, Therese’s joy is brought out by her budding relationship with Carol. “This morning she had awakened in Carol’s house. Carol was like ... a light invisible to everyone but her” (93). Even when Carol is not in the story, her presence is continuous through Therese’s fixation on her. This fixation reaches a spiritual aspect, as Therese goes through an awakening. This follows the “lesbian fairytale” model. As Marks remarks: “If ... it is the younger woman who falls in love, the narrative is structured so as to insist on this love as an awakening” (357). As it is a Christmas day party, the whole of Richard’s family is present, which prompts Therese and Richard to go up to his room. While up there, Therese again, as she did both at Carol’s house and Mrs. Robichek’s apartment, describes the room in detail. Her conclusion, that she loves the room because it stays the same and in the same place, highlights that her relationship with Richard is not about attraction. Instead, the relationship hinges on what Richard can offer her: security, stability, continuity, and predictability, something she lacked growing up and feels she must strive towards.

“She loved the room – because it stayed the same and stayed in the same place – yet today she felt an impulse to burst from it. She was different from the person who had stood here three weeks ago” (93). Although Therese is yet to admit the romantic aspect of her infatuation with Carol, she knows her relationship with Carol should remain a secret: “Carol was like a secret spreading through her, spreading through this house, too, like a light invisible to everyone but her” (93). Later she notes that “Soon there would come the first lie” (96). Therese’s infatuation reaching a spiritual level prompts the prophetic language used. The sentence utilizes the prophetic perfect tense, as the event is so certain of fulfillment that the perfect tense is possible. In the Bible, the verb in these sentences would often be translated in the past tense (Zuck 117). Utilizing this way of writing creates an allusion within the text, and effectively likens Therese and Carol’s relationship to a prophesied account. This fits in with Marks’s presentation of the stock character of “the lesbian as good or bad fairy who is

fate” in lesbian fairytales. At this moment in the narrative, Therese views Carol as her good lesbian fairy whom she is fated to be with.

However, despite Therese’s awakening, she seems set to continue the previous trajectory. Therese views Richard as a projection of herself. As she watches Richard with his family, she thinks that “Richard might be an orphan himself, a changeling, left on the doorstep and brought up a son of this family” (94). It appears Therese’s “high” is brought on by Carol but is sustained by the relationships she is building with Richard’s family. She views Richard as a changeling and orphan in his family, as she herself feels in her own estranged family. But he has a family – and more importantly – a mother. In an onslaught of affection, “Therese embraced her [Mrs. Semco] and kissed her firmly on the cheek, her lips sinking into the soft powdered cheek, in that one second pouring out in the kiss, and in the convulsive clasp of her arm, the affection Therese really had for her, that Therese knew would hide itself again as if it did not exist, in the instant she released her” (95). Therese, as made clear through her introduction of him, is not in love with Richard. However, she identifies with him, and at times, envies him. Marrying, or simply being with Richard is the closest Therese comes to *being* Richard – to having his life. This sentiment evolves into resentment after Therese gets a clearer understanding of her feelings towards Carol and starts rejecting Richard in favor of Carol: “It was something else. She envied him. She envied him his faith that there would always be a place, a home, a job, someone else for him. She envied him having that attitude. She almost resented him for it” (153). Through her acknowledgment of her feelings towards Carol, Therese recognizes how her interest in Richard is based on her desire to have a place, a home, and a job.

However, before the narrative progresses, Therese seems to view both Carol and Richard as characters playing distinctive parts in her future. She acknowledges her interest in Carol while continuing to envisage a future with Richard. “It wouldn’t be any different, if they were married, Therese thought, visiting the family on Christmas day” (95). An example of heterosexual compulsion, which controls the consciousness, is the “idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage” (Rich 291). This can be observed through the scene as well, as the kite sports the image of a cathedral on the back, and Mrs. Semco insists on making a dress for Therese. Later, as Therese is going on the trip with Carol, the dress is delivered, revealing a white dress that resembles a wedding dress (Highsmith 170). The wedding imagery is clear throughout the scene. As Therese starts wondering how her married life would be, it is made clear that the idealization of marriage is something that affects her subconsciously. Although Carol becomes Therese’s object of romantic affection, Richard



continues to be the representation of heteronormative, familial love which can only be achieved through heterosexual romance and marriage. Thus, we see how compulsory heterosexuality persists, despite Therese's budding realization of same-sex love.

As the scene continues, the function of Richard's character changes to be a window into societal attitudes towards homosexuality. As they are flying the kite, Therese asks Richard whether he has ever been in love with a boy. This scene is important as it shows Therese openly questioning the way their society is organized and almost confiding in Richard.

"Were you ever in love with a boy?" "A boy?" Richard repeated, surprised. "Yes." Perhaps five seconds passed before he said, "No," in a positive and final tone. At least he troubled to answer, Therese thought. What would you do if you were, she had an impulse to ask, but the question would hardly serve a purpose. She kept her eyes on the kite. They were both looking at the same kite, but with what different thoughts in their minds. "Did you ever hear of it?" she asked. "Hear of it? You mean people like that? Of course." Richard was standing straight now, winding the string in with figure-of-eight movements of the stick. Therese said carefully, because he was listening, "I don't mean people like that. I mean two people who fall in love suddenly with each other, out of the blue. Say two men or two girls." Richard's face looked the same as it might have if they had been talking about politics. "Did I ever know any? No." Therese waited until he was working with the kite again, trying to pump it higher. Then she remarked, "I suppose it could happen, though, to almost anyone, couldn't it?" He went on, winding the kite. "But those things don't just happen. There's always some reason for it in the background." (Highsmith 97-98)

The kite bears significant textual meaning. As the conversation between Therese and Richard turns towards homosexuality, Richard remains unbothered, continuing to pin his focus on the kite. Inadvertently, this creates a safe space for Therese to ask questions that would not have been accepted in another setting. Therese's questions are reported through direct speech and are occasionally framed by descriptions of Richard and the kite, hinting at Richard's attitude of nonchalance towards the topic. Initially at least, this is not a high stakes conversation for him. Despite his dismissive attitude towards gay people, he does not inquire deeply into why Therese asks him these questions. Richard's attitude towards this subject correlates with the idea of lesbians as a small group of people on the outside of normative society. Rich argues that "lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease, partly because it has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic" (296). Therefore, the insistence that "there's always some reason for it in the background", upholds the compulsion that lesbian existence is exceptional and caused by outside influences.

"Do you think I could?" Therese asked simply, before she could debate whether she dared to ask. "What!" Richard smiled. "Fall in love with a girl? Of course not! My God, you haven't, have you?" "No," Therese said, in an odd, inconclusive tone, but Richard did not seem to notice the tone. "It's going again. Look, Terry!" (Highsmith 98)

Following this conversation, Therese decides not to care about specific labels or definitions. “At any rate, Therese thought, she was happier than she had ever been before. And why worry about defining everything” (99).

This decision to “live and let live” – to continue her relationships with both Carol and Richard, is directly followed by Richard cutting the string of the kite. As mentioned, Therese earlier states that happiness is like a kite. As she holds the kite, she “let her arms go all the way up, she could feel it lifting her a little, delicious and buoyant, as if the kite might really take her up if it got all its strength together” (99). Richard decides to cut the string, to which Therese becomes inexplicably angry: “There was an instant of fear, when she felt Richard might really have lost his mind, and then she staggered backward, the pull gone, the empty stick in her hand. ‘You’re mad!’ she yelled at him. ‘You’re insane!’ ... ‘Why did you do it?’ Her voice was shrill with tears. ‘It was such a beautiful kite!’” (99-100). This act both literally and figuratively grounds Therese. The kite is not only a representant of Therese’s joy at being connected to Carol, but also, with the cathedral as a symbol and its connection to Richard, a representant of her tie to the heterosexual norms of the society she grew up in.

The kite becomes a representation of the idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage, and the cutting of the kite constitutes a clear turning point in the narrative. Before this, Richard has no knowledge of Carol. Just a few pages after, Richard meets Carol by accident at Therese’s apartment, which marks the beginning of Richard’s awareness of Carol’s impact on Therese. As Therese starts rejecting Richard more, he becomes increasingly suspicious of Carol’s character. The precedence for his suspicion is this conversation with Therese. Therefore, as the kite becomes the representation of all of Therese’s feelings for Carol, Richard and his family, and her own future, the cutting of the string is, effectively, the literary trigger for the following events. Richard’s attitudes towards same-sex attraction return to the story, through Therese’s internalization of them. When Carol leaves Therese to try to regain custody of her child, Therese reverts to an idealization of heterosexuality. This reversion is prompted by Carol leaving but is intensified by a gothic encounter with a painting which resembles Carol. As we have seen in this section, Therese continually infuses inanimate objects with meaning. In the next section I am going to explore how the meeting with a painting in a library acts as trigger which causes Therese to reject her own lesbian sexuality.

## 2.2 The Gothic Aspect of Compulsory Heterosexuality

Earlier, we touched on some of the gothic aspects of *The Price of Salt*, which appeared in Therese's encounter with Mrs. Robichek. As Therese and Carol go on their trip and grow closer, finally realizing their love for each other, the gothic aspects evade the story for a while. Although there is a threatening presence in the character of the private detective following them, this portion of the novel plays more into its "crime fiction" aspects, showing a clear similarity with Highsmith's other crime novels. Terry Castle writes that the crime in *The Price of Salt* is arguably more "outré" than any of Highsmith's Ridley novels, as it presents "two lust-intoxicated women who break a social and libidinal taboo so entrenched that even now, one can still feel shocked by the headlong *lusciousness* of it all" (2). However, as Carol leaves Therese, the description of Therese's perceptions reverts to the gothic undertones which are present in the opening chapters.

Throughout literary history, there has been a clear coupling of lesbian desire and gothic literature, as gothic literary devices have been utilized to portray the incongruity of "the lesbian" in meeting with heteronormative society. Patricia Smith theorizes that certain aspects of homosocial relationships between women have historically caused an anxiety for writers. She calls this anxiety "lesbian panic" and defines it as "the disruptive action that occurs when a character — or, conceivably, an author — is either unable or unwilling to confront or reveal her own lesbianism or lesbian desire" (qtd. in S. Parker 5). In *The Price of Salt*, the disruptive action comes in the form of Therese having a hallucinatory episode. This is interesting because, as it occurs, Therese has been living as a lesbian for several weeks. The cause for her rejection of her lesbian desire is Carol leaving her. Carol has, under coercion, ended her relationship with Therese. As a reaction to her own heartbreak, Therese does not only reject Carol, but she also rejects all women. This rejection is prompted by an uncanny meeting with a picture in a library but is fed by an internalized understanding of lesbianism as extrinsic, something which happens *to* a person. In the next few pages, I am going to examine Therese's rejection of lesbianism, and its connection to the understanding that there is "always some reason for it in the background" (98).

As mentioned, the kite is not the only inanimate object Therese has a strong reaction to. After Carol has left for New York and sent the letter to Therese saying that they cannot be together, Therese wanders through Sioux Falls aimlessly. She stumbles into the library and makes her way to the third floor, the only floor she had not yet explored. Her mind is preoccupied with images and memories of Carol. When she turns to leave the library she is met with a picture hanging over a door, and realizes that the same picture hung on the wall at

her boarding school: “It was only similar, she thought, not quite the same, not the same, but the recognition had shaken her at her core, was growing as she looked at it, and she knew the picture was exactly the same” (259). The situation becomes more complex, as Therese realizes that the model in the picture bears a significant resemblance to Carol, with Therese even going as far as to say that the model *is* Carol. “She knew the short, firmly modeled cheeks, the full coral lips that smiled at one corner, the mockingly narrowed lids, the strong, not extremely high forehead that even in the picture seemed to project a little over the living eyes that knew everything beforehand, and sympathized and laughed at once. It was Carol” (259).

As Therese continues to look at the picture, the expression of the woman seems mocking, and Therese expresses that she is experiencing a lifting of “the last veil,” “revealing nothing but mockery and gloating, the splendid satisfaction of the betrayal accomplished” (259). In these passages, we observe how Therese likens Carol’s image to a mythic figure, implicitly defining her actions towards Therese as intentionally deceitful and manipulating. At this moment Carol loses her status as the good lesbian fairy, although Therese continues to view her as someone she was fated to meet. As discussed previously, the scene where Carol brings warm milk to Therese, mirrors the scene where Mrs. Robichek spoon feeds Therese an unknown syrup. Despite the apparent similarity between the women, Therese experiences Mrs. Robichek as a witch-like creature with an intention of trapping her, and Carol as a nurturing, albeit distanced, figure. However, when Therese encounters the picture in the library, the writing seems to revert to the fairy tale rhetoric employed in the scene at Mrs. Robichek’s apartment. The picture is anthropomorphized. Further than just being a picture of a person, Therese imagines the picture to be breathing and moving. “She saw the picture in the hall at school, it breathed and moved now like Carol, mocking and cruel and finished with her, as if some evil and long-destined purpose had been accomplished” (261). The sentence twists the chronology of Therese’s fixation with Carol. At the same time as the reader is situated beside Therese, before she meets Carol, observing the picture at her school, the picture is transformed into Carol – morphing the two moments into one. We are both at Therese’s school and in the library at the same time.

This reads as a revelation scene: a scene where Therese recognizes her obsession with Carol to be predetermined by being exposed to this specific picture during adolescence. Effectively, Therese, because of heartbreak, a vivid imagination, and compulsory heterosexuality, begins to justify her interest in Carol by thinking it to be a result of her childhood influences. As Therese tries to make sense of her resentful feelings towards Carol,

she reverts to her internalized resistance towards queerness: “Hadn’t Carol been playing with her, as Richard said?” (266). This also fits in with Therese’s previous conversation with Richard, where he stated that the appearance of queerness always has “some reason for it in the background” (98), to which Therese said “Yes” amenably.

Following the revelation scene, we get a scene where Therese has fever-like hallucinations, combining the sounds of voices outside her room with claustrophobic apparitions of people from her life. She tries to ground herself by thinking of the world outside, “of Danny and Mrs. Robichek, of Frances Cotter at the Pelican Press, of Mrs. Osborne, and of her own apartment still in New York, but her mind refused to survey or to renounce, and her mind was the same as her heart now and refused to renounce Carol” (260). Despite this attempt to ground herself, her mind reverts to scenarios with Sister Alicia and her mother. Her reflections start at school, and one morning where she snuck out and ran across the lawn like:

a young animal crazy with spring, and had seen Sister Alicia running crazily through a field herself, white shoes flashing like ducks through the high grass, and it had been minutes before she realized that Sister Alicia was chasing an escaped chicken. There was the moment, in the house of some friend of her mothers, when she had reached for a piece of cake and had upset the plate on the floor, and her mother had slapped her in the face. She saw the picture in the hall at school, it breathed and moved now like Carol, mocking, and cruel and finished with her, as if some evil and long-destined purpose had been accomplished. (Highsmith 260-261)

In Smith’s description of “lesbian panic,” she explains the different ways it usually unfolds itself. “This destructive reaction may be as sensational as suicide or homicide, or as subtle and vague as a generalized [sic] neurasthenic malaise’ (qtd in S. Parker 5). In this scene, we see how Highsmith writes Therese into a set lesbian narrative by utilizing known tropes from the lesbian genre. Therese’s hallucinations or neurasthenic malaise are brought on by the combined unease created by the portrait of the non-Carol and her anxiety at her own sexuality. The order in the progression of Therese’s memories reveals something akin to ‘causality,’ at least that there is an idea of causality in Therese’s mind. This interpretation is possible due to Therese’s conclusion that some “evil and long-destined purpose had been accomplished”. Therefore, Therese regards both Sister Alicia running in the field and her own mother slapping her, as pivotal moments leading up to her becoming infatuated with Carol. Rich quotes Nancy Chodorow, who states “lesbian relationships do tend to re-create mother-daughter emotions and connections, but most women are heterosexual” to which Rich responds in brackets “(implied: more mature, having developed beyond the mother-daughter connection?)” (288). This pushes forward the idea that lesbians are less mature than other women, as they do not progress beyond the adolescent prioritization of female relationships.

When Therese comes out on the other side of her illness, she suddenly takes on an active role by looking for work and reconnecting with people she was estranged from, and soon after Danny returns to the story. The implication is that Therese, through her realization, has “turned straight” right in time for Danny, a male suitor, to come sweep her of her feet.

### **2.3 The Spiritual Advisor: Danny McElroy as the Ideal Heterosexual Man**

The character of Danny McElroy is included in the story to be an alternative to Richard. The inclusion of Danny is meant to show that, although Therese does not love Richard, she could still love a man; or at least, that she believes that she can still love a man. Therefore, Danny’s function in the story is for Therese to have someone to turn to as she starts rejecting Carol, and subsequently, as she rejects her queerness. Danny is Richard’s foil, as the two characters are different in the most fundamental ways. Danny’s traits are meant to highlight the traits Richard lacks. This is something Therese remarks on several times throughout the plot. Danny has known since he was fourteen what he wanted to do as an adult and he has worked continuously towards it, while Richard has changed paths several times and does not seem to have the conviction to follow through. Therese identifies with them both, something which scares her to a degree. As mentioned, Therese views Richard as an orphan with a family - as she herself is. With Danny, Therese experiences both a sense of ease and unease simultaneously. At one point he takes hold of her, “She felt it was only a gesture, a gesture instead of a word, the spell was broken. She was uneasy at his touch, and the uneasiness was a point of concreteness” (124). Much later in the narrative, Therese reflects that she cannot spend the day with him as he “would remind her too much of herself, and she still was not ready” (270). Therese’s identification with Danny is one of the aspects of the novel that aids in the progression of her character development. His juxtaposition to Richard emphasizes Danny’s role as a ‘safe space’: a relation where Therese can expand on her own thoughts and ideas. In the following paragraphs I am going to explore how, in the light of Carol leaving her, the influence of compulsory heterosexuality makes Therese exaggerate her positive feelings towards Danny as a means to fit in with heteronormative society.

As a man in this narrative, Danny plays a mix of the roles of the “spiritual adviser” and the “intrusive suitor”. Following Marks description of the lesbian fairy tale, men in lesbian narratives play one of three parts: the father, the spiritual adviser, or the intrusive suitor (357). Although it first appears as though Danny, as Richard, is an intrusive suitor, he is

ultimately someone whose function is to further Therese's understanding of life and love. Richard tries repeatedly to turn Therese away from Carol and insists that he loves Therese and just wants the best for her, despite her adamant stance that she does not love him. Danny, on the other hand, listens to Therese and holds conversations with her where, albeit there are some elements of infantilization, he still basically regards her as an equal. There are two scenes where this dynamic is especially clear.

The first occurs as Therese meets Danny by chance on the street and decides to join him at his apartment for a little while before going back to work. When entering his apartment, Therese starts describing it. Here we see a thematic similarity to her act of describing Richard's room:

The apartment was a semibasement, generally darkish, and the lamp made a warm pool of light on the desk that was always cluttered. Therese looked down at the opened books on his desk, the pages and pages covered with symbols that she could not understand, but that she liked to look at. Everything the symbols stood for was true and proven. The symbols were stronger and more definite than words. (119-120)

Although the rooms are different, Therese's sentiments are similar. At Richard's, she thinks that she loves the room because it stays the same. At Danny's, the representation of "sameness" is shown through the medical symbols written on the pages. With Richard's room, Therese draws the comparison between the layout of the room and his actions in life. His "passion", his paintings, only take up a small square in his room, "Just as painting took up only a corner of his brain, she felt, and she wondered how much longer he would go on with it before he dropped it for something else" (93). As a contrast, Danny's "pages and pages" of symbols leaves him with a much more positive review from Therese, as she imagines "Danny's mind swung on them, from one fact to another, as if he bore himself on strong chains, hand over hand through space" (120). Danny is therefore characterized, through the description of his room, as inquisitive but secure.

As their conversation progresses, it becomes more philosophical. As it turns towards talk of life, Danny tells an anecdote of riding a horse, despite not knowing how to ride well:

I remember the horse turning his head and seeing the hill, and deciding by himself to run up it, his hind legs sank before we took off, and suddenly we were going like blazes and I wasn't afraid at all. I felt in complete harmony with the horse and the land, as if we were a whole tree simply being stirred by the wind in its branches. I remember being sure that nothing would happen to me then, but some other time, yes, eventually. And it made me very happy, I thought of all the people who are afraid and hoard things, and themselves, and I thought, when everybody in this world comes to realize what I felt going up the hill, then there'll be a kind of right economy of living and of using and using up. (Highsmith 123)

Danny's understanding of life indicates that there is an abundance of life, and an abundance of the things in life. His understanding of life correlates to a concretization of "life" as

something that continues to grow, even when things are used up. Life brings you where you are supposed to be. He continues by asking “Did you ever wear out a sweater you particularly liked, and throw it away finally?” (123), to which Therese answers affirmatively, although her thoughts go to “the green woolen gloves of Sister Alicia, which she had never worn nor thrown away” (123). Therese’s reluctance to both wear the gloves and to throw them away, comes from her experiences of care and love growing up. Because of her mother practically abandoning her and growing up in an environment lacking unconditional love from adults, Therese clings to the gloves, as they are physical proof of Sister Alicia’s feelings toward her. Danny continues: “And the lambs who didn’t realize how much wool they were losing when someone sheared them to make the sweater, because they could grow more wool. It’s very simple.’ . . . ‘Yes.’ She knew. And like Richard and the kite, because he could make another kite” (123). As Therese connects Danny’s musings to Sister Alicia’s gloves and Richard’s kite, it becomes clear that, compared to Danny and Richard, Therese has not had an adolescence that encouraged this “live-and-let-live” attitude. Therefore, Therese continues to imbue inanimate objects with relational meaning.

However, it seems as though, through “losing” Carol, Therese also seems to stray away from her tendency to assign specific objects specific meanings. The second moment between Therese and Danny is after Carol has gone back to New York and left Therese. Therese leaves Sioux Falls, where she was confronted with the portrait resembling Carol, for Chicago. Again, Danny randomly appears, as he is making a pit stop to talk to Therese, before heading to Oakland for his new researching job. Right before Danny appears, Therese finds Carol’s letter opener. “She looked at the letter opener on the bed table, and now it meant Carol, the person of flesh and blood, the Carol with freckles and the corner nicked off one tooth. Did she owe Carol anything, Carol the person? . . . She frowned at the letter opener, not understanding why it had become only a letter opener suddenly, why it was a matter of indifference to her whether she kept it or threw it away” (266). Therese expects the letter opener to bear the same significance in her consciousness as the kite, the gloves, and the portrait had earlier. “After determining to split from Carol for good, Therese comes to understand this aesthetic epiphany as nothing more than the projection of her personal feelings of betrayal onto an inanimate object” (Perrin 393). This precedes Danny’s return into Therese’s life, and in some way, it works as a foreshadowing of his return.

When Danny comes to Chicago, Therese ascribes him the ability to be “a little salt”. *Salt* as a motif in this narrative is first included in the title, the price of salt, and is meant to signify the hurdles one goes through to be able to live a fulfilling life. When Carol leaves



Therese for New York, Therese reflects “how would the world come back to life? How would its salt come back?” (260). After Therese’s case of neurasthenic malaise, brought on by lesbian panic, where she ascribes her non-platonic feelings towards women to be caused by external influences in her adolescence, she decides to cut Carol out of her life. She writes a letter to Abby saying “You ask me to write to Carol. I don’t think I can or that I should” (266).

Directly after Therese cuts off Carol, Danny appears in the lobby of the hotel she stays at. This moment is marked by Therese exaggerating her positive feelings towards Danny to signify more than they do. “She felt shy with him, yet somehow close, a closeness charged with something she had never felt with Richard. Something suspenseful, that she enjoyed. A little salt, she thought. She looked at Danny’s hand on the table, at the strong muscle that bulged below the thumb. She remembered his hands on her shoulders that day in his room. The memory was a pleasant one” (268). As this memory refers to a specific point in the narrative, the reader can move back and examine Therese’s feelings at that past moment. Therese does not have this ability. “She was uneasy at his touch, and the uneasiness was a point of concreteness” (124). After he kisses her, Therese does not know how to take it, “She stopped, because the kiss had so mingled tenderness and roughness, she didn’t know how to take it” (124). Although Therese says that she does not mind the kiss, she practically flees the apartment and runs toward her job. “She ran the two blocks to the Black Cat. A little like the horse, she thought. But not enough, not enough to be perfect, and what Danny meant was perfect” (124). As Therese looks back on this moment, she does so with rose-tinted glasses. However, her conversation with Danny following this is characterized by a frankness and openness that has escaped Therese’s earlier conversations. Even her conversations with Carol have been hindered by Therese’s mental block, which restricts her from fully expressing herself.

Danny’s character is utilized as a substitute for both Richard and Carol. He is the ideal image of a heterosexual partner, who both understands the protagonist and pushes her to develop further. His similarity to Therese, and his role as the “good” suitor, lays the groundwork for the significance of the subversion of the lesbian fairytale towards the end. As Therese looks at Danny, she reflects that “She knew that up to now she had been under a spell that prevented her from seeing anyone in the world but Carol” (270). Here we see the continuation of implicitly connecting lesbianism with mysticism, highlighting that Therese candidly believes that her infatuation with Carol was externally brought upon her, and not a “natural” sexual orientation. While Therese is entrenched in this narrative, she clings to the

image of Danny and the heteronormative, stable life he could provide. While Richard previously is the representation of this sort of life, Danny, through his openness and rejection of Richard's gossip, supersedes Richard in this regard. Danny both asks about Carol without any surprise or attitude and tells Therese that "He [Richard] feels jilted. His ego's suffering. Don't ever think I'm like Richard. I think people's lives are their own" (269). This leads Therese to want to tell Danny of all her experience with Carol. Danny positions himself as the upgraded, philosophical heterosexual suitor, a man Therese at one point legitimately believes she can choose.

#### **2.4 The Meeting with the Other Blonde: Therese's Lesbianism as Universal**

Up to this point in the narrative, there are few signs that hint at the happy lesbian ending the book has been renowned for since. Both through the aspect of infantilization and the grip compulsory heterosexuality has on the characters in the story, there seems to be an understanding that Therese will choose Danny – demoting Carol from girlfriend to “the one that got away”. In Therese's own understanding, Carol is the representation of her lesbian secret – the secret that will bring her into adulthood. The focus on Therese's age and development resembles the focus of a bildungsroman. This correlation between the lesbian fairytale and the bildungsroman reveals an understanding of lesbian desire as childish and something one grows up from. Up until Therese's entrance at the party at the hotel in the last pages of the novel, the narrative follows the traditional lesbian fairy tale set-up. The young girl has met an older woman; her love is described as an awakening; she has not one but two intrusive, male suitors who are interested in her. As the plot winds down, the girl realizes that her infatuation with this older woman is a result of her own infantility instead of real romantic love which she previously, wrongfully, identified it as. Therese is set to join a career she previously did not have the willpower to pursue, and as the champion in a bildungsroman, she has succeeded in gaining a realistic streak she previously lacked. However, this would not earn the status it got as the first lesbian novel where, in Highsmith's own words, there was “a happy ending for its two main characters, or at least that they were going to try to have a future together” (291-292).

The turning point is when Therese meets a blonde actress at Harkevny's party, after her “final” conversation with Carol. During their final conversation, Therese becomes increasingly agitated, and after Carol asks her to live with her and she declines, Therese finds it “harder and harder to sit there” (280). However, as they part ways, Therese seems to have

accepted this ending and thinks “that was the way it should be . . . not with a lingering handclasp, not with backward glances” (281). However, as she meets Genevieve Cranell, this conviction is turned on its head. There are two aspects of the character of Genevieve which are of key importance, and both are commented on by Therese. “She knew before they were introduced that this woman was like Carol. And she was beautiful. And she did not look like the picture in the library” (283). Therese has, through her experience, now learned to recognize lesbian desire in other women – and established an understanding of the hidden language of lesbian courting. “She can spot lesbian sexuality at a hundred yards now, seeing instantly in an actress’s brief glance that the woman is interested in her” (Perrin 394). However, this moment is especially important as Therese understands that her interest in women is general, and not specific. Her earlier conviction that Carol was the outlier has been proven false, and to emphasize this, Highsmith revisits the portrait of the woman in the library. Genevieve’s appearance differing from the model in the picture, disproves Therese’s hypothesis that her interest in women was (1) a curse imbued in her from her preteen years, and (2) entirely fixed upon Carol. Therefore, as Genevieve cannot be grouped together with Sister Alicia, in her role as proxy mother, and cannot be grouped together with the Carol-like image; Therese realizes that her sexuality has not been brought on by outside forces and cannot be ‘escaped’, prompting her to accept that her interest in women is intrinsic.

During Therese and Genevieve’s conversation, Therese is asked her age: “You look so young, I don’t suppose you’ll mind if I ask how old you are.’ ‘I’m twenty-one.’ She [Genevieve] rolled her eyes. ‘Incredible. Can anyone still be only twenty-one?’ . . . Therese was flattered, terribly flattered, and the flattery got in the way of what she felt, or might feel, about Genevieve Cranell” (284). This conversation with Ms. Cranell is a revelation for Therese. As they flirt, Therese realizes that “Genevieve Cranell would never mean anything to her . . . that the excitement she felt now would not continue, and not be evoked again at any other time or place” (284). And as she has this realization she starts:

thinking of Genevieve Cranell, with a feeling of revulsion, of shame, for what had just occurred to her, and she knew it would never be . . . her consciousness had stopped in a tangle where a dozen threads crossed and knotted. One was Danny. One was Carol. One was Genevieve Cranell. One went on and on out of it, but her mind was caught at the intersection . . . and she clutched at Danny. But the strong black thread did not lead anywhere. She knew as if some prognostic voice were speaking now that she would not go further with Danny.  
(Highsmith 286)

This moment is pivotal to Therese’s character arc, and it is especially poignant in its difference from her realization that she was infatuated with Carol. Initially, as remarked upon earlier, Therese has no anxiety associated to her attraction towards Carol; therefore,

surpassing the lesbian panic event often used in lesbian narratives. Although she asks Richard about his knowledge on the subject and reflects upon seeing lesbians in public whom she did not identify with, Therese's initial understanding of lesbianism is not based in rejection or hate. This shines through in her assertion that gay people fall in love the same as straight people: "two people who fall in love suddenly with each other, out of the blue. Say two men or two girls" (98). Two seconds later, Therese thinks "Was it love or wasn't it that she felt for Carol? And how absurd was it that she didn't even know" (98). Compared with the disgust Richard expresses at the thought of Therese and Carol being a couple, Therese's initial lack of anxiety related to her sexuality subverts the idea that lesbianism is intrinsically different from heterosexuality. Therese's lack of anxiety creates a difference between Therese and other protagonists in lesbian narratives of the time. The characters of lesbian pulps often lived in shame and believed that "they belonged in 'twilight,' 'darkness,' or 'shadows.' Self-hatred was a requisite in these novels" (Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 147). It is not before Carol leaves her, and Therese's heart is broken, that she aims to find an explanation for her love for Carol. This moment in the story shows the influence of compulsory heterosexuality on lesbians, and it is first then Therese reacts with lesbian panic over her infatuation with Carol.

However, as she meets Genevieve Cranell, she realizes that her interest in women will not subside, not even as she gets a new wardrobe, a new haircut and becomes an 'adult'. As she realizes that "It would be Carol, in a thousand cities, a thousand houses, in foreign lands where they would go together, in heaven and in hell" (287), Therese must again combat internalized compulsory heterosexuality. In this instance, she reacts to her attraction to Miss Cranell with a feeling of revulsion and shame, as it interferes with her newfound life lie – that she has grown past her desire for women and that she can achieve happiness in a relationship with Danny. As she simultaneously understands that her sexuality is not a phase and that no other woman will compare to Carol, Therese has a feeling of loss, and a "loneliness swept over her" (286). However, this feeling passes quickly, and Highsmith makes sure to describe Therese's feelings during her "flight" towards Carol as heightened: "she felt she flew across the streets and up the curbs. Toward Carol" (286). As Therese sees Carol she smiles and thinks that "it was Carol she loved and would always love" and as Carol sees her, she "seemed to stare at her incredulously a moment while Therese watched the slow smile growing" (287). This ending, therefore, corresponds with the initial positive portrayal of lesbian love, as Therese experiences it.

Thus, we see that although there is a happy ending, where the two lovers end up together, the different relationships and plots are directly and implicitly influenced by compulsory heterosexuality. Although Therese accepts her lesbianism, it does not happen without dispute. The concept of compulsory heterosexuality then functions as a tension builder in the story; making the reader question whether Therese and Carol will have their happy ending. The fact that they do, does not negate the real impact the concept has on both characterization and plot. Thus, the influence of compulsory heterosexuality adds *The Price of Salt* into a historical literary tradition of lesbian narratives.

## Conclusion

When concluding my exploration into *The Price of Salt*, I want to specify the importance of knowledge of the literary tradition when analyzing the subversiveness of a work. When taking the tradition into account, we see that Highsmith's use of lesbian literary tropes, such as the sapphic model, the lesbian wife, and the intrusive suitor, creates a narrative which, at first glance, follows the literary restrictions which were imposed on American authors of the 1950s. It is through certain tweaks and turnings the real message of the novel emerges. This appears through Therese's rejection of the role as the seduced, and her active role within her relationship with Carol. Following the train of thought of the period, the attractive older woman was supposed to be the pursuer, the "seducer-corruptor," as explained by Marks. However, we see that Carol, despite her interest in Therese, is initially restrained in their relationship. Several times Carol pulls back and tries to push Therese towards Richard. Through these interactions, Therese takes on the role of initiator: "Carol does not seduce and destroy her young lover, and Therese is no victim; she actively pursues the sophisticated Carol" (Gutterman 488).

The characterization of Therese and Carol's relationship as some sort of mimicry of mother-daughter-relationships initially creates a link between this narrative and other, more marginalizing, narratives depicting lesbians. Its inclusion can be read as a means to escape censorship, as it shows lesbianism as taboo, and therefore does not "legitimize the abnormal condition [of lesbianism]" (Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 147). The dynamic is also prominent in other lesbian fiction of the period and closely related to historic perceptions of lesbianism. The relationship between Carol and Therese in *The Price of Salt* has also been cast this way by prominent lesbian critics, such as Terry Castle, who humorously names the two characters "Mommy-Carol" and "Baby-Therese" (1). As discussed, there is a correlation between the understanding of lesbian relationships as pseudo-incestuous and the infantilization 19-year-old Therese encounters. A continuation of the mother-daughter-understanding are the persistent observations about the youth of the younger participant. As we have seen, this correlates to the girl's school locus, where teenage girls were thought to, through their isolation, develop lesbian infatuations. Therese initially reminisces over her own teenage crush, Sister Alicia, before she replaces her with Carol. Through Highsmith's use of the school locus and the apparent replacement of Sister Alicia, Therese's initial interest in Carol seems to be correlated to a schoolgirl crush – a result of her immaturity. However, Therese's physical transformation towards the end acts as a symbol of her emergence into

adulthood. The novel manages to emphasize that, as Therese and Carol choose each other, they are two adult women who actively and consciously choose to be together – subverting the idea of lesbianism as something which is limited to adolescence.

By reading these narratives through a historical lens, contemporary readers can examine how *The Price of Salt* subverted the lesbian genre of its time and laid the groundwork for later lesbian novels. By analyzing the novel through its relation to compulsory heterosexuality, the treatment of Therese by the other characters and Therese's reflections surrounding her own sexuality becomes a representation of compulsory heterosexuality in historical lesbian narratives. Compulsory heterosexuality as a motif runs through most lesbian narratives, often prompting the character experiencing it to reject their own romantic sentiments towards women. *The Price of Salt* is interesting in that regard, as Therese, despite her initial belief in the intrinsic masculinity of lesbians, accepts her infatuation with Carol almost immediately. At one point, she questions whether her feelings for Carol can be defined as "love," however this questioning does not seem to be connected to any type of morality. Therese genuinely wonders whether she is in love with Carol, and later admits that she is, seemingly without any anxiety associated with the topic. This subverts the typical characterization of the lesbian pulp protagonists, since "Self-hatred was requisite in these novels" (Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 147). However, although she can accept her feelings towards Carol, it does not mean that Therese defeats the institution of compulsory heterosexuality.

As we have seen, initially, Therese believes that she can have both Richard and Carol; Richard acts as her continuous access to heterosexual marriage, family and stability and Carol is her romantic fixation. Her lack of concern for ending her relationship with Richard, despite realizing both that she does not love him, and that she is infatuated with a woman, demonstrates the reach compulsory heterosexuality has. Rejecting Richard is not only rejecting him as an individual, but his family, his regard, and the stability their relationship provides. Through the inclusion of the picture in the library and the character of Danny, Highsmith shows how Carol's perceived rejection propels Therese into a regression caused by lesbian panic. As she comes out on the other side of this panic-induced malaise, Therese turns away from Carol and women in general. Directly after this happens, Danny steps into the story again. Danny becomes the representation of the persistence of compulsory heterosexuality.

I maintain that, after Therese has chosen Carol again, the male characters appear in retrospect only to be narrative tools to emphasize Therese's lesbian sexuality. Through this

thesis, I have shown that Therese has an incessant need for stability. Therefore, Therese's rejection of heterosexual compulsion, despite the different prospects of the male suitors, subverts the established understanding between pulp novelists and contemporary readers. Richard can provide stability and family, and Danny can provide stability and an understanding of her character, but Therese still chooses Carol, and by extent women. When looking at the narrative through a modern lens, this seems obvious. However, by analyzing the dogma of the 1950s, where lesbian existence was seen as threatening, sick, and morally wrong, a narrative where none of the characters are "rescued by some strong man" (Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* 355) is subversive and radical. Both Therese and Carol reject financial stability and inclusion in heteronormative American society to be able to live as themselves, together.

In the introduction, I pointed out how contemporary lesbian movies, produced by larger production companies, often portray one type of story. These stories can be seen as an attempt to historicize a group of people who have been written out of history. However, through this thesis, I have explored how lesbian narratives in the 1950s were affected by lesbian literary tradition, which in turn was affected by societal ideas about lesbian existence. Therefore, *The Price of Salt* subverts the set narrative by using characteristics from the lesbian fairytale and pulp novels to raise the stakes, before allowing its two heroines to end up together. As shown, the common critique of these lesbian period dramas on the screen is both the appearance of the characters and the fact that they do not end up together. Therefore, *Carol*, the film adaptation of *The Price of Salt*, maintains its subversive status, since it in 2015, sixty-three years later, it does the same as the novel did in 1952: it allows for a queer future. Given the opportunity and time, I would have liked to explore how these historical dramas maintain a heteronormative and Eurocentric view of lesbianism as extrinsic, and therefore, help maintain compulsory heterosexuality by focusing on the marginalized status of the lesbian. My intention is not to judge the validity or quality of individual films; however, it would have been interesting to examine how the frequency of this narrative affects the social characterization of "the lesbian."



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