Patricia Highsmith's Queer Disruption:
Subverting Gay Tragedy in the 1950s

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Abstract

Published in a time when tragedy was pervasive in gay literature, Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel *The Price of Salt*, published later as *Carol*, was the first lesbian novel with a happy ending. It was unusual for depicting lesbians as sympathetic, ordinary women, whose sexuality did not consign them to a life of misery. The novel criticises how 1950s American society worked to suppress lesbianism and women's agency. It also refuses to let that suppression succeed by giving its lesbian couple a future together. My thesis assesses the extent to which the novel broke the conventions of gay literature, and how Highsmith was able to publish such a radical text in the conservative 1950s.

The Talented Mr Ripley, a crime novel published in 1955, is more representative of both Highsmith's work and 1950s homophobia. Tom Ripley is coded as gay through a number of often pejorative stereotypes, though the novel never confirms his sexuality. This makes it appear far more conventional than *The Price of Salt*. And yet, it treats Tom sympathetically and gives him a happy ending. Underneath the surface level homophobia is a story of gay survival and success, and once again Highsmith subverts the tradition of gay tragedy. However, because homophobic tropes are central to its narrative, it remains difficult to call *Ripley* a radical text.

In placing the two novels side by side, my thesis draws out the complexity of Highsmith's relationship with the gay canon. I find commonalities in the novels based on Highsmith's interest in disrupting conventional morality. She achieves this disruption by humanising outsiders such as gays and lesbians, and constructing narratives in which they are able to find the freedom and happiness that the literature of the period usually denied them.

Introduction

Patricia Highsmith occupies an uneasy space in the gay literary canon. Her second novel *The Price of Salt*¹ is a lesbian classic, acclaimed by readers since its 1952 publication for its happy ending and sympathetic treatment of its lesbian characters (*Carol* 311). It avoids the homophobic tropes which defined many of its contemporaries and also managed to avoid censorship, going on to sell almost one million copies (*Carol* 310). However, it was Highsmith's only lesbian novel, and she was not so consistently progressive. In her other novels, gay themes most frequently appear in the subtext of obsessive relationships between men which lead to murder. This pattern appears in *Strangers on a Train* (1950), *The Two Faces of January* (1964), and, perhaps the best example, *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955). Highsmith's "penchant for equating homoerotic and homicidal tendencies" complicates her canonical status (Trask, "Method" 585). And yet, she does not treat Tom Ripley like a typical gay villain. In fact, he is barely treated as a villain at all. The novel "cleverly seduces the reader into identifying with Ripley" and gives him a happy ending (Wilson 6). Still, the use of homophobic stereotypes makes *The Talented Mr Ripley*'s subversiveness hard to argue for without significant reservations, while *The Price of Salt*'s subversiveness is hard to argue against. Highsmith's ability to produce two such different texts makes her legacy difficult to assess and is the source of her canonical ambivalence.

My first chapter addresses the question of whether the gay elements in *The Talented Mr Ripley* are a straightforward expression of 1950s homophobia, or whether Highsmith is using them for more subversive purposes. The major difference between a regressive or progressive reading is whether one considers the more significant factor to be the tropes used in Tom's characterisation, or the novel's absence of narrative judgement. These tropes have historically been used to associate gay people with a range of unsavoury behaviours, including instability, deception, and violence, and their presence in *Ripley* continues that association. However, the amoral narrative style undercuts the tropes' usual purpose, turning Tom into an anti-hero rather than a villain. If he stops short of being likable, he is at least humanised, and the reader winds up "on the side of the killer, hoping he will escape punishment" (Wilson 6). Both tropes and treatment must be taken into account, and their seemingly contradictory purposes create tension

¹ The novel was republished in 1990 with the title *Carol*. I use *The Price of Salt* throughout to reflect the 1950s context, but cite a later edition which uses *Carol*.

in any reading. This tension is furthered by the coded nature of Tom's sexuality. The novel does not explicitly make him gay, but only hints at it through its use of common gay tropes. This leaves the purpose of the gay content ambiguous and enables completely contradictory readings. I steer a middle course between these readings, and conclude that the co-existence of homophobic and subversive elements in the same text can be explained through the concept of disruption. These elements work together to disrupt morality, literary convention and reader expectations, and ultimately produce a tricky, unsettling novel.

My second chapter finds that, while the implications of *Ripley's* gay content are debatable, there is no such ambiguity in *The Price of Salt*. It portrays American society as the clear villain, and the morality of its leads is not in question. Therese and Carol are presented as ordinary women, who nonetheless must navigate a misogynistic, homophobic society in order to build a life together. This society is exposed through the novel's use of setting, which dramatises the lack of space lesbians had in the geography and culture of 1950s America. The prescribed spaces for women are marriage and the home, both of which require heterosexuality and female submission. Lesbianism is excluded from this private space, as well as the public spaces of the city and the open road. Therese and Carol's journey through these spaces highlights the specific ways each one works to suppress lesbianism and female agency. Homophobia is constructed as endemic throughout American society and harmful to people who simply wish to live their lives. This is an undeniably radical message for 1952. The radicalism is supported by the novel's refusal to employ pejorative tropes which otherised lesbians, including the most pervasive trope of unhappy endings. *Salt* demonstrates how Highsmith's disruptive tendencies could be used to challenge the worst parts of the dominant culture.

Highsmith's production of *Salt* so early in her career begs the question of why she did not continue *Salt's* progressive unconventionality in future gay writing. One contributing factor was her reluctance to be classified as a gay writer, for personal and professional reasons. *Salt* was published under the pseudonym Claire Morgan so Highsmith could avoid the limitations of being "labelled a lesbian-book writer". This was a fair concern, given that the subject matter was controversial and that she "might never be inspired to write another such book" again (*Carol* 310). However, she continued to insist on the use of the pen name until 1990, long after it was necessary (Wilson 396, 441). This is indicative of her discomfort with its "lacerating self-

exposure”; “*Salt* was so personal that Highsmith couldn’t live with it” (Schenkar). Even when the novel was published under her own name, she remained reticent about her sexuality (Wilson 441-442). Her reluctance to out Tom Ripley, even in the *Ripley* sequels published in more liberal times, may well reflect this reluctance to out herself, especially given her strong identification with Tom. Highsmith’s efforts to distance herself from her gay narratives renders the mantle of gay pioneer an ill-fitting one that she would not have claimed for herself.

Highsmith’s reluctance to label herself and her writing can be read, like many elements of her work, as either an act of conformity or resistance to conformity. At a time of rampant homophobia, the closet could be a form of self-defence. Michael Bibler finds that a number of writers of the postwar era, Highsmith among them, “pushed back against the public crackdowns and campaigns against lesbian and gay people not by embracing or lamenting the secrecy of the closet but by asking for the right to the *privacy* of the closet” (123). In *Ripley* and *Salt*, Tom, Therese, and Carol demonstrate this desire for privacy by preferring not to label themselves gay, lesbian, or any equivalent term.² This is indicative of their desire to live their lives according to their own wishes, undefined and unimpeded by their sexuality and the negative connotations it would usually carry. These characters seek to retain their right to self-definition and escape the ramifications of being seen as gay in a staunchly homophobic society. Their happy endings come from successfully resisting attempts to define, judge, and control them. For Highsmith and her characters, self-imposed ambiguity can be an empowering choice.

The endings of both novels point to their common themes: the disruption of convention through the survival of gay characters and the social critique embedded in that disruption. Disruption is a common theme in Highsmith’s novels. Her body of work constitutes a “sustained attack on conventional morality”, in which she does “not [allow] us to be complacent about our easy sense of normality and our moral order” (Bronski, “Subversive”). *Salt* exemplifies this by portraying the “moral order” as inherently damaging to lesbians, and its open recognition of Therese and Carol’s sexuality makes its critiques of homophobia unequivocal. *Ripley* cannot explicitly critique homophobia without making Tom gay, and so the target of its social critique

² The term gay came into its current usage in the 1920s. In the 1950s, its usage was still largely confined to the gay community, while straight people used the term homosexual (Cory 107-8). The term lesbian dates back to at least the 1890s and was used by gay and straight people alike (OED Online)

remains murky. Both novels are concerned with the social exclusion of individuals. I organise each chapter around the ways exclusion manifests in each novel. My treatment of *Ripley* details Tom's various characteristics which lead to his exclusion or are the product of it, many of which are also stereotypically gay characteristics. My treatment of *Salt* is structured around the spaces where the exclusion of lesbians is carried out; that is, most everyday spaces in American society. While the overall ramifications of each novel's gay content may be quite different, they share a thematic resemblance in their quintessentially Highsmithian nonconformity.

Gay Literature in the 1950s

In the 1950s, Highsmith was writing against a backdrop of increasingly numerous, visible, and explicitly gay novels. What had once been 'the love that dare not speak its name' had been pushed into mainstream discourse by the Kinsey Reports and the explosion in pulp fiction after World War II (Bronski, "Pulp" 677, 684). But the proliferation of texts did not mean a proliferation of narratives. The price of writing openly about a still relatively taboo subject was "adopting the narrative of damnation" (Stimpson 367). This condition, and the threat of censorship for authors who dared defy it, affected literature highbrow and low; both tend to replicate "the basic stigmatizing formula" of gay representation (Abraham 5). Common components of this formula include tragic endings, self-hatred, criminality, and gender nonconformity. This is the tradition Highsmith was working in and against, and analysing how her predecessors and contemporaries deployed its tropes is essential for understanding the extent to which her works bucked convention.

One defining condition of gay literature before the 1950s was censorship and strategies for evading it. The landmark case was the publication of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928. The novel was rapidly banned in England, and while attempts to ban it in the US were unsuccessful, the notoriety it acquired had the same effect of discouraging similar works (Ladenson 111-2). The issue with *The Well* was not merely the lesbian heroine, Stephen, but the fact she is sympathetic. The English judge who banned it objected to the fact that "all the characters ... who indulge in these horrible vices are presented to us as attractive people and put forward for our admiration" (Chartres Biron, qtd. in English 7). The type of representation became a central part of whether a work was objectionable or not. Sympathetic depictions of gay

characters could be taken as endorsements of immorality. E. M. Forster's *Maurice* was unpublishable in 1914 because it has a happy ending, where "the lovers get away unpunished and consequently recommend crime" (Forster 236). It became standard for gay characters to, as Highsmith put it, "pay for their deviation by cutting their wrists ... or by switching to heterosexuality... or by collapsing – alone and miserable and shunned – into a depression equal to hell" (*Carol* 311). The act of demonising or punishing gay characters carries with it implicit negative judgement, and was a necessary prerequisite for addressing the subject.

Works which did fit these criteria could still meet with controversy upon publication. Lillian Hellman's 1934 play *The Children's Hour* managed to avoid being shut down by police, unlike several 1920s predecessors (Bernstein 202). It presents the archetypal tragic lesbian, who confesses her "sad and dirty" secret before walking offstage to kill herself (Hellman 116-7). While the play did well on Broadway, it was banned in Boston and Chicago, and the subject matter likely cost it the Pulitzer Prize (Sova 49-50). For Highsmith's contemporaries, the situation was still much the same. Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* was published in 1948, a novel notable for its frankness about sexuality and its divergence from the stereotype of gay effeminacy. But despite Vidal's literary credentials and *Pillar*'s strong sales, newspapers refused to advertise it and he spent much of the next decade working in television (Thomas 598, 602). James Baldwin ran into opposition for gay material as well. He had to cut sections from his 1953 novel *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, and his publishers were similarly hostile to *Giovanni's Room* (1956), warning him it could end his career (Woods 293; S. Adams 45). Both *The City and the Pillar* and *Giovanni's Room* end with the death of the protagonist's love object and leave the protagonist in despair.³ *The Children's Hour* goes one step further and kills its protagonist. All were allowed to be published or staged, but their literary merit and tragic endings were not a safeguard from backlash.

The 1950s saw an "unprecedented boom in lesbian-themed publishing" in the form of pulp novels (Forrest x). Their enormous commercial success made them the dominant, most

³ *The City and the Pillar* has two different endings. At the behest of the publisher, the original 1948 edition ended with Jim killing Bob after being rejected. Vidal revised the novel in 1965 and restored his intended ending, where Jim rapes Bob instead (Thomas 615n1).

accessible source of lesbian narratives at the time, but the threat of condemnation and censorship was still present.⁴ The 1952 House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials labelled pulps “a serious menace to the social structure of the Nation” (4). Because they were visibly gay, and displayed in highly public places like train stations and newsstands, they had to be visibly homophobic as well (Bronski, “Pulp” 683). Pulp covers marketed the lesbian as deviant through taglines declaring “homosexuality” to be “society’s greatest curse”, and lesbian life “a world of exotic evil” (Forrest 87, 117). French writer Tereska Torres, author of the first best-selling lesbian pulp *Women’s Barracks* (1950), had her manuscript altered by her American publishers to add a “moral vein” (Torres 205). This involved the narrator making “the kinds of judgements that an American of that time” would have made, even though “in the original manuscript [she] told without judgement” (Torres 206). Marijane Meaker, whose first novel was published the same year as *Salt*, says her publisher’s “only restriction ... was that it couldn’t have a happy ending” (qtd. in Forrest xiii). This led to the “mandatory ending of the book - madness and suicide” (Forrest xiii). These requirements led to pulps codifying the old tropes, making the lesbian character recognisable “only when she comes clothed in the cultural assumptions which make her the Other” (K. Adams 258). At the same time, pulps spread gay narratives to new mass audiences and helped break the long silence surrounding the subject.

The enormous demand for lesbian pulps and the blatant homophobia of the genre provided an opportunity for lesbian writers to break the mould in various ways. One of these authors was Ann Bannon, who notes that, while most authors of lesbian pulp were men writing for other men, there were a small number of women writing for women. She attributes to male authors the “excesses” and “total lack of sensitivity” which characterised much of the genre, but also acknowledges the necessity of such material for making “the lesbian pulp genre a viable one” (Bannon, qtd. in Yates). Because male-authored works were the most common representations of lesbian pulp, comprising about 85% of the genre, they were effectively “acting as a ‘cover’ for the more subversive representation” of “pro-lesbian”, women-authored pulps. Pro-lesbian pulps were “only allowed because the genre as a whole sold so successfully and because they conformed to some degree to the genre”. They were the closest contemporary

⁴ Gay pulp fiction never achieved the same popularity, perhaps because, unlike lesbian pulp, it had limited crossover appeal to straight men (Stryker 98).

equivalents to *Salt*, and, given that the “pro-lesbian wave” took off in 1957, its most immediate successors (Keller, “Was it right” 401).

Salt occupies a fluid generic space due its publication as a hardcover literary novel and a pulp novel in rapid succession. Against the backdrop of pulp, its literary credentials and unsensational characterisation rendered it comparatively “invisible” (K. Adams 269). The original 1952 edition was “a dowdily designed hardcover from the ‘respectable’ firm Coward-McCann” (Northrop 97). The packaging downplayed the lesbian content, its grey cover bearing an image of salt and the vague tagline, “A modern novel of two women”. In 1953 it was reissued as a pulp, and in this form achieved “real success”, selling “nearly a million copies” (*Carol* 310). The pulp edition was far more explicit about its subject matter: “a love society forbids”. By then, however, *Salt*’s literary merits were established by its past life as a hardcover and the use of a quote from *The New York Times* review on the cover. The quote assures readers that *Salt* treats its “explosive material... with sincerity and good taste”. At the time, “standards of literary taste, themselves partially reliant on cultural prejudices against the ‘cheap’ paperback book format, were homologous in the public’s imagination with standards of sexual decency” (Northrop 75). *Salt*’s generic ambiguity gave it both the writing quality of literary fiction and the wide distribution of pulp fiction. This ambiguity was essential in enabling it to break the conventions of both forms without being censored in either.

Common Gay Tropes

A basic requirement for gay novels was to send the message that, if you were gay, “your life would be a tragedy and you could never be happy or normal or stable” (Bannon, qtd. In Yates). This requirement manifested itself in gay characters deeply unhappy with their identity, often experiencing shame, self-loathing, hopelessness, and isolation. In *Women’s Barracks*, the narrator comments, “how sad must be the life of ... all [lesbians]. Their mournful eyes never laughed, even when their lips laughed. They lived separately from the rest of the world, cloistered among themselves” (Torres 133). Martha in *The Children’s Hour* considers her sexuality “something wrong” with her, which makes her feel “guilty” (Hellman 115). David, the protagonist of *Giovanni’s Room*, considers his attraction to men “monstrous” and cannot see a future for himself as a gay man. His first sexual experience “seemed the black opening of a

cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came” (Baldwin 12). Whether or not a novel takes the sympathetic tack of blaming homophobia for such feelings, the effect is the same: being gay was “written about as an essentially tragic condition” (Woods 217).

The depiction of gay characters as social outcasts is regularly reflected in the setting. In the broader culture as well as the literature, queerness was constructed as un-American (Cory 105). This often results in European settings, and Europe is portrayed as a place of greater freedom. France is a common choice, featuring significantly in *The Well of Loneliness*, *Women’s Barracks*, and *Giovanni’s Room*, among others. Vidal’s use of an American setting in *The City and the Pillar* was unusual. His rationale was that, “homosexuality in literature was always exotic. I wanted to deal with an absolutely ordinary, all-American, lower-middle-class young man and his world” (Vidal, qtd. in Thomas 599). However, his protagonist Jim struggles to find his place in America. His life consists of “Endless drifting” about the country, and at the novel’s conclusion he contemplates going to sea (Vidal 80). The leads of *The Children’s Hour*, ostracised for suspected lesbianism, realise “There’ll never be any place for us to go” (Hellman 113). A counter-narrative “of escape from rural misery to urban fulfilment” arose in the pulp novels, where characters move to the city and find their place in the gay community (Donoghue 196). This, however, undermines the image of gays as lonely outsiders, and when the community appears in *The Well of Loneliness*, *Women’s Barracks*, *The City and the Pillar*, and *Giovanni’s Room*, all characterise it as a “garish and tragic” collection of misfits (Hall 437). While gay characters are found in a range of spaces, they rarely fit in any of them, and the setting becomes another way to emphasise the sadness of their existence.

The inherent otherness of gay characters is frequently communicated through their gender presentation. “It was widely assumed that male homosexuality always equaled effeminacy”, and that lesbianism was synonymous with masculinity (Thomas 603). This is often represented in a character’s temperament, dress, vocabulary, choice of career, and attraction to more conventionally masculine or feminine love objects than themselves. In *Women’s Barracks*, the difference between a “true Lesbian” and a woman who merely dallies with other women is degrees of femininity (Torres 88). The lesbian is “solid and robust, with a deep voice and a man’s hands”, while the straight woman is a “femme fatale” who only “played being the man” (Torres 37, 36, 87). As the most visible members of the community, effeminate gays and butch

lesbians could be the target of scorn from both straight and gay characters. David dubs a group of queens “les folles” and comments disdainfully that “a man who wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one and a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of *them*” (Baldwin 39). The idea that gender nonconforming gay characters are not ‘real’ men or women is a recurring one, which emphasises their alienation from heterosexual society and its prescribed gender roles.

When gays and lesbians ‘normal’ in their gender presentation appear, they are often characterised, but not recognised, as bisexual. Bisexuality is rarely seen as a valid identity in itself, but rather as a stepping stone between gay and straight identities (Stryker 29). In *The Well of Loneliness*, both of Stephen’s relationships are with traditionally feminine women, who both end up with men. Rather than being genuine lesbians, they represent “the wayward heterosexual who returns to men when ‘the life’ becomes too difficult” (Walker 43). The masculine gay man was a relatively unusual character type when Vidal and Baldwin used it (Thomas 596). However, both of their protagonists have romantic experiences with women and try to convince themselves they are not truly gay. David returns to his fiancée at the end of the novel, hoping for a heterosexual future, while Jim “half-believed that should he ever have a woman he would be normal” (Baldwin 178; Vidal 125). Many of the men Jim sleeps with are married, their ability to appear straight enabling them to pass in and out of gay spaces at will (Vidal 156). Gender conforming gay characters supposedly have the option of heterosexual relationships and social acceptance, and consequently the sincerity of their same-sex attraction is questioned.

By the 1950s, masculine gays and feminine lesbians were seen as especially threatening due to their relative invisibility (Trask, “Culture” 158). The association of gay people with duplicity predated the decade, but gained fresh relevance thanks to Cold War paranoia. Like communists, gays were seen as the “enemy within”, hidden subversives dangerous because they could pass for ‘normal’ (Griffin 12). The characters themselves tend to lament the necessity of this behaviour, even as they are forced to engage in it for self-protection. Jim hates having to perform “the never-ending masquerade” of a heterosexual facade, especially around his family. He would rather be “natural and honest” (Vidal 179). David considers himself “too various to be trusted” while Stephen deplores “the lies, the despicable subterfuges” of hiding her lover from her mother, “as though they were little less than criminals” (Baldwin 7; Hall 383). *The*

Children's Hour is an unusual case. While ostensibly a story about false accusations of lesbianism ruining innocent women's lives, outing one of the women as an actual lesbian at the end means "The lie was not so big a lie after all: while wrong about Karen, it was right about Martha, if not in deed, then in desire" (Tufts 64). Martha becomes another deceitful lesbian, however unintentional the deceit. In these texts, it is taken for granted that gay characters lie, even if there is sympathy for their needing to do so.

Another trope heavily influenced by social context is the presence of Freudian concepts in gay literature. The Freudian explanation for same-sex attraction was prevalent in 1950s discourse on the subject (K. Adams 262). Diverging from older theories which identified homosexuality as present from birth, Freud attributed it to childhood causes. Absent, overly affectionate, or overbearing parents could all be responsible, as could a gay experience during one's formative teenage years (James 297; Cory 65). The effect was arrested development, immature people who could not form 'adult' heterosexual relationships (K. Adams 263; Foster 151). When gay novels detail their characters' childhoods, Freudian ideas often appear. David has a strained relationship with his father, a man he does not wish to emulate, and his dead mother appears only in his nightmares (Baldwin 15, 24). Jim's early interest in girls is obliterated by a teenage liaison with his best friend, and his inability to move on prevents the formation of healthy relationships, gay or straight, as an adult (Vidal 125). Ursula from *Women's Barracks* has divorced parents and an itinerant childhood, so "No one had ever taught her what was right" (Torres 93). This makes her particularly susceptible to the advances of Claude, an older woman who "started the girl toward perversion" (Torres 90). The use of a psychological theory in literature brings with it the psychologist's view of gay people as abnormal.

The assumption of abnormality is reinforced by the portrayal of gay relationships as predatory and unstable, if there are relationships in the first place. Jim and David both look to older gay men as representatives of the gay life, and are put off by what they see: a succession of one night stands, with "no affection in them, and no joy ... touch, but no contact" (Baldwin 82). When longer attachments form, they are arrangements of convenience rather than love, with the older man supporting the younger financially. Jim engages in two such relationships but takes neither seriously, viewing each as "a temporary halt on a long voyage" towards the true love he never actually finds (Vidal 66). When Giovanni ends up as a kept boy, it is degrading, and his

eventual murder of his lover is liberating. These “dirty old men” are construed as predatory: one “hunts the bars”, another is frequently called “disgusting”, and their conquests are referred to as boys rather than men to emphasise the age gap (Baldwin 72, 156; Vidal 146). The serious relationships Jim and David engage in are similarly volatile and filled with the potential for violence. David, deeply unhappy with his sexuality, feels “a hatred for Giovanni which was as powerful as my love and which was nourished by the same roots” (Baldwin 122). When Jim is rebuffed by his former lover, he either rapes or kills him, depending on the edition. In this literature, gay sexuality is rarely expressed in a healthy way.

Lesbian sexuality is also portrayed as dangerous, though emotional manipulation takes precedence over violence and loveless sex. A predatory lesbian is often a “seductive older woman... who preys emotionally on a younger one” (Castle, “Literature” 24). Claude from *Women’s Barracks* is a prime example, with her “unappeasable hunger for the young, the innocent” and her capricious treatment of the teenager who adores her (Torres 125). Their erratic relationship is taken as representative of all lesbian relationships, an “exhausting love which dies of its own sterility between brief flashes of passion” (Torres 88). *The Well* also features an older woman initiating a younger one into lesbianism, to the younger woman’s detriment. The process is described as “spiritually murdering” her (Hall 492). In *The Children’s Hour*, Karen and Martha’s suspected lesbianism is threatening because they are teachers. Their sexuality “may possibly be their own business” but “becomes a great deal more than that when children are involved” (Hellman 77). Lesbians are consistently characterised as harmful to the women and girls they pursue.

The standardisation of these tropes in gay texts facilitated the practice of gay coding. Gay coding involves giving a character traits associated with gay characters, but not explicitly making the character gay. It is a way to talk about gay subjects without seeming to talk about them, a useful tool for evading censorship (Russo 63). D. H. Lawrence’s 1915 novel *The Rainbow* was banned for its “problematic sexual themes, including suggestions of lesbianism”, but his 1922 novella *The Fox* escaped the censor despite similar content (Ladenson 143). *The Fox* centres on two women living together on a farm. Whether they are friends or lovers is ambiguous, but the characterisation of one as feminine and the other as “the man about the place” favours a lesbian interpretation, as does the story’s ending (Lawrence 7). One woman is killed by a falling tree and

the other gets married, an ending that seems to confirm they were romantically involved. The inability for their relationship to co-exist with a heterosexual one effectively equates the two, and turns the story into “an almost allegorical duel between different forms of sexuality”. The presence of the conventional tragic ending makes “readers take the women’s love more seriously” (Donoghue 103). But, because the lesbianism is coded, it can be read as a lesbian story without, on the surface, being one.

A coded gay story was not always subject to the same rules as an explicitly gay story. When the Hays Code was loosened in the 1960s to allow openly gay characters in movies, the immediate result was more homophobic portrayals than earlier decades. “When gays became real, they became threatening” (Russo 154). However, characters only coded as gay could slip under the radar. One such example is Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. It was published in 1948, the same year as *The City and the Pillar*, but Capote did not experience the same backlash Vidal did. His gay-coded protagonist is a young teenage boy, Joel, timid and effeminate with an invalid father. Due to his age and slowly dawning recognition of his identity, “the full implications of his homosexuality are avoided or only obliquely glimpsed” (S. Adams 16). And yet, the novel remains a coming of age story in which Joel’s acceptance of his sexuality brings with it confidence and manhood. By the end, “he knew who he was, he knew that he was strong” and goes towards his future “unafraid, not hesitating” (Capote 125, 127). The novel does not state what that future is, but it does not need to. Joel is poised to become a gay man without the tragedy that usually came with the territory, because the novel is, through coding, able to communicate things it cannot say outright.

These tropes cumulatively created a tradition of gay characters defined by difference, alienation, and unhappiness. By using these tropes, and adding the obligatory tragic endings, even texts sympathetic to their gay characters end up reinforcing the perception of homosexuality as an unfortunate problem, for gays themselves and society as a whole. *The Well* has a complicated legacy for this very reason. Hall attempted to use literature to gain acceptance for lesbians, but the novel “may have done more harm than good ... because of its rigid definitions and pessimistic outlook” (Ladenson 111). The method undercuts the message. Contemporary reviews of *The City and the Pillar* stress its similarities to prior texts, with the *New York Times* claiming it “adds little that is new to a groaning shelf” (Terry). Brooks Atkinson

praises *The Children's Hour* but would have preferred the play to leave the heroines' "innocence" intact, disliking the ending for its "rule-of-thumb confession" and "routine suicide". A reviewer of *Giovanni's Room* declares himself "dismayed by Mr. Baldwin's materials", lingering on the "grotesque and repulsive" elements before begrudgingly admitting the novel's quality in spite of them (Hicks). These reactions show the tropes did do their job of distracting from the subversive or innovative features of these texts, but seem to have had more impact than those features.

The ubiquity of tragic gay narratives lessened the effectiveness of those narratives for the readers who needed them most. Katherine Forrest calls the first lesbian novel she read "a book as necessary to me as air" (ix). She also notes that lesbian readers at the time "were in every way susceptible to accepting and even agreeing with the larger culture's condemnation of us", and the books available to them only reinforced this internalised homophobia (xiv). Lee Lynch describes her early gay reading as "validating" for recognising lesbian existence, but overall "dangerous to the gay psyche" for the kinds of images they presented (40, 46). In contrast, Highsmith describes the fan letters she received after *Salt*'s publication, which were too numerous for her to answer them all. They "carried such messages as 'Yours is the first book like this with a happy ending! We don't all commit suicide and lots of us are doing fine'" (*Carol* 311). The mere existence of gay and lesbian literature was significant at the time, but the kind of representation mattered too. Censorship and the resulting prevalence of negative tropes limited representation to that which reinforced common, homophobic views. These conditions muted the potential radicalism of many early gay novels.

Rejoicing in Evil: Queer Ambiguity and Amorality in *The Talented Mr Ripley*

The original 1955 edition of *The Talented Mr Ripley* was marketed as “a Novel of Suspense”. This straightforward generic classification fails to capture the essence of a text that is far from straightforward. Todd Decker observes that critics have a tendency to read *Ripley* as either a crime novel or a gay novel, when “It is – of course – both” (186). The novel fits more tidily into the crime genre, but the gay narrative keeps it from being a conventional entry in that genre. In fact, its amoral narrative style and ending keep it from being a conventional entry in either genre. Focalising the gay dimensions of the text creates a fuller picture of the novel’s complexity. A gay reading uncovers the subtext embedded in the novel and takes into account the “continuing themes of homosexual suspicion and self-revulsion running through it” (Decker 186). The presence of a gay narrative in a novel of another genre means that “the novel is culturally revealing in ways that a more prohomosexual text... cannot be” (Haggerty 163). The guise of crime fiction allows Highsmith to use her protagonist in ways her contemporaries could not or would not use theirs. While those contemporaries were establishing the gay canon under the pressures of censure and censorship, *The Talented Mr Ripley* provides an alternative example of what 1950s gay narratives could look like.

Reading Tom as gay is presented as a plausible explanation for much of his behaviour. His identity is a psychological burden to him, filling him with a sense of inadequacy and a simultaneous fear of that inadequacy being recognised by others. His class status certainly factors into this, but so do his meekness and lack of masculinity. His intense relationship with Dickie Greenleaf provides further support for a gay reading, with even a contemporary reviewer calling it a “strong homosexual attachment” (Anonymous, qtd. in Wilson 198). Tom idolises Dickie for being everything he wants to be himself: confident, rich, handsome, and straight-passing. The feelings of shame and anger he feels when Dickie rejects him for seeming “queer” suggest that Dickie is right (*Ripley* 69). Tom’s only form of defence is violence, a response which silences Dickie rather than proving him wrong. Tom’s ongoing identity issues are resolved by the adoption of Dickie’s identity. Through this performance, Tom erases the qualities he dislikes in himself and which make him seem gay. This is the only way Tom is able to be happy with himself. All of these themes, traits, and behaviours are tropes commonly found in gay

literature. Tom being gay, or scared of being gay, informs many of the fundamental aspects of his character.

The novel uses tropes to code Tom as gay while avoiding ever making it explicit. This renders the purpose of the gay content inherently ambiguous. The tropes are usually derogatory ones. Tom's performances, for instance, are used to hide both his crimes and his identity, which reinforces the perception of gays as "a disguised threat" to society (Nicol 100). In using such tropes, the novel "revels in stereotypes of gay male villainy that a homophobic world has long presupposed" (Trask, "Method" 585). Highsmith cannot confirm or deny this intent, inside or outside of the text, without sacrificing its ambiguity. And yet, beneath the coding is a subversive narrative in which the gay killer gets away with murder. He ends up rich and free after taking revenge on those who belittled him for his sexuality. The narrative works to make Tom sympathetic and give him a happy ending, which the novel's openly gay contemporaries were rarely permitted to do. Such a narrative could exist in *Ripley* only because Tom's sexuality is implied, never confirmed. Coding expanded the range of narratives beyond the few available to gay writers at the time, at the expense of transparency. Whichever reading of the novel one settles on, there are outstanding contradictions which unsettle that reading and remain difficult to reconcile. Given Highsmith's disdain for labels, this is an outcome she would likely approve.

The Burden of Being Tom Ripley

The novel's opening chapters demonstrate the psychological toll of Tom's identity and why he needs to escape it. He spends these chapters terrified of being exposed for what he is. This fear is apparent from the novel's very first pages, where he imagines his pursuer either arresting or propositioning him (1-2). This signals the two things he does not want to be seen as: a criminal or a gay man, both of which put him in danger on a daily basis. "His entire security rests on remaining beyond apprehension", but the danger of being apprehended, in either sense of the word, exists primarily in Tom's mind (Tuss 96). His pursuer turns out to be the harmless Mr Greenleaf, and no other tangible threat presents itself during this section of the novel. Despite this, Tom says that "If there was any sensation he hated, it was that of being followed, by *anybody*. And lately he had it all the time" (8). His paranoia is pervasive, making him "almost physically ill" and preventing him from cashing the cheques from his tax fraud, despite his

precarious finances (19). It is not a state he can live in indefinitely, but leaving New York is only a temporary solution, allowing him to avoid rather than address the causes of his paranoia.

Tom experiments with performance in New York, but to limited effect. This is because his assumed identity, George McAlpin, only distances him from the tax fraud, not himself. Unlike later performances where he maintains the act at all times, Tom only plays McAlpin over in letters and over the phone. It is a partially successful performance, in that it has the desired effect of helping him evade the law. It is impossible “the police would ever, could ever, connect Tom Ripley with George McAlpin”, and indeed, when the fraud is discovered, Tom is not a suspect (220-1). However, McAlpin is not a fully developed character that Tom can transform into. He remains himself in his daily life, a less than ideal scenario because Tom’s main problem is his inability to exist comfortably in his own skin. Pinning his crimes on McAlpin only addresses the external threat of the law, not the internal threat of his insecurity, and this is why a limited performance fails to bolster Tom’s mental stability. His performances need to subsume his identity to protect him from both external and internal threats.

The dual attribution of Tom’s paranoia to his sexuality and criminality is a sign of coding. The gay element of his anxiety is only mentioned once before being overshadowed by the criminal element, and being arrested for fraud is Tom’s greater fear during these chapters. He states that “he would rather [be approached by] a pervert than a policeman” because a “pervert” would be easier to dismiss (2). This does not invalidate the gay explanation for his paranoia. The “debilitating system of public hatred and fear” that was 1950s homophobia “makes a paranoid response, like that of Tom Ripley, both cogent and sensible” (Haggerty 166). But the emphasis on his criminality as the primary cause of his behaviour helps to mask the gay reading behind other, more easily identifiable readings. This duality is characteristic of the novel as a whole. The gay reading is often not the only one, nor is it always the most obvious. But it is logical, recurrent, and at times such as this, directly alluded to in the text.

Tom’s masculinity is one of the major sources of his insecurity. Given the contemporary assumption that effeminacy was synonymous with being gay, it is not difficult to attribute this insecurity to Tom’s fear of seeming gay. His friendship with Dickie brings the issue to the fore. Tom’s habit of constantly comparing the two of them highlights how he fails to measure up to the ideal Dickie represents. This is another situation with dual explanations. Tom’s envy of

Dickie's money, class status and lifestyle is also a significant factor in his idolisation, and the more obvious factor. Finding a gay reading for this behaviour requires looking beyond this. The attention Tom pays to Dickie's physical qualities, for instance, has little to do with Dickie's wealth. Tom envies Dickie's masculinity, which is sufficiently convincing to make his heterosexuality unquestionable. Regardless of whether or not he is straight, he puts on a successful show of it, and that is enough to protect him from suspicion. That kind of masculinity, like much of what Dickie has, is something Tom lacks but desperately wants.

Tom's insecurity is attributed in part to his family background and resulting economic situation. Dickie is the unattainable ideal, receiving a generous income, unconditional love, and a secure future from his parents. Meanwhile Tom struggles to support himself, "Living from week to week" with "No bank account" (5). An orphan, he has to maintain his relationship with his tyrannical Aunt Dottie because he needs her irregular "piddling checks" (31). This dependence is humiliating and keeps him from achieving adult independence or self-respect, until Mr Greenleaf takes over as a surrogate father figure. Tom approaches Dickie's family as an opportunity for both money and love. He fantasises about joining them, "imagining travelling with Dickie on some liner back to America for Christmas holidays, imagining being on as good terms with Dickie's parents as if he and Dickie had been brothers" (245). This desire is also represented by his theft of Dickie's signet ring, which identifies him as a Greenleaf with the accompanying respectable patriarchal lineage. Tom is not just after Dickie's fortune, but also craves his sense of belonging. Their respective family backgrounds are a major reason Tom and Dickie ended up with such different levels of confidence, wealth, and status. Tom ingratiating himself with the Greenleafs is a way to become more like Dickie and less like himself.

Tom's family is used to code him as gay. His dead parents and domineering aunt exemplify Freudian theories about the causes of homosexuality (Shannon 25). A weak or absent father, unable to provide a model of masculinity for his son to identify with, was believed to turn the son gay (Sarotte 170-1). Tom's father is prevented from being a role model by his death and the way Dottie speaks about him. She used to taunt Tom for being a "sissy! ... Just like his father!" (32). Well into Tom's adulthood, she continues to make "sly comparisons of him to his father", attacking the masculinity of both men (31). She completely prevents positive identification between Tom and his father. She also represents the overbearing mother figure,

who turned her son gay by scaring him away from women (Cory 74). Similarly, Tom's dead mother fails to provide a positive model of womanhood for him to be attracted to. This clear evocation of Freudian theory is one of the ways in which Tom's sexuality is clearly signalled to a 1950s audience.

Dottie is the first character to call Tom gay, an act which links Tom's family, sexuality, and insecurities. Despite never appearing on the page, Dottie is an emasculating force throughout the novel. The "sissy" incident left Tom humiliated, "with tears of frustration and anger running down his cheeks" (32). When Dickie repeats Dottie's accusation over a decade later, Tom recalls her words and feels those same emotions. By equating effeminacy with shameful weakness, Dottie is responsible for Tom's deep fear of being or seeming gay and the strong negative feelings he experiences whenever someone believes he is. Her treatment "undermines who he is and creates ... residual anger" (Haggerty 167). Tom holds her responsible for his difficulty in navigating the adult world, as "he had spent so much of his time hating Aunt Dottie and scheming how to escape her, that he had not had enough time to learn and grow" (33). He blames her for his employment troubles as well, his inability to hold a job and the "consequent demoralization ... of having no money" (32). Dottie, by constantly disparaging him as weak and effeminate, leaves him without any self-confidence, unable to feel secure in himself as a man or a gay man.

While Tom and Dickie generally look alike, several specific differences highlight their respective abilities to perform masculinity, and by extension, heterosexuality. On the beach, Tom is awkward and out of place. He is "ghost-white" where Dickie is tanned, wearing shoes in the hot sand where Dickie is barefoot, and uncomfortable in his "very revealing" swimsuit (38-39). Dickie is athletic, an "excellent" swimmer and sailor, while Tom is afraid of the water (40). When Dickie implies Tom is gay, Tom immediately suggests going for a swim in water that "looked cold as hell" to prove his toughness (86). Another signifier of masculinity is vocal pitch. Tom's instinctive response to being suspected of being gay is to deepen his voice, which he does on three separate occasions with Dickie, Marge, and Freddie. Dickie's voice is naturally deep, and Tom worries that it is "deeper, richer, *better*" than his imitation of it (146). Because Tom does not convincingly perform masculinity, his sexuality is suspect. Performing as Dickie requires Tom to shed his own tell-tale effeminacy and adopt Dickie's effortless masculinity,

which enables him to better perform heterosexuality. In the meantime, however, the contrast between the two men mainly serves as a reminder of Tom's failure to be sufficiently masculine.

A Desire to Have Him or to Be Him?

Tom's intense feelings for Dickie are often interpreted as attraction. George Haggerty observes that "Tom Ripley suffers a deeply rooted self-doubt that at times amounts to self-contempt. Dickie seems to offer Tom an imaginative and emotional escape... articulated in terms of desire" (164). The specific kind of desire Tom feels is less clear. Some argue that it is "not a desire to have him, but to be like him"; that is, envy rather than attraction (Žižek 13). However, the two are not mutually exclusive, and conflating them was not unusual in gay literature. In *Giovanni's Room*, David catches himself staring at a sailor with "envy and desire" for the man's unquestionable masculinity (135). This behaviour, in David and Tom, matches the stereotype of gay characters as "weak men, fascinated by strength of character in others" (S. Adams 148-9). But while David is ashamed of his envy, Tom's envy feeds into the validation he gains when Dickie reciprocates his friendship. Dickie's feelings for Tom are perhaps less constant and more platonic than Tom would like, but their friendship nonetheless boosts Tom's self-respect because it demonstrates his ability to be accepted by the right kind of person.

For Tom's friendship with Dickie to bolster rather than damage his self-esteem, Tom needs to believe they have more in common than not. He makes frequent references to the ways he and Dickie resemble each other. They are the same age, "the same height, and very much the same weight" (57). He notes insignificant details, such as how "Dickie had long, bony hands, a little like his own hands" (42). Their physical similarity is another nod to stereotypes, referencing the Freudian idea that gay people "are plainly seeking *themselves* as a love object" (Freud, qtd. in Bruhm 4). Tom places great significance on the fact they are both men, and uses this to elevate their relationship above Dickie and Marge's. After a night in Rome together, Tom observes that "Dickie had formed a closer bond with him in twenty-four hours, just because he was another man, than she could ever have with Dickie, whether he loved her or not" (60). He claims his own relationship with Dickie will always take precedence over Marge or any other woman, and the kind of adventures they have together are those that can only happen between men. Marge's response to their trip to Rome is "the look of a mother or an older sister ... the old feminine

disapproval” (60). They exclude her from their planning of a trip to Greece with the excuse that “they would be travelling in the cheapest and worst possible way ... no way for a girl to travel” (63). Identifying with Dickie on the basis of their shared masculinity, a major point of insecurity for Tom, is a way for him to alleviate that insecurity.

Tom’s efforts to ingratiate himself with Dickie show how desperately he needs the validation. He wants “to make Dickie like him... more than anything else in the world” (45). The phrase “to make” indicates that it is an active endeavour on Tom’s part. He tells funny stories and performs comic skits for Dickie’s amusement, and he is “terribly pleased with himself” when they land (50). His comedic performances are calculated. In the midst of one story, “his brain was estimating how high his stock was shooting up with Dickie” (49). Of course, there is money resting on Tom’s ability to befriend Dickie, but Tom’s admiration for Dickie goes beyond what is necessary for that. He is not completely blind to Dickie’s flaws, but his response to them shows that he wants to believe the best of Dickie. He feels “almost a personal shame” that Dickie is a bad painter, and wants him to say “something profound and original” to demonstrate intelligence (51, 56). Dickie is not a particularly impressive individual, but if Tom acknowledges that, then Dickie’s friendship becomes worthless as a form of affirmation. Rather, he chooses to believe that the qualities of Dickie’s he wants for himself - wealth, masculinity, confidence - make him a person worthy of emulation, and make his friendship worth having.

Tom’s idolisation of Dickie is paired with disdain for Marge, an attitude which supports the reading that his feelings for Dickie are more than friendly. From the first, he is sceptical that Dickie could be attracted to her. He rapidly concludes that “Dickie couldn’t have been more indifferent to her if she had been the fifty-year-old Italian maid” (43). However, he remains on the lookout for evidence of this, noting the absence of her clothes in Dickie’s bedroom and keeping an eye on their changing moods towards one another (52, 61). This shows how strongly he wants to be sure of Dickie’s indifference, but cannot quite be. His concern comes from his need to be not just Dickie’s friend but Dickie’s closest friend, or something more that he is unable to admit to himself. His pre-eminence in Dickie’s life is threatened by Marge, who, unlike Tom, is a socially acceptable romantic interest for Dickie. This gives her a major advantage over Tom, and explains his obsession with figuring out Dickie’s level of interest in her.

As well as disliking Marge, Tom treats their respective relationships with Dickie as mutually exclusive. As he gets closer to Dickie he begins to monopolise him, while Marge becomes more distant. Dickie “hadn’t seen her alone since Tom had moved into the house,” which Tom knows because he “had been with Dickie every moment since he had moved into Dickie’s house” (61). He is nice to her when “he could afford to be”, since “Marge was a little angry with Dickie” (60). However, when she and Dickie are on good terms, “he did not feel even like being witty in Marge’s presence” (53). Tom seeks reassurance from Dickie that he, not Marge, is the favoured one, asking “Do you want me to leave, Dickie? ... I feel I’m intruding on you and Marge” (64). But he does this after overhearing a disagreement between the two, when he has full confidence that Dickie will reply in the negative. He remains unwilling to risk the possibility of Dickie choosing her instead. The inability of a heterosexual and a close same-sex relationship to exist at the same time points to the same-sex relationship being more than platonic, or at least, that Tom wants it to be.

While Tom will not acknowledge feeling sexually attracted to Dickie, the intense anger he feels when Marge comes between them is telling. When he spies them kissing, his reaction is extreme. He is “disgusted”, shaken, and so enraged he throws Dickie’s painting supplies out the window (66). He chooses to believe that “Dickie didn’t mean it ... Dickie was only using this cheap, obvious, easy way to hold on to her friendship” (66-67). What he cannot accept is that Dickie might genuinely be attracted to Marge, and might therefore be straight. He “really wouldn’t have believed it possible of Dickie!” (67). But Tom cannot admit that that is the reason for his sense of betrayal, so he instead directs his anger towards Marge. He dresses up as Dickie and acts out a scene in which ‘Dickie’ murders her, accusing her of “interfering between Tom and me - No, not that! But there *is* a bond between us!” (68). In doing this, he “denies any homosexuality between the men while nevertheless claiming (without elaboration) a primary bond between them” (Straayer 122). Tom fears to even name what he is denying beyond a vague “that”. But the extremity of his actions, the fact he wishes horrific violence on Marge and blames her more than Dickie for the situation, suggests that his denials are false and his “bond” with Dickie is in fact gay. He explicitly states that their relationship is stronger than the heterosexual one, but stops short of acknowledging why.

The way Tom envisions his relationship with Dickie does little to dispel the gay connotations of his attachment. He believes that “by the time his money ran out ... Dickie would probably be so fond of him and so used to him that he would take it for granted they would go on living together” (64). He believes their connection is strong enough to transcend their unequal class status. This envisioned future would require Dickie to support him financially, a dynamic more common in romantic than platonic relationships and one which would further feminise Tom. In *Giovanni's Room*, such an arrangement leaves David feeling like “a housewife” (128). Elsewhere, Tom fantasises about “being on good terms with Dickie’s parents as if he and Dickie had been brothers” (245). The use of ‘brother’ is telling. In *The City and the Pillar*, Jim uses the term because he is uncomfortable with loving another man. By calling that man “an ideal brother, a twin”, his feelings become easier to acknowledge (Vidal 20). Brotherhood is an intimate yet acceptable male relationship, without the connotations of deviance that gay relationships had. Tom prefers to idealise their relationship as one which is extremely close while still remaining in the realm of respectability.

There are multiple ways of interpreting Tom’s feelings for Dickie, and the novel never commits to any one interpretation. Tom considers the idea he and Dickie are romantically involved “filthy” (69). This revulsion may be because his denials of queerness are in fact true, and there is no sexual component to his attachment to Dickie. Or, he may simply be unable to admit his true feelings. Honest denial and self-repression look the same on the surface, and either is plausible. Shannon suggests the alternate explanation that Tom is asexual, which the novel acknowledges when Marge calls Tom “a nothing ... He isn’t normal enough to have *any* kind of sex life” (Shannon 23; *Ripley* 107). Highsmith commented that “most murderers have something odd about their sex lives” (qtd. in Wilson 360). “Odd” encompasses all the possibilities and precludes the need for frank treatment of queer sexuality, which Highsmith was generally uncomfortable with. Her choice of the term “queer” maintains Tom’s indefinable oddness, as it “implies a kind of sexual irregularity that it does not precisely name” (Haggerty 171). The ambiguity of Tom’s sexuality is designed to foil easy explanation.

Whatever other feelings Tom may harbour for Dickie, identification remains key. Tom is infuriated by Dickie’s romantic involvement with Marge in part because it disrupts this identification. Tom prefers to focus on the ways he and Dickie are alike, but he cannot ignore

such a clear reminder of one way in which they are different. As it turns out, Tom was right about Dickie and his motivation for kissing Marge: he does not love her, but he does “intend to keep her friendship” (71). Dickie is “less than convincingly heterosexual”, but unlike Tom is able to project “sexual ambivalence” (Decker 186; Trask, “Method” 603). “Dickie’s veiled aloofness” is “a way of inhabiting the closet” without drawing suspicion to himself (Trask, “Method” 604). Tom identifies and covets this ability to pass, but baulks at how Dickie uses Marge to achieve it. Tom does not want to be recognised as gay but will not use the same methods as Dickie to perform straightness.

Tom’s relationships with women are generally familial, hostile, or both, and none of these options allow for sexual attraction. Cleo, his closest friend in New York, appears on only a few pages, but Highsmith still takes the time to make the platonic nature of their relationship absolutely clear. “She never wanted or expected him to make a pass at her, and he never had”, and he bids her farewell with a “firm, brotherly kiss” on the cheek (24). Of the other women in the novel, Dottie is related to him and Tom treats Mrs Greenleaf as if she is. Marge is likened to “a mother or an older sister” (60). The idea of her as a sexual object is repulsive to Tom. He is “disgusted” by “the big bulge of her behind” and “repelled” by the thought of “her underwear ... draped over his chairs” when she stays at his Venetian palazzo (67, 202). Having firmly ruled out Marge, Highsmith makes no attempt to show Tom being attracted to any other woman, either. The novel lacks any alternative female characters who might fill that role and make Tom seem straight. He has an opportunity for heterosexual flirtation on the boat to Europe, but ignores “the silly girls who kept looking at him hopefully and giggling” (34). He could feign heterosexuality by appearing to be interested in women, but does not. Dickie is the only character Tom is strongly attached to.

Tom and Dickie’s relationship begins to break down when Dickie rejects Tom’s identification on the basis of Tom’s sexuality. This begins with the dressing up scene. Catching Tom wearing his clothes, Dickie distances himself from Tom by saying, “I’m not queer” but “Marge thinks *you* are” (69). He realises that association with Tom threatens his own apparent heterosexuality and immediately takes steps to protect himself. In attributing the suspicion to Marge, he deflects suspicion from himself. It “would have been a little queer” if he had “noticed anything himself”, perhaps implying that he was looking out for queerness or knew how to

recognise it (Haggerty 172). Tom's queerness was only allowed to exist when it was unspoken and therefore unthreatening. But once it is said out loud, and demonstrated by Tom's wearing of Dickie's clothes, it has to be disavowed, and the friendship collapses.

Dickie's friendship makes Tom more confident in his identity, so "for Greenleaf to rebuff Tom is to threaten his stability" (Straayer 124). As Dickie cools towards Tom and turns to Marge instead, Tom realises he and Dickie were not as close as he thought. When Dickie turns down Tom's suggestion of a trip to Paris, "it was as if Dickie had suddenly been snatched away from him". Tom almost has a breakdown in the middle of the street, and confesses "I want to die" (78). This exemplifies how he "succumbs to severe depression and hopelessness when made to face up to what he judges as his own inadequacy" (Straayer 124). Identification with Dickie enables him to avoid facing that inadequacy, but that identification is an act of self-delusion. It was built on largely superficial traits. Looking at Dickie is like "looking in a mirror" (57). However, the mirror is also used to illustrate how fickle an image can be. Tom uses one to try on identities, using a cap to move between "a country gentleman, a thug, an Englishman, a Frenchman, or a plain American eccentric" (28). The mirror returns to signify this unreliability, underlining the gulf between what Tom wants from Dickie and what he gets. He wants "to see the soul through the eyes" but he sees in Dickie's only "the hard, bloodless surface of a mirror" (77). Mirrors are not windows. Tom "identifies himself as closely as possible with Dickie but in the end only fools himself", and struggles to cope with the subsequent disillusionment (Wyse 55).

Dickie's accusation of queerness shows that Tom's performance of heterosexuality is unsuccessful, which puts him in a vulnerable position. On purely practical terms, losing Dickie's friendship jeopardises his financial position and therefore his ability to stay in Italy. He worries that Dickie will throw him out of the house, or simply "hurl him off the terrace" (71). On a personal level, being labelled queer rattles him because "nobody had ever said it outright to him" (69). Tom "is at once shocked and terrified to be confronted openly about such a notion" (Egan 110). This may be the shock of being recognised "after suppressing his sexuality for so many years", or may be because "he has not articulated to himself" what his desire for Dickie actually is, or may be due to his awareness of the danger being outed puts him in (Egan 110; Haggerty 172). It may be all of the above. Whatever the cause, he realises during this scene that being seen

as gay has come between him and what he wants most: being like Dickie, being liked by Dickie, and the lifestyle those things give him access to. He loses Dickie's friendship permanently, but the others are still in reach if, going forward, he can perform heterosexuality with greater success.

Shame, Anger and the Queer Origins of Violence

Tom's reactions to being recognised as gay are not consistently negative. His New York social circle was tolerant, and there he claimed bisexuality to facilitate jokes at parties, saying "I can't make up my mind whether I like men or women, so I'm thinking of giving them *both* up" (70). His interactions with other gay people are neutral. He turned down advances from friends gently enough to enable the friendships to continue. When he thinks Mr Greenleaf might be about to proposition him, his imagined response is a polite, "no, thank you", a simple rebuff that would protect him without attacking his pursuer (2). When Dickie dismisses a group of acrobats as probable gays, Tom thinks, "Maybe Cannes was full of fairies. So what?" (86). But Dickie levelling the same charge at Tom upsets him, because Tom is especially sensitive to Dickie's opinion of him. Coming from Dickie, queer is meant as an insult, so Tom reacts strongly where in other circumstances, he might not mind.

Incidentally, Dickie's homophobia is more stereotypical behaviour for a gay character than Tom's tolerance. The masculine gay character is often hostile to effeminate gays, in part because their ability to pass for straight is compromised by being around such "strange womanish creatures" (Thomas 597; Vidal 62). In *The City and the Pillar*, the strongest expressions of homophobia and threats of anti-gay violence come from the "most suspect" men, who have the greatest need to prove their heterosexuality (Vidal 120). Homophobia becomes a form of self-preservation for such characters, and this seems to be the case for Dickie. When Tom brings up likely mutual acquaintances in New York, he "suspected Dickie of deliberately denying knowing" the gay ones, when in fact "he did know them". Tom is exasperated with him for being close-minded, thinking "who was making an issue of it, anyway? Dickie was" (70). Dickie refuses to even look at the acrobats, behaviour Tom finds ridiculous. He wonders, "What did he have that was so important to lose?" (86). The answer is of course his ability to appear straight. Tom, never having had it himself, does not understand the measures needed to maintain it. Still, he does mimic Dickie's behaviour, and "deliberately kept himself from even glancing at

the acrobats again”. This is too little too late for him, but such an approach seems to work for Dickie. That is, until Tom threatens his cover, and must be shunned like the other gay men Dickie encounters.

To be recognised as gay and rejected for it fills Tom with shame, an emotion the literary canon often associates with queerness. Shame is caused by “the pain of the dissonance between one’s ego ideal and one’s ego reality and the fear of being seen or exposed as undesirable in the eyes of others” (Allen and Oleson 34). This is Tom’s situation precisely. Painfully aware of his own shortcomings, he is terrified of others seeing them too and thinking less of him as a result. This is especially true of people, like Dickie, whom he respects and wants to be respected by. Thus, to be labelled queer and judged accordingly by Dickie, Marge, and Aunt Dottie is shameful, because it proves they see the parts of himself he tries to hide. Shortly before Dickie gives voice to Marge’s queer suspicions, Tom feels “an amorphous yet very strong sense of guilt, as if Marge had told Dickie specifically that he had stolen something or had done some other shameful thing” (65). When Dickie returns to the subject of Tom’s queerness, Tom feels “the same shame he had felt in Mongibello when Dickie had said, *Marge thinks you are*” (86). After the murder, he lets Marge believe that he and Dickie were a couple and then regrets it, feeling “ashamed of her knowing... that he and Dickie might be guilty of what she had accused Dickie of in her letter” (199-200). The consistency of his emotional response to these separate incidents demonstrates the indelible connection between queerness and shame.

Tom’s feelings of shame often lead to a sudden “shift from inward guilt to outward anger” (Straayer 123). Dickie’s rejection fills him with a “crazy, directionless fury” (76). When Dickie repeats his suspicion of Tom’s queerness, it brings back the memory of Dottie calling him a “sissy!” (86). Tom is forced “to relive his own emasculation at the hands of his aunt”, and her words replay in his head as he clenches his fists (Egan 110). While no longer a child, he is as powerless to defend himself from Dickie as he was from Dottie. Tom thinks, “Damn him anyway” and “half-dozen taunts sprang to his mind”, but as soon as “Dickie glanced around at him coldly, with distaste... the first taunt died in his mouth” (86). Tom’s anger remains internal, without any outlet. His perfect recollection of the sissy incident, so many years later, shows that the emotional impact of such treatment is cumulative. The shame and anger that Dottie and

Dickie's homophobia evokes in him does not dissipate, but remains within. Every new accusation brings those feelings to the surface again and makes them stronger.

Tom's bottled up anger is the source of his violence. As a child, he entertained fantasies about killing his aunt by "hitting her with his fists, flinging her to the ground and throttling her, and finally tearing the big brooch off her dress and stabbing her a million times in the throat with it" (33). "Dottie has instilled the violence" through her homophobic abuse, and left him with the "residual anger that... leads him to violence" as an adult (Haggerty 167). He has a similar murderous fantasy about Marge, where he strangles her as he verbally denies his queerness. Violence is a silencing tactic, to defend him from the "shattering of identity" that comes with being recognised (Targan 314). This motive also applies to his murder of Dickie. Tom cares more about impressing Dickie than the women, and so Dickie's rejection is a greater blow which hypothetical violence is not enough to assuage. Shame is the common denominator of Tom's sexuality and his violent tendencies. All of his victims, real or imagined, caused him shame by calling him queer, and he has no other way to defend himself because he cannot convince them he is straight. The "violence of judgment ... produces violence" (Abel 110).

Tom uses his sense of victimhood to justify his violence. Ian Young uses the term "existential freedom" to describe how gay characters, already outside 'normal' society, do not always feel obligated to follow the rules of that society (244). Tom's amorality fits this trope perfectly. He feels that being subjected to "abandonment, disrespect, and disenfranchisement" by people and society entitles him to break the law (Tuss 101). After losing a job, he stole to console himself, "feeling that the world owed a loaf of bread to him, and more" (34). Initially ashamed at the thought of killing Dickie, when Tom begins to seriously consider it, "what was there to be ashamed of any more?". By that point, "he hated Dickie" and Dickie has rejected him(87). "Highsmith depicts the entire process of Tom's becoming-violent as a response to the force of judgment levied at him", and "*because* of Tom's experience of guilt, he does not pause to consider the morality of his actions" (Abel 110). That is, having been made to feel guilty for his sexuality, a feeling he did not deserve, Tom then refuses to feel guilty for committing murder. As a gay man, he is already immoral by 1950s standards, so becoming a murderer hardly changes his self-perception.

Dickie's murder protects Tom from the shame of recognition, as well as the shame of being attracted to a man. This is a form of shame that Dickie, and only Dickie, instils in Tom, and is apparent in Tom's inability to decide what his feelings for Dickie are. Leading up to the murder, he wrestles with "a crazy emotion of hate, of affection, of impatience and frustration" (87). In the moments before the deed itself, he observes that "he could have hit Dickie, sprung on him, or kissed him, or thrown him overboard" (90). Tom's confusion of romantic and aggressive actions fits the trope where love between men can "only be contemplated in the form of aggression" (S. Adams 24). A character struggling to suppress his sexuality might resort to violence, an acceptably masculine way to express his feelings. By killing the man he loves, he rids himself "of the involuntary cause of his own torment" (Sarotte 85). For Tom, no longer having a man to love, compare himself to, or be rejected by means he can exist without being constantly reminded of his shortcomings. In other words, by killing Dickie, Tom "destroys the object of desire and with it the source of shame" (Haggerty 175).

The ambiguity of Tom's feelings for Dickie carries through to the murder scene, where the line between attraction and aggression is blurred. This begins with Tom's suggestion that, in the absence of witnesses, "he could have hit Dickie... or kissed him". Tom's reluctance to name just what he is about to do continues the ambiguity. He states vaguely that "he knew that he was going to do it, that he would not stop himself now, maybe *couldn't* stop himself, and that he might not succeed" (90). The suggestive possibilities of what "it" might be are magnified by the action, as both men start to undress. Admittedly, their intention is to swim, but after the acknowledgement of possible queerness in the relationship, it is not hard to find subtext in lines like: "'Come on,' Dickie said, nodding at Tom's trousers" (91). This context gives Tom's attack a "notable ... phallic undertone": "when Dickie was shoving his trousers down, Tom lifted the oar and came down with it on the top of Dickie's head" (Cotkin 73; *Ripley* 91). Tom then proceeds to bludgeon him to death in a "frenzied scene of lust and loathing" (Castle, "Ick"). Gay here and in general, reflects "both the desire for bodily symbiotic union and the refusal to make such a union into an erotic one" (Sarotte 297). Even as Tom eliminates the possibility of his relationship with Dickie ever becoming sexual, the scene's undercurrents are distinctly queer.

In the film *The Talented Mr Ripley*, the murder scene places the gay elements front and centre, resulting in a dramatically different scene. It begins with, as director Anthony Minghella

puts it, Tom “revealing the depth of his feelings for Dickie”, only to be “cruelly rejected” (“Truly”). Tom suggests Dickie is the one “pretending to be somebody else”, and challenges him to come clean; that is, come out. Dickie is enraged, mocks Tom for being “a little girl”, and slaps Tom around, initiating the violence. They begin to fight, and this display of aggression from both parties makes Dickie partially responsible for his fate while partially absolving Tom. He is not a calculating killer but an accidental one, whose theft of Dickie’s identity is an afterthought rather than a key motivation. The insertion of Dickie’s rejection into the murder scene makes explicit a connection between the two which the novel only hints at, and this decision privileges the gay reading of Tom’s violence. It colours the scene with strong emotion, rendering it a crime of passion far more in line with stereotypical gay violence. The separation of the two incidents in the novel has the opposite effect. Tom has time to plan, his anger has time to cool, and in this rational state he thinks about Dickie’s money as much as revenge. In the murder scene itself, the subtext discussed above keeps the gay elements present. However, the contrast between the novel and the film makes it clear that, unlike Minghella, Highsmith is not foregrounding those elements.

Regardless of motive, the murder itself is a transformative act for Tom. The practical requirements of the deed turn it into a trial of his masculinity; he must prove that he is not a “sissy”. He chooses to commit the murder at sea, “Dickie’s element” and a longstanding fear of Tom’s (88). Already unsure of whether he can carry out his plan, Tom makes it more difficult for himself by opting for blunt force rather than a knife or gun. Weapons would make his strength immaterial, but by opting to bludgeon Dickie to death, he makes strength integral to his success. When Tom falls into the sea, strength becomes integral to his survival as well. He survives entirely through his own exertions, which gives him a new conception of himself. He goes to sleep that night “happy, content, and utterly confident, as he had never been before in his life” (98). By besting Dickie using physical strength, at sea, Tom decisively asserts his masculinity and worth. The Tom that could carry out such an act is not the “cringing little nobody” he used to be (247). With Dickie and the old Tom gone, the new Tom can emerge.

Death, Rebirth and Transformation

Killing Dickie does not resolve all of Tom's insecurities. It eliminates one specific external threat to his stability, but there is nothing to say that in future, others will not identify him as gay and treat him with the same disdain. The murder also fails to resolve Tom's inner turmoil, initiated by Dickie's rejection. By exchanging his own identity for Dickie's, Tom protects himself from present instability and future rejection. The transformation is not just about becoming Dickie but annihilating Tom, with all the insecurities too heavily ingrained in that identity to alleviate any other way. When Tom falls out of the boat, he "suffered in advance the sensations of dying" (93). The sea has previously been associated with death and rebirth. Tom's parents drowned, and the voyage to Europe was a chance for Tom to start over with a "clean slate" (29). In the murder scene, the sea "is again associated with ... death, not just that of Dickie but also of Ripley himself" (Messent 72). Pained by the realisation that he and Dickie are not as alike as he hoped, Tom's solution is "to eliminate all the distance between them" (Wyse 55). He abandons the identity he does not like and adopts the identity he does, "keeping Dickie alive in a way ... while seeking to obliterate himself", the final source of shame (Cassuto 138).

By becoming Dickie, Tom gains control over Dickie's image and is able to remake it as he wishes. This effectively queers Dickie. Tom's impersonation begins with the dressing up scene, an attempt to disavow Dickie's attachment to Marge and reconstitute the relationship as he wants it, with himself as the priority. This is a temporary fantasy, but after the murder, Tom is able to rewrite the relationship in the same way, without the real Dickie to contest it. He imagines writing a letter to Marge confirming her suspicions, telling her that "he'd wanted to be tactful all this while... but that by now he had the feeling she understood, anyway. He and Dickie were very happy together" (158). Even before this apparent elopement, Tom's presence makes Marge suspicious of Dickie. She writes to Dickie, "you act vaguely ashamed of being around him when you *are* around him" (108). Tom never actually tells Marge he and Dickie are a couple, but she assumes as much, asking "Why don't you admit that you can't live without your little chum? ... What do you think I am, a small-town hick who doesn't know about such things?" (160). She never explicitly calls Dickie queer, but implies it by using vocabulary with connotations of shame, cowardice and deception. When Tom recreates Dickie as he wanted him

to be, rather than how he really was, Dickie is queer and Tom is the most important person in his life.

In becoming Dickie, Tom becomes straight. Some of Tom's qualities lose their gay implications when attributed to Dickie. One of these qualities is Tom's taste, which enables him to become "a better Dickie than Dickie" (Colletta 164). He dons Dickie's nice, unworn clothes and uses Dickie's money to cultivate his taste for fine possessions. He takes an interest in art and carefully curates the objects in his Venetian palazzo, favouring "not ostentation but quality" (222). Dickie, in contrast, left much of his villa "stark and empty" (52). He was a terrible judge of art, "proud" of paintings that Tom "winced" to see (51). In a working class man like Tom, good taste is a sign of effeminacy, but once he becomes Dickie, "Tom's homosexuality actually assists his class passing. His fondness for jewelry and exquisite clothing suits the upper-class masculinity" he affects, and, "once achieved, this upper-class masculinity then smooths Tom's passing as straight" (Straayer 126). The shifting connotations of Tom's taste indicate the queerness inherent in his original identity, and therefore the necessity of shedding of that identity to achieve heterosexuality.

When Tom switches back to his own identity, his taste immediately becomes suspicious again. By wearing Dickie's clothes and jewellery, Tom makes both Dickie and himself seem gay. This is Freddie Miles' first assumption. He stares at Dickie's bracelet on Tom's wrist and challenges, "you do live here, don't you?". After Tom's denial, he points out that "Dickie's loaded you up with all his jewellery", as if it is proof. Freddie's manner becomes hostile, and he is "the kind of ox who might beat up somebody he thought was a pansy". Tom is "afraid of his eyes", feeling threatened by Freddie's judgement as much as his potential violence (125). In this case, queering Dickie is bad for Tom because it queers Tom as well. Tom is outed to Freddie, who is capable of hurting him psychologically or physically. When Tom sees Marge again, in person, he feels "ashamed" of letting her believe "that he and Dickie might be guilty of what she had accused Dickie of in her letter" (199-200). The re-appearance of Freddie, and later Marge, in the narrative highlights Tom's ongoing need to protect himself from identification.

Freddie's homophobia enables Tom to frame his murder as revenge. In the aftermath of the murder, Tom regards Freddie as "a selfish, stupid bastard who had sneered at one of his best friends... just because he suspected him of sexual deviation". He lingers on Freddie's prejudices

as the final note in the scene, rather than “how sad, stupid, clumsy, dangerous and unnecessary his death had been”. He tells the body, “you’re a victim of your own dirty mind”, as if to make Freddie responsible for his own murder (129). Unlike Dickie’s murder, Freddie’s is hard for Tom to justify to himself. He retains a feeling of “guilt” because it is “unnecessary” (171). His real motive is Freddie’s imminent discovery of Dickie’s murder, a discovery which is in fact delayed by Freddie’s queer suspicions. But by centring Freddie’s homophobia in his understanding of what happened, Tom can make himself out to be the victim, a position from which he is comfortable committing violence. He is not entirely successful, and this murder remains an anomaly in his general guiltlessness. Still, his thought process during the scene shows how Tom’s experience of discrimination allows him to rationalise his crimes as a response to that discrimination.

The centring of Freddie’s queer suspicions in his death scene makes his murder consistent with Tom’s other acts of violence, real or imagined. All such acts happen after the victim voices their suspicion of Tom’s queerness. Their ability to see “his true nature better than he can see it himself” interrupts Tom’s attempts at reinventing himself (Targan 314). Freddie and Dickie both walk in on him mid-reinvention, forcing him back into his identity while still dressed in Dickie’s clothes. This only highlights the gulf between Tom’s real and ideal selves. The other characters’ ability to see Tom gives them the power to define him. He is terrified of losing that power, at one point catching sight of himself in a mirror looking “anxious and scared... because the way he looked was involuntary and real” (168). But in killing those who seek to define him, he regains control over his image. Being “involuntary and real” scares him, but being deliberate and manufactured is comforting. Performing another identity makes him feel “safe and happy”, and protected from his crimes “as if perhaps all of it were unreal” (171). Self-definition is self-defence for Tom, protecting him from homophobia, the law, and his own self-hatred, and so he is willing to kill for it.

Tom’s relationship with performance shifts over the course of the novel as he learns how to deploy it effectively. At first, his performances are geared towards making other people like him, but they often fail to make Tom himself happy. He plays an “upright, self-respecting young man” for the Greenleafs, but the scene feels “like a movie” set because he cannot relax (17). He “used to spin wildly funny stories ... to amuse people at parties”, and “kept Dickie amused” with

the same tactic (61, 70). He comes to regard this conscious effort to entertain as demeaning. It was motivated by the “feeling that people looked down on him and were bored with him unless he put on an act for them like a clown” (169). This made it doubly ineffective: it failed to boost his self-esteem and it failed to hide his sexuality. His skit dramatising “Lady Assburden sampling the American subway” begins “the process that will lead to him being challenged about his sexual intentions” (*Ripley* 50; Haggerty 169). The performance required to stay closeted is compromised by his comedic performances, which are primarily for the benefit of other people. Gay performance in general was for the benefit of straight people, enabling them to either maintain their ignorance of others’ identities or to laugh at them. In Hays Code era Hollywood, gay-coded characters often appeared in comedies where the ridiculousness of the genre allowed them to “get away with transvestism, double entendre and sexual ambiguity” (Russo 74, 89). Neither kind of gay performance permitted the gay character to prioritise their own needs.

Tom’s early performances give away his sexuality rather than concealing it. The qualities he uses for performance are the same ones the novel associates with being gay. His voice is one of his most valuable tools. He creates George McAlpin by pretending to be “a genial old codger of sixty-odd” over the phone (12). He is able to ingratiate himself with Mr Greenleaf because he “knew just what to say to a father” like him (2). He gets so caught up in his imitation of Dickie’s voice that “it was strangely easy to forget the exact timbre” of his own (106). Tom also brings out “his deepest voice” to ward off suspicions of queerness, but this technique is ineffective (125). One of the few things he cannot do with his voice is persuade people he is straight. Dickie tells him “it’s just the way you act” that gives him away, a line which suggests “Acting in general is inseparable from queerness” (*Ripley* 69; Trask, “Method” 604). Clothes also help Tom create a character, but being caught in Dickie’s clothes is a telltale sign of queerness. Dickie may well have been aware of Tom’s queerness already, and willing to tolerate it as long as Tom amused him, but after the dressing up scene he cannot pretend not to know. Performance is meant to be Tom’s way of hiding his sexuality, but it only works when it is not recognised as performance, because performance in itself is suspicious.

Tom’s adoption of Dickie’s identity signals a new kind of performance. He brings out a new metaphor to match, likening himself to a “fine actor when he plays an important role on a stage with the conviction that the role he is playing could not be played better by anyone else”

(120). A stage actor has the dignity that a clown does not, and this is a performance Tom takes pride in and genuinely enjoys. He goes to a party as Dickie and “felt completely comfortable, as he had never felt before at any party” (111-112). Under no obligation to amuse the other guests, “He behaved as he had always wanted to behave at a party” (112). Being Dickie loses its queer connotations when nobody around him is able to recognise it as a performance. This leads to him performing every day for an audience of strangers without any fear of exposure, “absolutely confident he would not make a mistake” (120). Unlike Tom the clown, Tom the actor gives a performance that is worthy of him, cannot be identified as queer, and is designed first and foremost to please himself.

The lengths to which Tom goes in his impersonation of Dickie show that he is the main beneficiary of the performance. He plays Dickie constantly, “from the moment he got out of bed and went to brush his teeth” (121). His attention to detail is excessive. “He broke his bread as Dickie did, thrust his fork into his mouth with his left hand as Dickie did”, and even replicates Dickie’s Italian grammatical errors (118). This goes far beyond what is necessary to avoid being caught. As Michael Trask points out, anybody who knew Dickie well enough to notice such mannerisms would know Tom is an imposter, while “anyone who does not know Dickie presumably also does not know that he could not master the subjunctive” (“Method” 598). Tom’s complete habitation of Dickie’s identity at all times represents the achievement of his original goal in coming to Europe: the “annihilation of his past and of himself” and subsequent “rebirth as a completely new person” (112). He is more comfortable in Dickie’s skin than his own because, although he “is happy living with the danger” of being a murderer, he “does not want to live with himself” (Haggerty 176).

By becoming Dickie, Tom sheds the qualities that make him seem gay. He gets so used to speaking in Dickie’s “deeper, richer” voice that he almost forgets what his own sounds like (106, 146). Alone in his room, he “danced as Dickie would have with a girl”, feigning heterosexuality even in private (107). He tells Marge, “You were on the wrong track about Tom” being queer, though his efforts to convince her are undermined by his simultaneous, somewhat unintentional queering of Dickie (105). His sense of inferiority is erased by his effort to feel exactly as Dickie would. To him, “the main thing about impersonation... was to maintain the mood and temperament of the person one was impersonating” (116). He had noticed that, even wearing

dirty clothes, Dickie would sit in a cafe and behave “as if he owned” the place (56). His confidence did not come from looking like a rich man but acting like one, and for Tom, acting is the route to genuine feeling. He finds that, “If you wanted to be cheerful, or melancholic, or wistful, or thoughtful, or courteous, you simply had to *act* those things with every gesture” (170). By altering both his interior and exterior to match Dickie, “One of the paramount benefits Tom [gains] ... is heterosexuality” (Straayer 126). He gains the ability to appear straight and loses the vulnerability of being an outsider.

This transformation paves the way to Tom’s happy ending. Although he is forced to resume his own identity, this is “nothing but a name change”, a superficial resumption of his old mannerisms (Straayer 128). He plays an exaggerated version of his former self, and “began to feel happy even in his dreary role as Thomas Ripley” because that identity is now a shield as well. His old timidity is suddenly an asset. After all, “would anyone, *anyone*, believe that such a character had ever done a murder?” (171). He retains the best parts of Dickie, his money and confidence, and sets himself up as a “young well-to-do American” living in a Venetian palazzo (189). As he has done since the murder, “he manufactures good feeling from outside” through “material goods and social station” (Cassuto 144). This composite identity is the key to his survival. He escapes the police by looking like Tom, and escapes external and internalised homophobia by feeling like Dickie. On the last page, Tom winds up with “Dickie’s money and his freedom. And the freedom, like everything else, seemed combined, his and Dickie’s combined” (258). “Inasmuch as Tom imagines that Dickie is still present ... there is no need to feel guilty: Dickie lives on, after a fashion”, and Tom lives on without being “haunted or hunted” for his crime (Shannon 22). Out of Dickie and himself, he has synthesised an identity that allows him to exist without danger.

The Implications of a Non-Judgemental Narrative

The implications of the novel’s ending are demonstrated by a comparison with its two film adaptations, which show emphatically what the novel is not doing. The first film, René Clément’s *Plein Soleil*, was made in 1960, and it emphasises the social-climbing elements of the story. Tom’s primary motive is greed. As Dickie comments, “all he cares about is money”. But money is not enough to enable successful class-passing. The film treats class identity as “natural and

unchangeable”, not something Tom can acquire (Straayer 118). In fact, his desire to do so is incriminating; as Dickie tells him, “To look distinguished... is a low-class ambition”. Much “to Highsmith’s dismay”, *Plein Soleil* concludes with Tom’s arrest (Žižek). This turns the story into a straightforward case of crime and punishment. The novel has the materials to craft a similarly conventional crime narrative out of the murder investigation. It goes so far as to introduce an American detective, but he, like the Italian police, is totally ineffective. Highsmith is not interested in the triumph of law and order, but that is precisely what the film’s ending accomplishes. Its version of Tom fails on all counts: he fails to pass as Dickie, he fails to get away with murder, and he pays a high price for his failure.

Plein Soleil’s efforts to make Tom straight have mixed results. “In a strange bid to remove all hints of homoeroticism, one scene depicts Dickie and Tom involved in a *ménage à trois*” which is, “ironically, the most homoerotic scene in the film” (Shannon 19). Tom kisses a girl after, and likely because, Dickie kisses the same girl. Dickie and Marge are engaged; Tom and Marge become romantically involved. Even if these actions are read as part of Tom’s attempt to become Dickie, it places both men far closer to heterosexuality than the novel ever does. Marge becomes part of the future in which Tom gets everything that Dickie had: the money and the girl. If one reads Tom as gay, the connotations of the film’s ending hardly change: the criminal is caught, the gay is punished. Tom is unable to become what he is not, and fails to achieve his desired future as a rich straight man. The film’s attempts to impose heterosexuality and a conventional ending on a Highsmith story remove the story’s most distinctive features.

Anthony Minghella’s 1999 film, *The Talented Mr Ripley*, takes the opposite approach of focalising the gay elements. A product of “the self-actualized and tolerant 1990s”, it does allow Tom to be openly gay (Shannon 21). It also adds a second gay character as “a reminder that Ripley’s pathology is not explained by his sexuality”, an attempt to remedy the novel’s apparent homophobia (Minghella, “Truly”). This second character, Peter, doubles as a love interest for Tom. The film offers Tom a chance at happiness through romance, a prospect never present in the novel, but it also snatches that chance away. Tom is forced to kill Peter to conceal his previous crimes. In this scene, Tom is reflected in the mirror on the closet, and the film “ends when the closet door swings shut on Tom”, literally and figuratively (Decker 186). Minghella

acknowledges his addition of a “moral imperative”. He describes his film as “concluding that eluding public accountability is not the same as eluding justice... You can get away with murder, but you don't really get away with anything” (“Truly”). He interprets his ending as punishment for murder, but it reads as punishment for being gay because it is a personal loss, not a legal sentence, that constitutes “justice” for Tom. The film denies him the possibility of happiness, which ironically means that it “corresponds more to 1990s representation” of the 1950s than it does to the authentic 1950s text it is based on (Straayer 131). This becomes especially apparent when one compares the *Ripley* film to the 2015 film *Carol*. The latter does not cater to modern expectations of a 1950s narrative, but faithfully recreates *Salt*'s understated approach to lesbianism. That *Ripley*'s ending was changed to make the film more palatable to modern audiences shows that the novel continues to defy expectations of what a gay narrative looks like, decades after its original publication.

The films' introduction of a “moral imperative” into the narrative changes the story completely, and makes it abundantly clear that there is no such imperative in the novel. According to Highsmith, the novel was meant to be “showing the unequivocal triumph of evil over good, and rejoicing in it” (Highsmith, qtd. in Wilson 195). Neither film captures either element. Their endings omit any “triumph” or “rejoicing”, and the 1999 film also neglects to characterise Tom as “evil”. Minghella stresses Tom's relatability, claiming “His actions are an extreme response to emotions all of us recognise... We've all been Tom Ripley” (“Truly”). His Tom is a “plausible misfit... not so far from one version of ourselves”, an image of what we might become “without the reassuringly tight belt of morality around our waists”. The result is a “kinder, gentler, and far less threatening” character than his literary counterpart (Bronski, “Subversive”). Even so, Minghella has pointed towards a crucial element of the novel: Tom cannot be too distant from the reader if we are indeed to rejoice at his triumph. “The characterization of Ripley as a rationally intending subject allows us to admire his success”, despite his methods of achieving that success (Abel 104). If Tom were explicitly gay, it would likely inhibit this admiration. Even in the 1990s, test audiences for Minghella's film were “uncomfortable... with the homoerotic elements” (Minghella, qtd. in Decker 199). These elements were reduced in the final cut and excluded from the film's marketing (Decker 200). For a 1950s audience, there was an even greater risk that Tom's sexuality would undermine Highsmith's intentions.

Tom needs to be both “evil” and a character whose success is satisfying, which justifies the seeming incongruity between what he is and how the narrative treats him. The usual purpose of the gay killer was “to be eradicated, thus affirming the strength of traditional gender roles, heterosexuality, the family, and conservative values” (Schildcrout 2). But Tom is not eradicated, nor used for any kind of moralising. The novel “never treat[s] him as anything other than some version of normal” (Haggerty 166). The style of narration is crucial to this amorality. It is third person, straightforward, and dispassionate, which gives it “an air of objectivity, but ... it is consistently focalized through Tom”, and tells us only what he thinks or knows (Wyse 45). This makes Tom seem reasonable, his actions logical responses to the situations he finds himself in. He is the only norm the novel offers, and it is easy to forget how far he deviates from it because there are no other prominent, sympathetic characters to provide an alternative standard. Through this singular focus, Highsmith “maneuvers us into identification with her protagonist by adopting ... his - and only his - value system and point of view” (Messent 75). Tom exists in a moral vacuum, where any judgement or moral standards must be brought from outside by the reader.

The novel’s ending is the other major component of this moral vacuum. It is the final opportunity Highsmith has to provide a note of judgement, but she refuses to do so. A judgemental ending would not necessarily have to harm Tom, as the films do. A killer remaining at large could easily be construed in a negative light. The narration could take a step back from Tom and create an air of menace, perhaps speculating about the damage he may do in future, but it remains firmly centred on Tom. The speculation is all about Tom’s future and the opportunities he now has as a rich free man. The only threat alluded to is imaginary police, which is a threat to Tom’s freedom, and one he brushes off easily. The threat Tom poses to other people remains unarticulated. He is happy, and so the ending is happy. As in the rest of the novel, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ signify only what is good and bad for Tom, and no other measures matter. The ending commits to amorality by continuing to ignore conventional moral standards.

Of course, given that Tom is a murderer, he could hardly be mistaken for a role model. The self-evidentiary nature of his deviance is an asset, enabling the novel to make him sympathetic while simultaneously avoiding censorship. Villainous characters were permitted a greater degree of gender and sexual deviancy than heroes (Russo 89, 135). “Boring men make boring central characters,” while what is technically a “‘negative’ representation” can create

something far more interesting (Woods 219). The centrality of transgression to the crime genre also justifies the leniency shown to Tom. In such novels, “duplicity is not a moral failing but an asset in a strategic, high-stakes game in which survival requires deception. Normative social behavior and even law are abandoned here,” and “the audience secretly hopes that the murderers will ‘get away with it’” (Schildcrout 77). The way such characters are presented to the audience does not change their criminality, just their reception. Similarly, Tom’s sympathetic narrative packaging does not change his status as a gay murderer. He still reinforces negative stereotypes, and therefore does not challenge homophobic ideology.

Tom’s evident immorality makes it unnecessary for the novel to explicitly condemn him, which in turn leaves room for a subversive reading of his violence as revenge fantasy. His violence is always linked to his shame about his sexuality, and directed at characters whose homophobia is responsible for that shame. The gay killer trope can be reclaimed as a way for marginalised characters to give “voice to rage and resistance, even to vengeance” (Schildcrout 4). This version of the trope is valuable for acknowledging the dark feelings of frustration and anger that arise out of oppression, feelings more positive gay representation may ignore (Schildcrout 6). These characters reject victimhood and instead “enact trenchant fantasies of empowerment” (Schildcrout 4). Tom considers himself a victim, but by the novel’s conclusion he has cast off that role by escaping or killing his persecutors. He takes behaviour developed in response to homophobia and uses it to his advantage. A key component of this fantasy is how the novel takes “lavish delight in Tom’s exploits” and insists “that readers likewise root for his getting away with murder” (Trask, “Method” 585). For Tom, violence is an effective solution for homophobia. The narrative never questions the validity of his solution, and after the work it does to suspend moral judgement, the reader is hardly in a position to question it either.

This subversive reading is contingent on Tom being gay, which the novel never confirms. This means that such a reading must exist alongside a range of more conventional, equally viable readings. Tom’s shedding of his own identity could represent either liberation from, or the triumph of, homophobia. By suppressing himself to achieve success, Tom is effectively “accepting terms that the 1950s demand for a queer” (Haggerty 177). In “this flight from himself”, he “has foreclosed the possibility of self-knowledge”. Other gay authors treat performance as damaging. In *Giovanni’s Room*, David’s “obsessive investment in maintaining

an ‘immaculate’ masculinity ... is a primary source of the ruination he inflicts upon himself and on others” (Thomas 598). His denial of his identity is unsuccessful and self-destructive, illustrating the psychological burden of gay existence in a homophobic society. Tom experiences that same burden, but deals with it by retreating further from himself, capitulating to social expectations rather than defying them.

Alternatively, Tom’s performance can be interpreted as granting him the power of self-definition. The closet, frequently characterised as oppressive, “could also be a source of power and safety”, a space “where secrecy coincided with the potentially more empowering notion of privacy” (Bibler 136). When one’s private life was criminalised, denying the outside world access could be an act of resistance (Bibler 125-6). It is also a realistic form of resistance. For Tom to be able to live openly and comfortably with himself would require a radically different society to the one he lived in. The novel instead finds a happy ending that requires only the semblance of conformity on Tom’s part. For an individual gay character to succeed in spite of systemic homophobia is more plausible than the overthrow of that system, and much more in line with Highsmith’s unsentimental realism. Tom’s self-closeting is one way in which the novel acknowledges the realities of the time while still allowing him to be more than a tragic victim.

Highsmith’s closeting of the narrative through coding can be read similarly as a way of balancing reality and radicalism. She was reluctant to let her work be easily defined, stating “I like to avoid labels. It is American publishers who love them” (*Carol* 311). She was unsurprisingly “loathe to let any one of her male characters fully out of the closet” (Nagy). When asked directly, she said alternately, “I don’t think Ripley is gay” and “he represses it all” (qtd. in Peary; qtd. in Wilson 360). In conjunction, these statements effectively cancel each other out and uphold the novel’s ambiguity. Authorial intent does not necessarily correspond with authorial product, but it does matter. Highsmith’s reluctance to confirm *Ripley*’s gay content or to be seen as a gay writer makes it difficult to place her in the same category as authors like Vidal, who did set out to break new ground and suffered the consequences. Her caginess freed her from the limited narratives available for gay characters, but makes her legacy trickier to assess.

Tom’s dual roles as symbol of evil and object of readerly empathy are what he represented to Highsmith as well. Again, Tom’s sexuality only tidily fits with one of these roles. In commenting, “most murderers have something odd about their sex lives”, Highsmith connects

his sexuality with his crimes (qtd. in Wilson 360). On the other hand, she identified strongly with Tom. Her writing process involved “thinking myself inside [his] skin” (qtd. in Wilson 194). As a result, her “prose became more self-assured”. Žižek refers to Tom as her “externalised ego”, and a friend remarked, “she *was* Ripley, or ... she would have liked to have been him” (Charles Latimer, qtd. in Wilson 194). This assessment is supported by her occasional habit of signing her name as “Tom (Pat)” or “Pat H., alias Ripley” (qtd. in Wilson 194). The appeal of Tom was likely his freedom, the quality which represented “Highsmith’s intellectual and cultural aspirations” (Wilson 350). Given Tom’s function as Highsmith’s literary alter ego and her discomfort with her sexuality, he could hardly be overtly gay and remain the person Highsmith wanted to be.

As Highsmith was not seeking to make *Ripley* a gay novel, critics have suggested her main intent was criticism of American society. Tom is a tool of this criticism, not the target. He “extends the American desire for wealth to its darkest limits”, his crimes “part of a twisted but logical extension of America’s success ideology” (Shannon 26; Colletta 161). His ability to exploit the class system via murder and identity theft is a poor reflection on that system, not on him. As a killer, as a gay man, he is doubly excluded from society, and therefore typical of a Highsmith character. Her novels show how “outsiders, such as homosexuals”, “who live outside the prevailing social and moral systems are in a unique position to critique, expose, and undermine their underpinnings” (Bronski, “Subversive”). She often found her killers more interesting than their victims, noting that “a criminal, at least for a short period of time is free, free to do anything he wishes” (Wilson 7; Highsmith, qtd. in Piepenbring). Tom’s queer, murderous amorality makes him the perfect expression of the existential freedom she found so compelling. His sexuality is an aspect of his character which enables Highsmith to accomplish the novel’s cultural critiques more effectively.

A useful term for discussing Highsmith’s work is disruption. Gill Plain uses it in reference to crime fiction. “Although superficially conservative in its reliance upon resolution and the restoration of the status quo”, it is a genre built on the disruption of laws, social order, and often gender and sexual norms (6). Highsmith’s refusal to restore the status quo at the end makes *Ripley*’s disruption particularly pronounced. In a decade of rigid conformity, Highsmith resists easy categorisation; right and wrong, straight and gay are not clearly defined. Definitions

of Tom are similarly tricky. “Highsmith does not want merely to label her character a ‘queer’ ... as an end point to her investigation of his character” (Haggerty 171). She was equally reluctant to pathologise him, commenting that “I would not call him insane because his actions are rational . . . I consider him a rather civilised person who kills when he absolutely has to” (qtd. in Žižek). The disruption of *Ripley* carries through to the lack of a resolution. Crime fiction is a “literature of containment”, a process of “confronting and taming the monstrous” (Plain 3). So, too, do the conventions of gay literature seek to contain by killing or demonising gay characters. But *Ripley* breaks with both traditions. Tom is never contained, and his survival ensures that the novel’s disruption is open-ended.

The concept of disruption allows for a reconciliation of the novel’s seemingly disparate elements. The usual purpose of stereotypes was to limit gay characters to types that reinforced homophobic ideas and therefore encouraged homophobia. The portrayal of Tom’s sexuality as a burden which causes him feelings of paranoia, shame, and inadequacy seems to be playing into this. His relationship with Dickie adds to the negative connotations of his sexuality by introducing envy and self-delusion into the mix, as well as highlighting Tom’s inadequate masculinity. His rejected identification with a handsome, straight-passing man makes his effort to find acceptance in the straight world seem hopeless, particularly as his queerness is the factor driving the men apart. With this characterisation established, Tom’s future looks like a bleak space of alienation and unhappiness. Murdering Dickie seems likely to drive him further away from the social acceptance he craves. In the first part of the novel, the stereotypes are used to code Tom as gay and then attribute to him a wide variety of negative traits associated with being gay.

The disruption of the stereotypes occurs after Dickie’s murder, where the tragic trajectory they prescribe is averted by Tom’s survival. The murder is the initial disruption which opens the door to others, shifting the narrative into a world where normality is suspended. In most crime novels, the suspension would be temporary, but this novel is different. Tom’s outbursts of violence seem to be a product of his inability to cope with homophobia, but are in fact a highly effective coping strategy. It frees him from victimhood and gives him the agency to create a new future for himself. He deploys performance with similar success, creating a new self who is able to attain the heterosexuality and resulting confidence the old Tom Ripley never had. There is no

downside to this solution for Tom. He experiences neither a tortured conscience nor legal repercussions. This, along with the somewhat improbable success of his scheme, underscore how this is a fantasy of a gay man gaining things that would normally be out of his reach. The centrality of performance and violence to Tom's happy ending demonstrates how stereotypes could create narratives of empowerment.

The situating of a conventional gay character in an unconventional narrative of success is a fundamental component of the *The Talented Mr Ripley*'s disruption. It creates an ambiguity necessary for the time, frustrating for the critic, and characteristic of Highsmith's resistance to labels. Reading the novel as inherently radical or conservative erases its complexities, while reading it as inherently disruptive takes into account those complexities, along with the realities of gay writing in the 1950s and Highsmith's reluctance to acknowledge the gay elements. It also diminishes the significance of whether Tom is positive or negative representation, a reductive question and an impossible one to answer. Instead he, and his queerness, are recast as part of Highsmith's "sustained attack on conventional morality" (Bronski, "Subversive"). Whatever undesirable qualities Tom possesses, he is still the hero, and the novel quietly encourages identification with him. The reader emerges from the novel firmly on the side of the gay-coded character, in spite of his blatant immorality and defiance of social norms. This level of disruption was only possible in a novel with *Ripley*'s duality. Beneath its conventions, and because of them, a very unconventional kind of gay narrative is able to take shape.

“Don’t Do That in Public”: Finding Space for Lesbians in *The Price of Salt*

The Price of Salt deftly evokes the intricacies of lesbian life in the 1950s. Early in her developing relationship with Carol, Therese assesses her feelings. She thinks, “it would be almost like love, what she felt for Carol, except that Carol was a woman” (52). Although she wants to tell Carol she loves her from their very first meeting, she does not say the words aloud for another month, when they are in a hotel room thousands of miles from home. The time and distance it takes their relationship to reach that point reflects the lack of conceptual and physical space for lesbians in 1950s America (Hesford, “Love” 130). Therese does not have the concept of romantic love between women to help her understand and articulate her feelings. The only option offered to her is heterosexuality and the expectation of marriage. This limited conceptual space dictates the physical spaces she can occupy as a woman, none of which have the privacy to conduct a lesbian relationship. She and Carol cannot be together until they leave their daily lives behind and embark on a road trip across the country. Despite the obstacles, they are able to find and maintain a space for their relationship. In presenting such a narrative, the novel establishes new literary space for lesbians, a space where they are not stereotyped, pathologised, or victimised, but allowed to create their own lives on their own terms.

Drawing on work by Victoria Hesford, I link each of the novel’s major physical spaces - the home, the city, and the road - with conceptual ones. As the characters pass through these locations, they confront the realities of living by the conditions of those spaces. Carol’s home in the suburbs of New Jersey represents the ideological home of the 1950s, “symbolic of the oppressive claims of heterosexual, middle class convention” (Hesford, “Love” 120). Here, heterosexuality works through marriage to reinforce masculine authority and feminine compliance, an arrangement which led Carol only to unhappiness and divorce. The city offers women independence through work, opportunities for lesbian encounters, and public spaces to develop non-heterosexual relationships in. But the city is also a “city of sameness”, a predominantly heterosexual space which keeps lesbianism out of sight, promotes conformity, and hampers human connection (“Love” 126). This makes it a difficult place to build a relationship. This absence of lesbian geographical spaces is matched by the absence of lesbian cultural spaces. Lesbianism goes largely unacknowledged by mainstream society, making it difficult for lesbians to identify themselves or each other. In response to this “homelessness”,

Therese and Carol depart these spaces in search of new ones, where they might be able to be together (“Love” 130).

The last space the couple encounter is in fact a collection of spaces: the various cities, towns, and hotels they travel through, which I collectively term the road. The road has potential: it offers the freedom the relationship needs to flourish. But it has no permanence or complete privacy. Hotel rooms are only “borrowed space[s]”, and the road’s apparent freedom is compromised by America’s omnipresent heteronormativity (“Love” 129). When the couple returns to the city, they discover new possibilities there, but must make compromises in order to permanently inhabit that space. At one point, Therese “envied [Richard] his faith that there would always be a place, a home, a job, someone else for him” (160). Heterosexuality confers automatic belonging, while lesbians must search for a place and people to inhabit it with. As Therese moves through each of these spaces, she is conscious of her isolation and her need for the connection which Carol offers her. Language of distance and understanding defines the relationship. The novel’s use of space underscores the importance of connection across the spaces society puts between people, and how those spaces affect lesbians in particular.

The Home and the Fundamental Imbalance of Heterosexuality

The home is the space women were meant to occupy in the 1950s, where they fulfilled their designated roles of wife and mother. In *Salt* it is a space of oppression and conformity, as these roles revolve around men and require heterosexuality. For Carol, the home is a space from which she needs to escape to reclaim control of her life. For Therese, the home is a possible future. For both, heterosexual relationships inevitably lead towards marriage, which institutionalises the inherent inequality of those relationships. Catharine Stimpson draws a link between the agency of female characters and their refusal to marry, observing that the lesbian “must reject the patriarchal family... if she is to reject repression” (373). In this novel, the home is a site of masculine rule-making and feminine rule-breaking, which proves ultimately too patriarchal for a lesbian relationship to exist within it. Patriarchal control of this space, no matter how tyrannical, was justified by the significance afforded the nuclear family in this era. “Cold War domestic ideology” treated “the middle-class home as a source of national strength and normality” (Hesford, “Perversions” 217). Lesbianism destabilised the home and was therefore a threat to

national security. This ideology reinforces Harge's authority over Carol, inside the home and out of it, which almost destroys her relationship with Therese.

Contemporary discourse characterised lesbians as "threats" to "ideals of 'normal' womanhood", dangerous because they might lure women away from the roles of wife and mother (K. Adams 257). Here the position is reversed, and the restrictiveness of those roles is threatening to lesbians, or any woman with her own mind. Carol's marriage is built on social obligation and little else. She married "because it was the thing to do when you were about twenty, among the people I knew" (82). The marriage has all the components of a successful one: wealthy husband, attractive wife, a child both are devoted to. It "embod[ies] the Cold War vision of the modern, prosperous, domestic, and secure suburban way of life" (Tucker-Abramson 56). But the external trappings are not enough to compensate for the emotional emptiness of the relationship. According to Carol, Harge is "the kind of man who doesn't let a woman enter his life", a man who "picked [her] out like a rug for his living room" (86, 135). She describes his feelings for her as "not love" but "a compulsion... he wants to control me" (135). Highsmith treats the home as "a space of dehumanization in which people are made into effigies of a controlled ... masculinity and femininity" (Hesford, "Perversions" 218). For Carol, marriage means sacrificing love for appearances and individuality for submission, confines she finds untenable.

The novel's critique of marriage extends beyond the specific problems of Carol's marriage to the socially condoned oppression of marriage itself. Harge's desire to control her is echoed by his family, who disapprove of her being her own person rather than "a blank they could fill in" (135). She finds herself isolated by the divorce, because "everything's supposed to be done in pairs" (105). The community she has as a married woman is contingent on her staying married, and she turns instead to Abby and Therese, other lesbians, to get the support she needs. There is no sense Carol's loveless marriage is particularly unusual, nor are there many examples of happier marriages to redeem the institution. Carol suggests a better wife for Harge would be a woman of her acquaintance whose life consists of supporting her husband by giving "exquisite little dinner parties", and drinking on the side (135). The price of a supposedly successful marriage is the wife's unspoken unhappiness. This trend is not limited to people of Carol's class. Therese observes a married colleague of hers and wonders if she is still happy with her husband,

which seems unlikely given her downtrodden demeanour. She also recalls reading that love is usually gone after two years of marriage (77). This fits Carol's marriage into a broader pattern, suggesting that the controlling behaviour and emotional detachment she experiences are not anomalous but characteristic of marriage in general.

The novel's critiques of the home are broadened into a critique of heterosexuality in general through Therese's relationship with her boyfriend, Richard. They are not married, but experience some of the same issues as Carol and Harge. One of the major issues is social obligation. For Therese and Richard, it is perhaps the only thing keeping them together, besides force of habit. They have familiarity without intimacy or commitment. Therese describes it as a "half-dangling, half-cemented relationship". As for her feelings, she says that she "liked him better than any one person she had ever known, certainly any man" (28). Given that she is young, has not been in the city very long, and has a limited social circle, this means that Richard is simply the best option that has come along so far. Her reasons for liking him have little to do with romance. She likes his family, how he treats her "like a person instead of just a girl", and how he's "not like most men" (81-2). She likes his confidence and strong sense of self, traits she herself lacks. However, she does not love him and doubts she ever will. This lack of passion is in stark contrast with her feelings about Carol, which are intense from the first meeting. Meanwhile her ten months with Richard have not led to anything stronger than liking him. Therese is an emotional person, but not about Richard, and this is a fundamental, irreparable flaw in their relationship.

Another fundamental flaw is the lack of connection and understanding between them, which neither time nor physical intimacy have remedied. Therese notes that "They saw more and more of each other, without actually growing closer" (28). Richard is only rarely aware of the distance she perceives between them. After he declares her to be in "another of those miles-away moods", she observes that he only notices "when he felt himself deprived of her by distance" (109, 110). The same pattern of distance and incongruous perception occurs in Therese's recollection of their sexual experiences. She remembers them as highly unpleasant and painful and has no desire to try again, while he laughed at her discomfort (56-7). It certainly did not bring them closer. For Richard, their physical intimacy rendered their lack of emotional intimacy insignificant, while it is clearly significant to Therese (110). His insensitivity to her needs is

accompanied by entitlement. He takes her for granted, thinking “her tie with him permanent and beyond question, because he was the first man she had ever slept with” (110-111). She resents this assumption, and challenges his claim on her because it is based on arbitrary markers rather than a genuine rapport. When attempting to break up with him, she says, “you didn’t even know me” (164). That lack of understanding dooms the relationship.

The same imbalance of power and emotion which ended Carol’s marriage is present in Therese and Richard’s relationship. Therese is aware that Richard wants “A girl like herself, with her face, her ambitions, but a girl who adored him”, and “resented the fact that she wasn’t and never could be what he wished her to be” (151). He behaves as if, as the man, he is the only one entitled to make decisions about their relationship. Therese does not have to enter the home to experience marital power dynamics. When she rejects Richard, he is affronted at her assertion of agency, protesting that “You can’t just give me marching orders out of your life” (165). He questions her judgement, calling it “completely unreasonable” and likening her to a “child” (162, 163). He also re-asserts his claim to her, and is “never so determined not to give her up” as when she is telling him to leave. His possessiveness “frightened” Therese because “She could imagine the determination transformed to hatred and to violence” (166). Because they are not married, his power over her remains limited, but marriage, the only available future for a heterosexual relationship, would cement that power. This makes a future with Richard untenable for Therese.

Therese’s rejection of Richard signifies her rejection of the role of wife and the conformity it entails. When Richard suggests they visit a married couple of their acquaintance, “to show her an ideal life in theirs”, Therese declares them “two of the most boring people she had ever met” (152). She recognises Christmas with his family as a preview of what married life would be like: very similar to what they have already. She likes his room because “it stayed the same and stayed in the same place - yet today she felt an impulse to burst from it” (94). Her feelings on the relationship are much the same; it does not change, but she herself is changing. Now she has become “a different person”, she no longer wants the same things she did. When trying on a dress made for her by Richard’s mother, she notes that it looks like a wedding dress, “a mold she feels reluctant to accept as her own” (Mayne 90). She dislikes it for its connection to Richard, and blames its “inhibiting” qualities for her inability to maintain a conversation with Carol while wearing it (180). The spectre of matrimony keeps her from engaging with a woman,

even platonically. Therese envisions marriage to Richard as a life of familiarity, routine, and limitations. Marrying him will not give her anything new, but will lock her into that life and prevent change or connections with other people.

Despite knowing that she does not want to marry Richard, social pressures induce Therese to stay in the relationship. Both heteronormativity and urban isolation encourage heterosexual relationships, and Therese, with little awareness of alternatives, settles for Richard in the absence of better options. Their relationship is one “made in the City for the City”, a useful temporary arrangement “while you wait in anticipation of the ‘real’ thing” (Hesford, “Love” 122). Therese’s social life is largely facilitated by Richard. The few friends of hers which appear in the novel are ones she met through him. Breaking up with him would cut down her social circle, removing his family, their friends, and potential career contacts (“Love” 122-3). It is personally and professionally convenient for her to stay with him. He is preferable to other men she has met and she refrains from criticising him too heavily, instead telling herself that former boyfriends were worse. Therese’s choice to stay in a mediocre relationship is a product of compulsory heterosexuality; that is, “the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives” (A. Rich 640). Heterosexuality is socially prescribed behaviour that Therese engages in because it is expected of her. She gets little happiness out of it.

In the absence of men, the home is not always a negative place. Carol’s house is a haven for the couple as their relationship develops. In contrast with the city, it is a place of quiet and seclusion. Carol dresses casually in slacks and moccasins, free of the standards of appearance she is subject to elsewhere. In the absence of other people, they can openly display affection. Carol begins to call Therese “darling” there, and kisses her for the first time (140). Admittedly, this kiss is on the forehead, but the moment is sexually charged. For Therese it is also a moment of vulnerability. Being in Carol’s space is overwhelming: “her hands on the keyboard that she knew Carol played, Carol watching her with her eyes half closed, Carol's whole house around her... made her defenceless” (64). Therese later opens up about her family background, telling Carol things even Richard does not know and ending up in tears. This is only their third meeting. The

privacy of the home facilitates a rapid breaking down of barriers. They can be emotionally vulnerable and physically close there, as they cannot be anywhere else.

The flourishing of a lesbian relationship in the home, supposedly a bastion of heterosexuality, shows the potential of that space to be co-opted for other purposes. Therese's presence exposes the fragility of the home as a heterosexual institution. At first she does not belong. As soon as she arrives, she "found Carol looking at her puzzledly... and Therese felt that in the next second Carol would ask, 'What are you doing here?'" (60). Carol cannot settle on a room to take her to. Hesford notes that "they do not fit into the landscape of the house", because it was not built for a couple like them ("Perversions" 226). But Carol has a photo of Abby on her dresser, not Harge; the house already contains signs of a non-heterosexual relationship. Therese continues this infiltration by becoming a regular visitor. She stays in Harge's room, wears his dressing gown and uses his closet, replacing him in Carol's life and home. The couple explore an alternate domesticity, without men and wifely duties. Therese likes making Carol's breakfast, and they decorate a Christmas tree together. Carol spends Christmas, traditionally a time for family, with Therese and Abby. She forms for herself an alternative family, based on genuinely loving relationships rather than obligation. Therese refers a number of times to "the Home" where she grew up, a school run by nuns (14). For her, 'home' has generally signified a feminine space, rather than a heterosexual, family-oriented one. Carol's house becomes that kind of home for them.

While their time in Carol's house is invaluable for the relationship, the privacy they seek there is precarious and unsustainable. Neither woman has a space that is solely hers and free from male intrusion. Although Therese's apartment is ostensibly her space, Richard feels he has "a right" to be there (107). When Carol comes to visit, he drops in on them unannounced and interrupts a moment of physical contact. Harge has an even stronger claim on Carol's house, and his presence is as disruptive as Richard's. Carol tries to stop him coming when Therese is there, telling him three times "I have a guest"... as a barrier", but to no avail (70). He has authority over the house. His visit is brief but leaves "a deadness in the silence between them" (72-3). Their inability to continue their conversation is echoed later in Therese's inability to speak while wearing the wedding-like dress. In both cases, the reminder of domestic masculine control limits lesbian expression. The knowledge that the space is not only theirs leads Therese to hide physical

evidence of their relationship, only for the maid to turn it over to Harge. She is an extension of him, and through her, his authority over the home is enforced even in his absence.

The home becomes an obstacle to Carol's lesbian relationships. Her affair with Abby was facilitated by their furniture shop, a space of their own away from men, but even that could not survive while she was married. Carol admits "the fact that Rindy existed stopped me from leaving Harge", and Rindy impedes her relationship with Therese as well (209). This forces her to choose between love and motherhood; the two can only co-exist in a heterosexual context. Her marriage makes Carol susceptible to pressures that Therese does not have. Therese is able to move and simply leave behind the people she does not want to see again, leading Carol to remark, "how lucky you are to be able to do it. You're free" (69). Meanwhile, even divorce is not entirely effective in freeing Carol. Harge's attempts to keep control of her are fully sanctioned by society and the law. The invasion of her privacy and revocation of her maternal rights are not questioned by the lawyers, because such actions uphold patriarchal authority and punish feminine deviance. Even as Carol frees herself from marriage, she remains a mother, and this role is used to try and force heterosexuality on her in perpetuity.

The power structures of the home exist outside the physical structure, and the detective embodies the home's continuing claims on Carol. When she discovers a dictaphone in their hotel room, she calls it "a portrait of Harge" (232). The spike the detective drives into their wall is another demonstration of Harge's power to force his presence upon them. Therese characterises it as an act of violence, "shattering, destroying" their space (297). Richard, too, expresses a perverse, voyeuristic interest in what Therese and Carol do together. He questions Therese multiple times over whether the relationship is sexual or not, curious "as if he were watching a spectacle through a keyhole" (166). After breaking up with him, Therese hopes he will not "follow her, spy on her" (168). While Richard lacks the power to punish Therese legally, he does threaten to out her to mutual friends, as if to control who she associates with even after she leaves him. Yvonne Keller describes voyeurism and surveillance as tools of heteronormativity and the patriarchy. Both are "an attempt to see the invisible" and "control" it ("Looking" 191). "The watcher", usually a straight white male, "has more power than the watched" (179). This assessment fits Harge and Richard perfectly. Both men utilise such behaviour to deny Therese and Carol a sexuality that does not involve them.

The inability of lesbianism to exist in the home constructs privacy as a heterosexual privilege. Heteronormativity is a “privatized sexual culture” which works to “block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures” (Berlant and Warner 553, 554). In other words, sex belonged in the home, and the home was strictly heterosexual. The exposure and subsequent eradication of lesbian sexuality within it was a way to maintain its heterosexuality. This is precisely what Harge tries to accomplish through surveillance, an act which turns Therese and Carol’s relationship into a “public document” (Abraham 20). Keller differentiates the functions and jurisdictions of voyeurism and surveillance. She associates voyeurism with the watching of women, an act “typically seen as illicit” which occurs in the realm of “the private, the sexual”. Surveillance is “sanctioned”, the watching of men in relation to “the public, the criminal, and political” (“Looking” 179). The detective collapses the two categories into one by policing female sexuality in the national interest. Surveillance makes the private public, which is acceptable when private acts, such as lesbianism, are a threat to public security.

The actions taken by Harge, the maid, and the court to break up Carol and Therese reflect Cold War anxieties about the lesbian’s ability to destabilise the home. Non-normative forms of sexuality threatened “the stability of the family unit”, one of “the cornerstones of our system of society” (House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials 9). The feminine lesbian was particularly dangerous because she was not immediately identifiable as a lesbian, and this “enabled her to infiltrate the institutions of heterosexuality and disrupt them by converting the heterosexual woman to lesbianism” (Corber 7). This disruptive potential is recognised in the novel. Carol compares Therese to a match, saying that “given the right conditions, you could burn a house down”, and Therese refers to herself as “the intruder” (65, 136). Narratives of lesbians converting ‘straight’ women “suggested that lesbianism was so powerful that a heterosexual woman only had to be exposed to a dyke and she would fall” (Faderman 147). Concerns about this manifest in the condition that Carol keeps away from Therese, and “others like” her, after the divorce (271). Carol is removed from her domestic roles while remaining trapped by the home’s heterosexual constraints. The novel does in fact vindicate cultural fears about lesbians disrupting the home. Both women leave men for each other, and in doing so, thwart male attempts to control them. The novel’s subversion lies in the presentation of the home as oppressive, and lesbianism as liberating rather than threatening to women.

Heterosexuality is characterised as inherently unbalanced, while same-sex relationships offer a more equal alternative. The heterosexual relationships are doomed by Therese's lack of love and Carol's lack of power, but the women have no such problems with each other. Carol considers straight relationships a "shifting and uncertain thing", while "the rapport between two men or two women can be absolute and perfect, as it can never be between man and woman" (273). The potential power imbalance of her relationship with Therese, based on their differing ages and degrees of experience, is countered by Therese's active pursuit of Carol (K. Adams 271). Therese initially feels herself to be the more insecure of the two, but this is reversed at the end when Carol is uncharacteristically "cautious and uncertain" (293). Each woman derives strength from the other. Therese considers it impossible "to be afraid and in love", while Carol writes, "I remember your courage ... and it gives me courage" (222, 262). Neither woman dominates the other, and any imbalance is temporary. The institutionalisation of heterosexuality through marriage forces heterosexual relationships into the same mould of gender inequality, but lesbian relationships are free of those pressures and can exist as a partnership of equals.

Both Harge and Richard utilise homophobia as a form of control, and in doing so demonstrate the link between heteronormativity and the patriarchy. Harge utilises systematic homophobia to set the terms for Carol's life even after their divorce. Richard, lacking Harge's legal power, resorts to homophobia to stop Therese leaving him, and then to save face after she does. His desperation and pettiness takes much of the impact out of his words. His willingness to express homophobic views makes him the novel's "standard-bearer in the cause of normalcy", but he is a "fairly ineffectual" one (K. Adams 271). He regurgitates standard contemporary discourse about lesbians: that "there's always some reason for it in the background", that older women prey on younger ones, that their relationships are unstable, "sordid and pathological" (100, 163, 265). Richard clearly has no firsthand knowledge of what he is talking about, and Therese has already rejected this vision of gay life because it bears no resemblance to her relationship with Carol. The gap between the stereotypes he references and Therese's lived reality seriously challenges the legitimacy of those stereotypes. At the same time, tying them to Richard, with his ulterior motives, makes it clear what their purpose is: to convince women of the superiority of heterosexuality. The novel's selective use of homophobic sentiment links it decisively to the patriarchy, and both forces are combined in the home to keep women under the control of men.

Connection and Conformity in the City

The city is a space of conditional possibilities. It is made up of smaller spaces, each with their own characteristics. Frankenberg's Department Store reflects the city's general limitations. It offers Therese independence from the home through paid employment, but that employment resembles the home in its restrictions, gendered work, and hierarchy. The social mixing that occurs there enables her meeting with Carol, and they use the city's public spaces to conduct the early stages of their relationship. These public spaces, predominantly restaurants, illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the city. Its size, speed, and impersonality allows for relative freedom from scrutiny, but those same qualities limit the potential for genuine connection, and their freedom from scrutiny is contingent on their ability to pass for straight. Their relationship cannot become romantic there. Apartments are the final type of space within the city, but their potential is only gestured at towards at the very end. Carol's new apartment is a home outside the home, a lesbian domestic space which offers privacy and freedom from heterosexuality. However, they have to leave the city before they can confirm they want that kind of space together. Overall the city is relatively neutral. But, in light of the overt hostility towards lesbians and individuality encountered in every other setting, it is the only feasible space for Carol and Therese to have a future as a couple.

Physical descriptions of the city characterise it as a bleak place, highlighting the hostility of the urban environment and the necessity of human connection in order to survive it. References are made to the cold, the "furious" wind, and the grey winter skies (58). Trees are "all twisted up like a signpost gone wild" or consist of "scraggly black twigs" (116, 156). Blue skies, sunshine and greenery belong elsewhere, usually around Carol's house. The inhumanity of New York is amplified by the crowds, inside Frankenberg's and outside on the street. Therese finds them overwhelming and dehumanising. Richard lives at home with his family who "keep him cheerful", but Therese lacks that support system (21). She clings to her acquaintance with Mrs Robichek to help her survive. Having "someone to look for in the store ... made all the difference in the world" (8). But when she spots her outside the store, Mrs Robichek greets her "so indifferently that Therese was crushed" (11). In joining the crowd going down to the subway, they are "sucked gradually and inevitably down the stairs, like bits of floating waste down a

drain” (12). Superficial connections are not enough to counter Therese’s feelings of isolation or make the city an easier place to live.

Frankenberg’s Department Store is similarly bleak, and shows how the working world could replicate the gendered division of labour and female subordination of the home. Broadly speaking, women’s work in the 1950s reflected the tension between the domestic feminine ideal and the practical reality that women’s participation in the workforce was increasing. “By the mid-1950s, rates of women’s employment matched the artificially high levels attained during World War II”, and this increase was particularly noticeable among middle-class married women (Hartmann 86). Still, working women faced gender-based disadvantages. There was an “institutionalized... divide between ‘breadwinning’ (male) employment and secondary (female) jobs” (Hatton 8). Women’s work was constructed as temporary and marginal, a way for a woman to make “a little extra money to supplement her husband’s income, without disrupting her duties at home” (Hatton 3). This allowed women to be both wives and working women, as well as justifying economic discrimination. Women were paid less, encouraged into certain occupations and barred from others, and “had limited access to mortgages, credit cards, or other kinds of borrowing because their earnings were assumed to be temporary or part of a man’s ‘family income’” (Hatton 3, 16). Paid work was an opportunity for women to free themselves from economic dependence, but the cultural ideas surrounding it worked to minimise this potential.

Therese’s job at Frankenberg’s is a conventional type of women’s work. As a shop girl in the doll department, her role is gendered and requires her to be polite and subservient. She is aware of, and uncomfortable with, the “relationship between the commodification of her body and wage labor” (Tucker-Abramson 52). The store is likened to a “machine” and a “prison”, a site of soulless industry with no room for individuality (3, 4). In such a setting, Therese is just a body, and her intelligence and creativity goes entirely unused. She dislikes the “pointless actions” and “meaningless chores” (5). Every day, she watches a toy train go round its track, full of “wrath and frustration”, “like something gone mad in imprisonment” (8, 9). With the dehumanisation, repetitive menial labour and the sense of being trapped, the store very much resembles the home. And, like the home, it offers little opportunity for change. Therese’s colleagues include much older women who are stuck in the same environment she is. There is no

real progression in Frankenberg's, only cyclical routine and adverse psychological consequences. Therese's distaste for the place reflects her general disinterest in a conventional career or life.

Therese is further discouraged from staying at Frankenberg's by the older women at the store, who show her what may happen to her if she stays there. They all look the same, "stricken with an everlasting exhaustion and terror", and the portrait is expanded in the character of Mrs Robichek (7). She lives in "a house like the one Therese lived in, only... much darker and gloomier", underlining the possibility Therese may end up in a similar position (*Carol* 12; Mayne 80). Further similarities can be found in Mrs Robichek's past as a dressmaker, a career of creativity and independence not unlike the set design career Therese aspires to. That she has "sunk so low as to work in a department store" frightens Therese (15). Frequent references to Mrs Robichek's ugliness and exhaustion show the degrading effect of such a career on the person. She is, or was, married, as are several other colleagues, but this has not freed them from the need to work. Therese is struck by the "hopelessness" of Mrs Robichek's life and the "hopelessness of herself, of ever being the person she wanted to be" (16). Therese looks to other women for models of the woman she might become, and in Mrs Robichek, she finds a cautionary tale, warning her away from Frankenberg's and all it represents.

Carol's arrival in the store signals new possibilities for Therese. She and Mrs Robichek are foils for one another, completely different in their appearance, class status, residence, and occupation. "Mrs. Robichek is associated with the slowness and drudgery of labor", while Carol is associated with glamour, leisure, and "the speed and sleekness of consumption" (Tucker-Abramson 55). For the working class employees, Frankenberg's is a prison, but Carol is able to pass in and out as she pleases without being dehumanised by it. Her entrance into that space initiates Therese's escape from it. She recognises Therese as an individual and expresses sympathy at her situation, recognising "It's a rotten job, isn't it?" (39). This contrasts sharply with the "banality" and "masked" faces Therese finds in most of her interactions (5). Therese sees in Carol an opportunity to find a more genuine connection than any which can exist in the store, and sends Carol a card the same day she turns down an offer to stay on at Frankenberg's. For Therese, Frankenberg's represents a life "of overcrowding, decay, poverty, and ceaseless wage work", a life "she seeks to escape through her connection to Carol" (Tucker-Abramson 47).

While Frankenberg's is a negative space for Therese, it also illustrates the advantages of the department store, and the city in general, as settings for lesbian narratives. In the 1950s, lesbians "were without a geography", even in urban spaces where gay men were establishing visible communities (Faderman 147; Rabinowitz 188). Bars were the main kind of urban space for lesbians, but these were associated with working-class women and subject to police raids (Faderman 161, 164). A woman had to know where to find the lesbian bars in order to visit them, and know she was a lesbian in the first place, knowledge which Therese does not possess. In contrast, the department store does not "stray from middle-class, middle-American propriety", and the act of shopping "provide[s] possibilities for almost any young woman to meet other women" (Rabinowitz 186). The department store provides the opportunity for "sanctioned ... cross-class encounters in quasi-public spaces" (Rabinowitz 185). It is a space that both Therese and Carol can feasibly inhabit, despite their different backgrounds, and the large quantity of people passing through it increases the chance of a lesbian encounter occurring there.

The city is the space where a lesbian connection can be initiated and pursued, but not consummated. The population provides the cover of relative anonymity for Therese and Carol's ongoing meetings. But as women, and as women with lingering connections to men, there are restrictions on their public conduct. On one date, they visit a restaurant with mirrors on the walls and bright lights, which "gave [Therese] a feeling of nakedness" (156). Both women are uncomfortable there, and their discomfort, "in a space of acute and brutal visibility", is indicative of "the lack of any social space for Therese and Carol's relationship". This "is made most apparent in that the mirrors reflect back... the oppressive claims of heterosexuality" (Hesford, "Love" 127). Richard is with them, Therese recalls visiting with a previous boyfriend, and they spot Harge sitting behind them. In public, men are able to monitor them, enacting similar control as they do in the home. Although both heterosexual relationships are ending by the time they leave the city, men still prevent them from establishing a romantic relationship there.

When Therese and Carol return from their trip, the possibilities of the city have expanded. With Richard and Harge definitively out of the picture and their own relationship confirmed as a romantic one, the city becomes a space of reinvention. Therese already tried "starting a new life" there, simply by moving and telling few people where she was going (69). The size of the city allows her to choose who she associates with. She can replace her

acquaintance completely if she wishes, unlike in a town where the people stay the same. If she moves in with Carol, her old friends do not have to know. She and Carol can create their own private space in a new apartment and control who has access to this space. The city also offers the possibility of a lesbian social circle, particularly through the theatrical community Therese is becoming part of. Besides the traditional association of gay people with the theatre, Abby has friends in that community and Therese meets Genevieve at a party of theatre people. The city becomes a place of connection, rather than isolation. Its multitudes and anonymity give Therese and Carol a space where they can be alone, together, and can surround themselves with whoever they choose.

Lesbian Cultural Invisibility and Communication

Therese and Carol's relationship develops across multiple spaces, but does not belong in any of them. "The homelessness of [their] love" is a product of lesbian invisibility; that is, the lack of a physical or cultural space for lesbianism to exist (Hesford, "Love" 130). This invisibility is constructed through the policing of lesbianism in public spaces and through negative stereotypes. These stereotypes encourage a narrow, prejudiced understanding of what love between women looks like and suppress all other images. Therese struggles to recognise herself as a lesbian because she does not fit these stereotypes. The construction of romantic love as a strictly heterosexual experience deprives her of the vocabulary she needs to understand her feelings for Carol. Invisibility also limits the ways in which she can connect with other lesbians. She and Carol establish their mutual interest largely through non-verbal forms of communication, including sight and intuition. Their ability to build a relationship, despite the forces working against them, shows how lesbians could navigate homophobic spaces and connect with each other, without outing themselves to the heterosexual majority.

Therese's instant connection with Carol comes as a stark contrast to the landscape of urban alienation she inhabits. In the midst of the busy store, Carol is unforgettable, and Therese has a feeling "that she knew her from somewhere" (39). She writes down Carol's address "like something stamping itself in her memory forever" and meeting her fills Therese with "irrevocable happiness" (37, 38). Though Therese will later puzzle over whether her feelings constitute love, there are several indicators that, consciously and subconsciously, she already

knows. Most obviously, she is tempted to write “I love you” on the card she sends Carol (40). The act of sending the card is another, showing her inability to let something this important pass by. Other indicators of attraction include the language: Carol’s address is “like a secret Therese would never forget”, her voice is “full of secrets” and when she later calls her, Therese feels “rigid with guilt suddenly, as if she had been caught in a crime” (36, 37, 43). The sense that there is something illicit about her interactions with Carol indicates that she knows her feelings are taboo, even if she lacks the full awareness of those feelings or of lesbianism to explicitly articulate that. Through their meeting, Therese begins to recognise what she wants, who she is, and that Carol offers her an opportunity to better understand both.

Much of the communication between Carol and Therese is wordless, a necessary precaution given their lack of privacy. They often meet in public spaces, their relationship unfolding “through the motions of a legitimated interaction” (Hesford, “Love” 126). This means it “must be conducted through moments, gestures, and silences”, rather than direct statements (“Love” 128). Their meeting resembles a normal interaction between customer and shop girl, and the subsequent card and phone call have the appearance of Christmas kindness. Their first proper conversation covers ordinary subjects and never becomes particularly deep. But the gestures communicate more than mere kindness: the card is an overture which Carol recognises, and reciprocates with the lunch invitation. Both gestures show their unspoken mutual understanding, and their mutual interest is confirmed by the arrangement of further meetings. Another sign of their understanding is how Therese seems to recognise Carol. She feels that she does not need to talk about herself, because Carol “could not look at anything without understanding completely”, and she is not shy in telling Carol she admires her because “she knew the woman knew anyway” (47). This sense of familiarity and understanding speeds the relationship along, despite the restrictions of a homophobic environment.

Sight is a crucial form of communication in this environment, and is used to convey desire. Their meeting begins with a moment of eye contact, and Therese finds herself “caught by” Carol’s eyes (36). During their lunch, Therese’s looking and not looking signals at once her desire and her fear of being caught desiring. Though she finds Carol beautiful, she “could not bear to look at [her face] directly”. She wants to look at Carol’s lips, but having Carol’s eyes “so close drove her away” (46). Nonetheless she mentions them twice more in the next few pages,

and the fixation stirs in her “an indefinite longing” (49). When Carol invites her for a visit, Therese returns her gaze “for the first time” that scene and accepts the invitation (50). Through the look, she acknowledges that they are on the same page and faces up to the desire she had been trying to deny. The morning after they first sleep together, Therese stands looking at Carol, who tells her, “Don’t do that in public” (203). The way Therese looks at her is eroticised to the point of incrimination. But for the most part, sight is a subtle language they can use in public. Unlike speech or touch, it cannot be recognised as an obvious expression of attraction by other people, and therefore cannot be policed. At the same time, eye contact requires both individuals to confront one another and their feelings about one another. While adopted out of necessity, it is an effective form of communication in this repressive environment.

Sight functions as a general shorthand for lesbians to identify each other in public. Therese traces her break-up with Richard to the moment she first spotted Carol. She attributes her recognition of her sexuality to that moment rather than their subsequent relationship, stating “it had all happened in that instant she had seen Carol standing in the middle of the floor, watching her”. She would have felt the same way “if Carol... had never spoken to her at all” (163). Therese has no cultural images of lesbianism in which she can see herself. In seeing Carol, she recognises her own desires, and in seeing Carol and other lesbians, she recognises women with the same desires. When she meets Genevieve Cranell, their mutual attraction is indicated by looking. There is a “flash of interest” in Genevieve’s eyes, and Therese reciprocates by holding her gaze past the first glance (302). She knows Genevieve is gay before they ever speak, and compares meeting her to meeting Carol. This establishes sight as a form of universal lesbian communication, rather than belonging only to Therese and Carol. Likewise, Therese’s attraction to another woman after Carol proves that she is a lesbian, and “will not return to heterosexuality with the next turn of the narrative” (Abraham 14). For lesbians to see each other is to recognise possibilities for existence which would otherwise be suppressed by their invisibility.

The prevalence of wordless communication reflects the lack of other language available to lesbians. There is much Therese and Carol cannot say for lack of privacy, and there is much they cannot say because they lack the vocabulary. The vocabulary of romance is reserved for heterosexuals, and the vocabulary of lesbianism is limited to often pejorative stereotypes. In this society, the lesbian is recognised “only when she comes clothed in the cultural assumptions

which make her the Other” (K. Adams 258). Therese has difficulty seeing herself as the Other. When Richard claims “There’s always some reason for it in the background”, Therese ponders her own background, but finds no reason. She is not totally unaware of lesbians, but “she knew what kind of people they were and what they looked like. Neither she nor Carol looked like that” (100). “Like that” means butch. At one point, Therese recognises a pair of lesbians from their slacks and short hair (153). In contrast, references to Carol’s heels, jewellery, and perfume establish her as very feminine. Therese wears more make-up by the end of the novel; she is clearly not defeminised by her identity. Her appearance and conventionally feminine presentation protect her from being identified as a lesbian by the general public, but also make it difficult for her to claim that identity as her own.

The irrelevance of lesbian stereotypes to Therese continues with her relative lack of the shame and self-loathing often presumed part of the gay experience. The *New York Times* review of the novel expressed surprise that “Therese apparently cannot conceive of there being anything questionable” about her relationship with Carol (Rolo). As Kate Adams comments, “it’s not normal for Therese to assume that she’s normal” (272). But she does. It is hardly a conscious act. Having decided she is not like the lesbian stereotype, she simply does not think to apply any of those qualities to herself. As Phyllis Nagy puts it, “No one frets about being gay; others fret on their behalf” (qtd. in F. Rich). It falls to Richard “to convince her she was unhealthy” and that her relationship with Carol is “sordid and pathological” (166, 265). Like most of what Richard says, it has little effect on Therese. Her self-possession likely stems from the fact that, as a straight-passing lesbian who does not frequent gay spaces, she is relatively sheltered. Gay shame is a product of internalised homophobia, but Therese never had homophobia directed at her, so she did not consider its messages applicable to her. This frees her from the expectation that lesbians are meant to feel a certain way about their sexuality, and instead allows her feelings to occur naturally.

Therese is not entirely free from feelings of guilt and shame, but these are rarely associated with her sexuality. Richard evokes more negative feelings than Carol does. She experiences a multitude of unpleasant emotions at the prospect of sleeping with him. In quick succession she feels “miserable and ashamed, sorry for herself and for him”, “wretched embarrassment”, “tortured by herself” and “by a shame she could not really account for” (56,

57). Given her general lack of strong feelings related to Richard, this intensity is startling. Rather than automatically associating negative feelings with the lesbian relationship, the novel instead associates them with the relationship which has real problems. When Richard asks invasive questions and makes offensive insinuations about Carol, it gives Therese feelings of “humiliation, resentment, loathing of him” but no self-loathing. She recognises that, by “trying to convince her she was unhealthy”, he was in fact being “cruel, and unhealthy” himself (166). His manipulation is the problem, not her sexuality. Guilt and shame are not inherently linked to lesbianism, but are instead used to signal that Richard, not Carol, is the wrong choice for Therese.

More broadly, Therese feels guilt and shame when she feels disingenuous. She is uncomfortable performing romantic actions when she is unsure if her underlying feelings match. Her inability to reciprocate Richard’s affection because “she wasn’t in love with him made Therese feel guilty, guilty about accepting anything from him” (56). This keeps her from going away with him or having sex with him, both of which she does with Carol without guilt. In regards to Carol, the guilt appears instead when Therese cannot articulate her feelings. On their first date, she experiences “an indefinite longing”, likely a desire to kiss Carol, and brushes it off for being “absurd” and “embarrassing” (49, 50). Recalling this moment later, “she set her teeth in shame” (65). She cannot justify or even define the action to herself because she is still struggling with the question of whether she is in love with Carol. Love is the necessary prerequisite for kissing her without shame, or for participating wholeheartedly in any relationship. The prospect of an affair with Genevieve gives her “a feeling of revulsion, of shame” only after Therese realises she could never truly love her (305). Honesty is crucial too. Therese feels “false, guilty” when she lies and tells Carol she has never been in love (82). Shame for Therese comes from a lack of emotional authenticity, a disconnect between what she is feeling and what she is expressing.

This disconnect is in part due to the absence of lesbian images and vocabulary to help Therese define her feelings. She goes back and forth on whether ‘love’ is the right word, preoccupied by whether love can exist between two women who do not fit the lesbian stereotype. The lack of verbal language inhibits her ability to raise the subject with those who might be able to help her. “Silence is the space from which Therese must articulate her feelings”, and it is a

space she struggles to break out of (Hesford, "Love" 130). At first, she is reticent even with herself, consigning her feelings to unsent love letters. She remains quiet when she is with Carol, as "only the things she had written to Carol in the unmailed letter were to be talked about, and that was impossible" (60). The only other lesbian she might talk to is Abby, whom she sees the same day she finally realises "she loved Carol" (126). Abby is a uniquely qualified confidante, but Therese cannot utilise her properly because she does not know what to say. She "wished she could lead the conversation to the heart of things, but just what the heart of things was, she didn't know". She is full of questions but cannot articulate them, "because all her questions were so enormous" (119). Carol and Abby have knowledge that she needs, but Therese's access to that knowledge is prevented by the lack of words for her experiences.

Books are another potential source of knowledge on love and lesbianism. Therese's literary engagement represents her confrontation with, and rejection of, prescribed romantic and lesbian narratives. Inexperienced in love, she refers to "what she had read about love" to tell her how it "was supposed to be" and how long it "usually" lasts (28, 77). The love the books refer to is heterosexual, but she applies these lessons in ways that challenge heteronormativity. She uses the definition of love as "blissful insanity" to reject Richard and confirm her preference for Carol (28). Books are also one of the few sources for information about gay people. Richard parrots medical literature when she raises the subject with him, and even Carol learned about it through what "the books... tell you" (206). However, there is no overlap between the discourses about love and non-normative sexuality. When Therese goes into a bookshop, she picks up a book of medieval love poetry but "its heteronormative paratextual features alienate her". She cannot find any representation of lesbian romance because mainstream literature offers her "no prescribed romantic ritual to follow". She has the option to "cross-identify with" male characters and "repurpose ... 'heteromantic' poems as expressions of homoerotic desire" (Northrop 89). Instead, she chooses to leave the bookshop empty-handed and, through letters, write her own romance.

Therese's letter writing illustrates the damaging effects of cultural silence and works to counter them. She uses conventional romantic language of spring and music, emphasising the similarities between them and any other couple. Her choice of vocabulary also conveys a specifically lesbian loneliness and need. In one fragment, she writes, "I feel I stand in a desert with my hands outstretched, and you are raining down upon me" (161). She notes how hard it is

for gay people to find each other, and how “incredibly lucky” she and Carol were to meet (163). Lesbian invisibility isolates Therese and places her in “a desert” where she is disconnected from other lesbians and unaware of how much she needs that connection. Her relationship with Carol is an absolute necessity because it is, to date, the only opportunity she has had to establish that connection. Therese’s dramatic language turns the stakes into a matter of life and death. On their first drive together, she “wished the tunnel might cave in and kill them both, that their bodies might be dragged out together” (59). Uncertain that they will have a relationship, she envisions a death that will unite them forever. She contemplates suicide at a date ending prematurely, and wants to tell Carol, “I don’t want to die yet without knowing you” (136). When Carol leaves, it feels like “something you loved was dead in front of your eyes” (220). Through Carol, Therese discovers the lesbian connection she did not know she had been missing, and she is quick to recognise how much she needs it.

Carol is positioned as a mother figure to Therese for the vital role she plays in Therese’s self-discovery. The presence of such a metaphor is initially startling, and seems to introduce Freudian ideology into a text generally free of homophobic tropes. In the usual iteration of the trope, lesbians are portrayed as psychologically immature, and seek in other women substitute mothers to compensate for poor relationships with their real mothers (K. Adams 263). Carol as a mother figure is an image the novel returns to several times. First, she supplants the nun who previously filled that role in Therese’s affections (46). When Therese comes to visit, Carol calls her “a child” and insists she take a nap, even tucking her in and bringing her a glass of milk (65). For a novel that usually ignores stereotypes, the presence of this one is startling. However, leaving Freud aside and reading *Salt* as a coming of age novel, Carol as mother figure becomes a reference to her guiding role in Therese’s growth.

Carol must fill this role because Therese has no other lesbians to model herself on. Therese uses other, older women as examples of the woman she may become: Mrs Robichek and Genevieve Cranell show her worlds her future self could inhabit. But she has no images of the lesbian which she can recognise herself in, until Carol. Therese knows that lesbians are meant to be butch, but in commenting that “Neither she nor Carol looked like that”, she recognises their shared divergence from the stereotype (100). They may not be “like that”, but they are like each other. She is attracted specifically to Carol’s femininity and elegance, noting her “graceful”

figure, “delicate-looking suede pumps”, perfume, and make-up (35, 78). Make-up, a traditional marker of womanhood, is pushed on her by both Therese’s real mother and Frankenberg’s, who offer her a job in the cosmetics department. She rejects both the make-up and their models of womanhood: marriage and children, an unambitious sales job. And yet, by the end of the novel, she is wearing more make-up than she used to and looking “all grown up” (294). Carol provides a model of feminine lesbian womanhood that Therese could not find anywhere else, and by the novel’s end is inhabiting herself.

Carol also helps Therese become a woman by modelling a feminine strength and resilience. Therese “had always been attracted to people with Richard’s kind of self-assurance”, a trait she herself lacks (125). But she finds it in Carol, who “would always have ... courage”, and through Carol, finds it in herself, because it is impossible “to be afraid and in love” (222, 298). Experiencing homophobia and heartbreak first-hand shake but ultimately strengthen her. By the time of Carol’s court ordeal, she writes of Therese as the strong one, saying “I remember your courage that I hadn’t suspected, and it gives me courage” (262). Her open-minded attitude towards Therese’s growth is another quality that facilitates it. She writes, “I love you always, the person you are and the person you will become”, in stark contrast with Richard who insists she has not changed at all (272). A heroine finding her identity as a woman through romantic involvement with another, more experienced woman is a tradition in lesbian literature. This type of character arc dramatises how, “Through the woman, [the heroine] comes to the woman, herself” (Griffin 36). Therese feels she “had been born since she left Carol”, language that once again positions Carol as a mother figure, creator of the new Therese (294). The mother/daughter dynamics in their relationship are not pathological, as Freud would have them. Carol teaches Therese things she could not learn from her real mother, and the trope is used to illustrate the vital support that lesbians give each other when nobody else will.

The gradual development of Therese and Carol’s relationship affirms the ability of lesbians to find, connect with, and support each other, in spite of the barriers the culture places between them. Therese’s engagement with writing depicts the lack of literary space for lesbians, but also depicts how lesbians make their own spaces “in the interstices of convention” (Hesford, “Love” 121). Therese leaves a love letter to Carol in the Oxford Book of English Verse, “literally writ[ing] her own eroticism into the poetry book” (Northrop 90). The novel performs a similar

act of making space where there is none, in the interstices of genre. This involves the complete absence of any labels, in the text itself and in the hardcover edition's lack of recognisably lesbian external features. The pulp edition quickly rectified this, but even when marketed as lesbian, *Salt* was not lesbian in the same way pulp novels were. In pulps, the label had inescapably negative connotations. As one pulp character declares, "*Lesbian* is an ugly word and I hate it" (Vin Packer, qtd. in Forrest 22). Another asks, "I don't have to label my love, do I? Do I have to say it's Lesbian love?", as if to label it as such would tarnish it (Vin Packer, qtd. in Forrest 27). By simultaneously resisting definition and presenting an undeniably lesbian narrative, the novel creates "a virtual space for lesbian desire" without the rules of a conventional lesbian narrative (Rabinowitz 188). Like its characters, it finds its own subtle methods for navigating a homophobic landscape and asserting its identity, while remaining unnoticed by the broader culture.

The Road, Transformation, and the Limitations of American Freedom

The road is a transient space where Therese and Carol escape the enforced heteronormativity of the city and the home. The novel enters the generic space of the American road novel, and explores many themes common to the genre. The first of these is "protest", and features characters travelling to avoid "being defined by custom, tradition, and circumstances back home, and - at least for a while - to construct an alternative way of living" (Primeau 15, 33). On the road, Therese and Carol find the freedom and privacy they need to consummate their relationship. However, this freedom has limitations. It is contingent on constant motion, an unsustainable situation. Freedom is also difficult for women like Carol to attain, because their lingering ties to the home mean that "whatever agency is exercised on the road is necessarily limited" (Clarke 103). Another theme of American road novels is "the search for a national identity", an identity the novel refuses to romanticise (Primeau 15). Therese and Carol discover "an America that alienates, threatens, and suffocates" (Hesford, "Love" 129). The 'land of the free' does not extend freedom to lesbians, and the ubiquity of American homophobia almost destroys the relationship. However, the period of separation is crucial for Therese's maturation and the couple's eventual reconciliation. The experience strengthens her independence, resolve,

and resilience. The road represents freedom with conditions, which makes it transformative but fragile space.

At the beginning of the trip, Therese and Carol are still behaving with the guardedness they needed in the city. As they set off, Therese “felt there were thousands of words choking her throat, and perhaps only distance, thousands of miles, could straighten them out” (183). Once again, she is in a position in which she has much to say but little knowledge of how to say it, and stays quiet. This initial silence signals the ways in which the relationship has not been able to progress in the city or the home. The wordless communication they had to employ in those spaces confirmed only that there was mutual interest, not the nature of that interest, leaving both women uncertain as to where the other stands. They refer back to their first drive together, and Therese has to explain to Carol that she was nervous then out of excitement at their meeting. Carol reacts with her habitual surprise at the strength of Therese’s feelings (185). Shortly afterwards, she gently chides Therese for the “many times a day” she has to ask what Therese is thinking (191). Therese finds Carol similarly opaque, and refuses to agree to the trip until she has confirmation that Carol does “seem to care whether I go or not” (137). The relationship cannot move forward without unguarded, unambiguous communication of feelings, and the road is the only space which permits that.

Closing this emotional distance is a necessary prerequisite to closing their physical distance. Early on, an accidental brushing of hands leaves Therese’s skin “burning”, though she “could not understand” why (48). Carol placing her hands on Therese’s shoulders invokes a “tumult so intense it blotted out” the subsequent kiss on the forehead (64). When Carol intentionally reaches for her hand, one would expect another strong reaction from Therese, but instead she focuses on how Carol did it “indifferently” and spoke in a “bored tone” (79). Carol often seems cool towards her. While sitting at her feet, Therese observes that “Carol was still so distant even when she spoke, even when she looked at her” (130). Physical proximity and even their usually intimate looks are meaningless when Therese is unsure of the feelings involved. Carol’s reticence is a factor in this sense of distance. After opting for silence rather than talk about her divorce, it seemed “they travelled through space away from each other” (78). Therese’s decision to go on the trip comes only after Carol finally opens up to her about the divorce. That same night, Carol calls her darling for the first time and Therese asks if she may kiss Carol good

night (140, 142). While these are not an 'I love you' nor an actual kiss, they are the first steps towards those actions. Verbal declarations of love and explicitly romantic contact can happen only after emotional transparency.

In the city, Therese did not have the language or space to articulate her feelings, but on the road she finds both. In Chicago, after a few drinks, she feels "painfully close to Carol" and almost expresses her desire to sleep in Carol's bed and kiss her. By this point, she has confirmation of lesbian existence to validate her attraction. She cites the lesbian couple she glimpsed in the City, thinking, "they did that, she knew, and more". But she worries that Carol will "suddenly thrust her away in disgust" and lose all her affection for Therese (197). The difference between this unrealised overture and her successful one the following night is that the latter begins with Therese saying "I love you" (199). Making that unequivocal statement is an essential step in the relationship's progression. The guarded, often wordless communication they have used up to this point is too ambiguous, particularly to the inexperienced Therese. She cannot be certain how Carol feels until it is spoken out loud. The road is the only place where, as far as they know, their love can be spoken without anybody around to overhear, interrupt, or penalise them for it.

The importance of the verbal confirmation of love is indicated by how quickly the relationship develops into a sexual one afterwards; all they needed was to be sure their feelings were mutual. The language used in their sex scene contrasts directly with Therese's sexual encounters with Richard. There, she had been bothered by "her distance then compared to the closeness that was supposed to be", and their lack of synergy made the experiences amusing for Richard and uncomfortable, even painful for Therese (110). She had asked, "Is this right?", wondering "how could it be right and so unpleasant" (56). With Carol, it is the reverse: "she did not have to ask if this was right, no one had to tell her, because this could not have been more right or perfect" (201). In the scene's abstract imagery, Therese imagines herself as an "arrow" crossing "pale-blue distance and space" (200). This growing spiritual closeness complements their physical closeness. When she comes back to reality, she emphasises their proximity: how "Carol's head was close against hers", how "She held Carol tighter against her", how she looks at "Carol's face only inches away" (201). The mood is completely different too: Therese smiles instead of crying. On the road, she finds the love and "perfect connection" she could never have

with Richard, and had despaired of ever finding in the city where “everyone was incommunicado with everyone else” (5, 126).

The impermanence of the road that enables Therese and Carol to exist as a couple also imposes certain limitations. There is a sense that they are separate from reality. Their constant travel “simultaneously protects the lovers from the world, and prevents their connection to the world” (Hesford, “Love” 128). They pass through towns where the “homes looked as comfortable and safe as birds’ nests”, while their own domesticity is confined to hotels in nameless or generic towns (192). Even the crucial site of Waterloo is undermined by the remark, “There’s a couple of Waterloos in every state”, locating the events that transpire there simultaneously anywhere and nowhere (201). The indistinct, ever-changing backdrop gives their happiness an unreal, temporary quality. Therese describes it as “a time too absolute and flawless to seem real”, and likens herself to an actor, “playing... someone fabulously and excessively lucky” (214). This suspension from regular time and regular life enables the relationship to flourish only in this nowhere-space “without past or future” (227). It has nowhere to go from here. Carol assures Therese that “it’ll be the same” when they return to the city, but this is impossible. With Rindy still in the picture, it is “useless to dream of” them living together (214). The road allows them to escape the real world and much of its homophobia, but such an existence can only be temporary; as Carol says, “you have to live in the world” (210).

Suspension from reality is a quality of the road that enables transgression. The road is “a frozen time and ever-changing space where all is possible” (Primeau 69). This is particularly appealing for marginalised groups, denied many possibilities in their everyday lives. Simply “By leaving home and hearth, many traveling women exemplify... transgression”, and Carol’s exchange of heterosexual domesticity for adventurous lesbianism is doubly transgressive (Ganser 157). Terry Castle credits Highsmith as “the first writer” to use the road to facilitate a taboo relationship, in the process “mix[ing] roadside Americana, transgressive sex, and the impinging threat of a morals charge” (“Ick”). She speculates that *Salt* inspired the road trip in *Lolita*, and the 2004 Norton edition of *Salt* repeats this theory in its tagline “the novel that inspired Nabokov’s *Lolita*”. There is no evidence for this, but there are recognisable parallels in their depiction of a transient relationship, deemed immoral by society but treated as a “rhapsodic taboo romance”. Relationships which flourish on the Road are cut off from the ‘normal’ world,

but they remain vulnerable to potential exposure and inevitably contain “danger and paranoia” (“Ick”). The mobility of the road is necessary, but proves a poor substitute for the stability regular relationships automatically have access to.

The instability of the road is reflected in the ongoing instability of Therese and Carol’s relationship, due to the homophobic environment and their communication issues. Therese initially perceives a new level of understanding between them, disregarding Carol’s moods because “whatever Carol said in words, there were no barriers and no indecisions now”. That morning in Waterloo, the pivotal moment is not Therese repeating “I love you”, an afterthought at the end of the scene, but their tight embrace at the beginning which conveys the same sentiment. “It was hard to find words”, so “they stood holding each other as if they would never separate”, their actions speaking for them (203). This is in contrast to their careful interactions in the outside world. When Therese looks at her a certain way, Carol warns, “Don’t do that in public”, and also cautions against their holding hands (203, 204). In the face of these restrictions, Therese reaffirms the value of wordless communication. However, their ingrained habit of using actions over words means Therese does not discuss her doubts with Carol. She has questions about the nature of love and fears about Carol’s commitment to her, and although she has the vocabulary now to articulate these questions, she still wonders, “who could answer them?” (208). Homophobia and Therese’s shyness are not location-specific problems, and are present in the relationship wherever they go.

These ongoing issues leave them unprepared for the crisis instigated by the detective. The night they decide to separate, Therese considers Carol’s attention to practicalities “cold”, and the “expression on Carol’s face... made her feel shut off” (250, 251). She finds herself “bewildered ... by the elusiveness of what they talked about, time and space, and the four feet that separated them now and the two thousand miles” about to separate them (251). Their sudden physical distance and limited communication nurtures Therese’s previously held doubts about Carol’s devotion to her, and the sense of emotional distance returns. Therese feels that “Carol did not tell her everything in her letters” and fears that “Carol couldn’t and wouldn’t even want to see her again” (263, 269). When Carol does indeed break off the relationship, Therese takes it as confirmation of this long-held fear rather than a response to Carol’s current circumstances. She sees a painting resembling Carol and reads it as Carol with “the last veil lifted and revealing

nothing but mockery and gloating” (277). Carol too is unsure of Therese’s attachment to her, writing, “Did you ever care for me that much, I don’t know” (272). Uncertainty and instability are issues the trip exposes rather than improves, and solving them is essential if the relationship is to have a future.

The detective exposes the flaws of the road as a setting for romance. His presence alone indicates that geographical distance is not enough to protect them from the vast social and legal forces committed to upholding heteronormative patriarchy. Hesford describes the road as a “displaced manifestation” of the city rather than a unique, separate space. Like the city, it is “neither public nor private” (“Love” 129). Hotels are not the fully secure space Therese and Carol need. Their anonymity and impermanence keep most people from paying too much attention to the couple, and two women travelling together is less suspicious than two women living together. However, these qualities also enable the detective’s surveillance. A neighbour following them around and hammering spikes into the wall would be hard to miss, but in a landscape of strangers, such activities are much easier to carry out surreptitiously. Meanwhile, the anonymity Therese and Carol have on the road is conditional. They have to appear straight everywhere but their hotel rooms, an appearance they had to maintain in the city as well. The advantages of the road are nullified by the detective, leaving the car as the only uncompromised space they have, and they cannot live on the run forever.

The trip is framed as an opportunity for Therese to broaden her horizons; Carol declares, “It’s time you saw America” (141). “Defining a national identity” is a common theme of American road narratives, and the novel’s vision of America evokes “the Western, with its outdoor spaces, rugged individualism, and freedom” (Primeau 15; Tucker-Abramson 57). Both America and the road are traditionally associated with freedom, but “women’s road stories prove this promise of freedom to be largely illusory”, which is especially true for lesbians (Ganser 155). Therese and Carol discover an America determined to control them, and the generic trappings of the Western position them as outlaws. Carol brings a gun and they are on the run from the law, represented by the detective. The detective is “not a cowboy per se,” but “he looks an awful lot like one, with his ‘cigar’ and his ‘broad-brimmed hat, with Western boots’” (Tucker-Abramson 57). The cowboy is an archetypal American hero, and to have the enmity of a cowboy-esque figure reinforces Therese and Carol’s exclusion from the national identity.

Through their road trip they lay claim to the American pioneer spirit of adventure and individualism, but as lesbians their access to this narrative is limited.

The confrontation with national identity portrays that identity as inherently homophobic. Going on a road trip is a way “to get back in touch with ... [American] values” stifled by civilisation, but present in a more pure, authentic form out west (Primeau 9; Tucker-Abramson 57). Therese notes of one hotel room that it “had a curiously old- fashioned, ample air about it that she associated with the American West... A kind of cleanness, as well. Yet Carol looked for a dictaphone” (225). The idealised national character and the persecution they experience seem here like two incongruous elements, but are connected in the detective. He is described as a neutral figure, “not on any side” but simply after the money (242). Yet Therese “could feel in him a desire that was actually personal to separate them” and perceives him as a stand-in for “the whole world [that] was ready to be their enemy” (245). The court which rules against Carol is similarly generic: “a dozen faces that opened their mouths and spoke like the judges of doomsday” (271). The non-specific, representative qualities of these figures and their legal backing positions their actions as not contrary to, but a fundamental part of the American character. The persecution Therese and Carol experience is the way American national identity, of which heterosexuality is a key tenet, is maintained. Their most significant encounters with homophobia occur on the road or as a result of it, which characterises it as a broadly American phenomenon, not limited to one place or type of people but found everywhere.

Becoming aware of the nationwide presence of homophobia forces Therese to confront what it means to be a lesbian in America, and the experience is necessary for her maturation. Before discovering the detective, she wants to hold Carol’s hand in public, thinking “of people she had seen holding hands in movies” and wondering, “why shouldn’t she and Carol?” (204). Her awareness of the difference between them and other couples is largely abstract. When she asks, “Is it anything to be ashamed of?” Carol has to remind her, “In the eyes of the world it’s an abomination” (210). It takes the detective for Therese to become truly aware of that. After meeting him, she realises “what she had only sensed before, that the whole world was ready to be their enemy” and feels “a shame and shock she had never known before” (239, 245). His hostility, the broader hostility he represents, and the couple’s subsequent separation are a significant challenge to Therese’s devotion to Carol and her sense of self, fragile and newly

formed as it is. During their separation, her time alone allows her to reflect on both her relationship and identity, and whether she wants to continue in the direction she has been going.

Therese's youth, uncertainty and mutability are replaced by a new confidence and maturity during her time alone in South Dakota. This evokes the "self-discovery" theme of the road narrative, where the character ends their journey "more experienced and wiser, and what had been boundless enthusiasm gives way to a measured and more mature judgement" (Primeau 15, 128). Dannie observes that Therese seems "grown up all of a sudden" and does not "look frightened any more" (286). In seeing him, Therese is reminded that she could have relationships that would not expose her to discrimination, and that her bad experience with Richard would not necessarily be repeated with another man. Dannie is unbothered by her relationship with Carol, telling her it is unimportant in the long term because "you're so young... You'll change. You'll forget" (288). Richard expresses a similar assumption that her same-sex attraction is temporary, and both he and Carol think her "too young to make enormous decisions" about her sexuality (205). But after her separation from Carol, Therese "did not feel young", and she returns to New York more sure of herself (288). She wants to find a new apartment, meet new people, and replace her "juvenile" wardrobe that belongs to a younger self (289). This Therese has the confidence to exist without Carol and seriously consider her other options. "One was Dannie. One was Carol. One was Genevieve", and though she "clutched at Dannie", she quickly realises there is no future with him (305). This signals an acceptance of her sexuality, which could only come with her newfound self-possession. The solitude of the road helps Therese clarify her identity as a woman and a lesbian, and equips her for a future in the city.

The road is a space of great personal change but environmental stasis. Despite the distances travelled, the places Therese and Carol go are fundamentally the same in their social attitudes. Being temporarily suspended from their lives does allow the relationship to blossom, seemingly unimpeded by external factors. But the novel characterises running away as a solution that does not solve anything. Therese tried it once before, and after splitting from Carol, has the chance to do it again by going to California with Dannie. But in a sign of her growing maturity, she chooses instead to return to New York, resist the easy option of resuming heterosexuality, and reconnect with the friends she had dropped. Carol had considered eloping with Abby, but "the fact that Rindy existed stopped" her (209). The road trip, effectively a second attempt at

elopement, fails for the same reason as the first: she has not completely detached herself from the home. Due to her family, she is more sensitive than Therese of her “responsibilities in the world that other people live in”. Therese wants to brush off the way their relationship is seen as “an abomination” by bigots because “they're not the whole world”. Carol reminds her that “They are enough. And you have to live in the world” (210). Therese learns from the road that she, as she is, has to live in the world, as it is, a lesson she needs to enable a stable future with Carol.

Hypothetical Spaces and New Possibilities for Lesbian Existence

The final kind of space the novel features are hypothetical spaces. These include real spaces the characters speculate about and the spaces Therese and Carol create in their respective careers as set designer and furniture dealer. Their future together is also a hypothetical space, and the possibility they might have a future is taken as a happy ending. The novel's significance in the lesbian literary canon is attributed to this ending (Meaker 1). While it does end much more happily than most of its contemporaries, the fact remains that Carol has lost her daughter. Their conditional happy ending speaks to the novel's continual awareness of the limitations imposed on lesbians in American society, and its simultaneous refusal to let those limitations define its characters' lives. These hypothetical spaces, along with the novel's physical and ideological spaces, are used to dramatise lesbian existence and the many forms of American homophobia.

When Therese pictures herself and Carol in places other than where they are, these places are generally overseas and idealised. On the road, “they made a point of talking about travel” if they have no other subject (229). This is done lightly, but the joke about going to Iceland to hold hands highlights the inadequacies of the road, or America in general, as a romantic setting for them (229). In this context, real and potentially reachable spaces function as escapist fantasies. They also represent confidence in the relationship's longevity. Therese “had no doubt that she and Carol would one day go to France”, notably the place she would not go with Richard (208). Later, when Therese thinks on what they had not done together, she includes both a trip to Europe and the feeling of waking in the same bed, knowing “that nothing would separate them” (264). This is a lament for both the future they have lost and the romantic experiences they were denied. Therese returns to the language of travel at the end, when she declares she would love Carol “in a thousand cities, a thousand houses, in foreign lands where they would go together, in

heaven and in hell” (307). Hypothetical spaces, initially a commentary on the limitations of their environment, become a refusal to let that environment affect their relationship.

Therese and Carol find careers which open up a new space and role for them: the working world and the working woman. Both women find ungendered work, which gives them some degree of workplace agency. Through financial independence, they achieve control over their lives. The working woman is not defined by heterosexuality or submission to male authority. Being “a lesbian and a working woman... are identified as interrelated conditions” (Abraham 15). Most of the lesbian encounters in the novel are work-related: Therese meets with Carol and Genevieve through jobs, and Carol’s affair with Abby was enabled by their furniture shop. Work also provides a way for women to identify themselves and find fulfilment outside of their relationships with other people. During her divorce, Carol, no longer a housewife, describes herself as “nothing” (108). Therese considers her first design job “the single important thing she could tell about herself” (62). She values her ability to support herself, and is reluctant to take money from Carol, Richard, or even her mother. Independence is important to her, and work is the primary means of ensuring it. For women, the working world provides an alternative to, and freedom from, the home and its restrictions.

Each woman’s career choice further underlines her desire for agency. Therese was miserable at Frankenberg’s because she was merely a cog in the machine. As a set designer, however, she is being employed for her creativity, and is much happier in a self-directed career. Carol, too, finds a job that values her specific skills, taste, and choices. And, reflecting their engagement with space throughout the novel, both opt for careers which involve creating or shaping spaces. Therese’s job is to imagine spaces where stories can happen, spaces that are then physically created. She does the same thing in her relationship. Martin Northrop draws a connection between her engagements with forest imagery which exemplifies this. After a date with Carol, she starts sketching a set and “a world was born around her, like a bright forest with a million shimmering leaves” (73). A fragment of a letter to Carol contains a line about “music caught in the heads of all the trees in the forest” (161). Northrop connects this to the forest illustration in the rejected book of medieval love poetry. He interprets Therese’s creative output as an effort “not only to rewrite but also to redesign the book” which represented traditional heterosexual romance (Northrop 90). She imagines spaces for her romance with Carol before she

is able to find such spaces in the real world. It is worth noting that, for Therese, theatricality does not involve acting to hide her identity, but rather constructing a space in which that identity can exist. Her work complements her character arc.

The couple's future together constitutes a happy ending because it is a future that Carol has chosen for herself. In doing so, she loses her daughter and severs her final ties with the home, underlining the incompatibility of female agency and institutional heterosexuality. During the court proceedings, Carol wonders, "What future have they fixed up for me?" (271). Wives and mothers have futures assigned to them, and as long as she remained a mother, she remained under Harge's control in spite of the divorce. Her trajectory through the novel entails gaining the strength to break free of him. Once "too afraid and too weak" to run away with Abby, with Therese she declares herself "not afraid" anymore (209). She finds the courage to shed the one positive part of her marriage along with all the negatives. The novel consistently emphasises those negative qualities, while her relationship with Rindy and her grief at losing her happen largely off the page. This enables Carol's final choice of freedom over motherhood to seem like a net gain, and the ending affirms that women can find a fulfilling existence outside the home and heterosexuality.

Highsmith is not known for happy endings, but to end her lesbian novel that way is in line with her habit of disrupting social norms. Whether gays or criminals, she centres and humanises people usually condemned by mainstream society. *Ripley* is disruptive because it does not punish the character who defies conventional morality, and in allowing Carol and Therese a future together, *Salt* does the same thing. Through the use of space, it criticises the systematic oppression of lesbians. To then deny its lesbian characters a space to be together would let the system win. Such an ending would reinforce the conventional view that women could only be happy in their traditional roles, and lesbians never. Instead, the ending is where the novel commits to its subversion and presents the victory of individual agency in a society dedicated to conformity. At the point where other novels often hastily dissolved their lesbian relationships and restored heterosexuality, *Salt* does precisely the opposite, disrupting social norms and literary conventions by letting its lesbians stay together.

The understatement of the novel's politics is a major part of its radicalism. The cultural criticism is embedded in the narrative, arising out of the specific experiences of specific

characters. Therese and Carol do not engage with the gay community or its activism, but simply want to live their lives in peace. They are treated as normal people, not outsiders, victims, or stand-ins for all lesbians and the discrimination they face. The social critiques come organically from the characters and their daily lives, without any sense of the novel having a broader agenda in making such critiques. For Therese and Carol, heteronormativity is oppressive and lesbianism is a liberating alternative. This is likely the case for many other women, but the novel trusts the reader to make such connections on their own, and never suggests it is doing anything beyond telling this one specific story. Its subtlety extends to its refusal to engage with contemporary tropes, which would mark it more obviously as a lesbian text. This understated approach downplays the political dimensions of a distinctly political novel, which “delivers an extraordinarily subversive message, but ... in a highly conventional, genteel narrative structure” (K. Adams 257).

The novel’s subtle politics and eschewal of stereotypes give it a timeless quality in comparison to its contemporaries. It remains unusual in comparison to 21st century lesbian narratives as well. *Salt* was adapted into the film *Carol*, directed by Todd Haynes and released in 2015 after a long and fraught development process. Phyllis Nagy wrote the screenplay in the late 1990s. It might have been made around the same time as *The Talented Mr Ripley*, but Nagy struggled for over a decade to find interest (Ali). The difficulty was in part due to its seeming apoliticism. Nagy comments that, “During its development, there was a very different kind of lesbian or gay movie that got financed” which “were very agenda or issue driven, and this was not... it insists on not being that in order to make the point” (qtd. in Ali). She also “rejected frequent suggestions that Carol or Therese should feel guilty about being gay and suffer some kind of breakdown scene about it” (Jordan). Nagy refused to change what she recognised as the narrative’s defining qualities, and the film which was finally made remains faithful to the novel. Highsmith’s “failure to surround her lesbian characters with the ‘explosive’ trappings of other popular fictions dealing with lesbians is precisely the ‘failure’ which makes her text so successfully radical”, and which prevents it from feeling dated (K. Adams 271). The same could be said of Nagy’s adaption. Both women, despite the intervening decades, defied convention by treating the same narrative in the same way. This speaks to both the progressiveness of the *Salt* narrative and the ongoing pressures on lesbian narratives to conform.

Highsmith claimed not to have thought about the radical implications of the novel's ending while writing it (Meaker 5). She "presents herself as unconcerned with her place in literary history", and the four decades it took for the novel to be published under her own name supports this assessment (Ladenson 121). While this lack of intent does not negate the novel's qualities or canonical status, it is important in assessing its place in Highsmith's oeuvre. It is an anomaly in many respects: its sympathetic characters, general lack of cynicism, romantic genre, and explicit lesbianism are rarely, if ever found in her other work. Margaret Talbot describes *Salt* as "a unique expression of candor in a career built on artifice", offering a possible explanation of why this novel turns out well when so many of Highsmith's do not. It was clearly a personal subject for her. She wrote of being glad she did not have to use her "best thematic material" for a "false" heterosexual relationship, and one inspiration for Carol was a former lover of hers (qtd. in Talbot). Further inspiration came from an encounter much like Therese and Carol's first meeting, with Highsmith as the shop girl captivated by a glamorous older woman (*Carol* 308-9). This autobiographical element frames the novel as a wish fulfillment fantasy for herself, one she was "surprised" but "pleased" to find lesbian readers liked so much (Meaker 5). This unassuming explanation befits the novel's quiet radicalism.

The novel's social critiques are conducted at the everyday level, rendering them at once inconspicuous and wide-ranging. As Therese and Carol move through different spaces, their experiences reflect the ways in which each of those spaces work to suppress lesbianism. The home is the space where domestic ideology convinces women that marriage and motherhood are the only path to a fulfilling life, where masculine control is most apparent and inescapable and where heterosexuality is elevated to national importance. The city demonstrates how those same forces function in work and public spaces, preventing women from straying beyond acceptably feminine, heterosexual behaviour. Lesbians are similarly invisible in the cultural landscape, becoming visible only when they match the stereotypes used to reinforce negative ideas about them. The road seems to offer freedom from the restrictions of everyday life, but for lesbians in America, freedom always has limitations. These spaces all work to control the way women think, feel, and act, and to prevent the creation of any alternate spaces where they might act otherwise. However, this suppression is not insurmountable. The city is too big for every space within it to be policed, and there lesbians could slip beneath the radar to establish small private spaces for themselves. Hypothetical spaces, including the arts and the imagination, provide other arenas in

which lesbians could resist their geographical and cultural erasure. Literature, too, is a hypothetical space, one in which writers have the power to portray lesbian lives as they wished them to be. Highsmith, unlike her contemporaries, utilised the radical potential of this space to give her lesbian characters the humanity and happiness they deserved.

Conclusion

Highsmith was very much a writer of her time. Taken in conjunction, *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *The Price of Salt* capture many of the contradictory facets of gay literature in its emergent stage. In the 1950s, the genre was gaining visibility. But the heteronormative culture dictated the terms of this visibility, and literary tropes were a way of confining gay representation to forms that upheld the culture's values. Highsmith responds to this situation differently in each novel. Both engage with themes common to 1950s gay literature, but *Ripley* does this through tropes and *Salt* does this largely without them. The two share some basic similarities. Tom and Therese are trying to exist in a homophobic society, which requires coming to terms with their identity and finding a way to inhabit that society without letting it destroy them. And, crucially, neither character is destroyed. They are not "distinctive in the way that Cold War homophobic discourse would insist: their specialness does not consign them to a life of virtually suicidal solitude" (Trask, "Culture" 162). In fact, they both achieve notable success: Tom gains wealth and status, while Therese finds love and a fulfilling career. These narratives, boiled down to their essentials, mirror each other. However, taken in context and in their entirety, they are extremely different, and the contrast shows the way tropes can colour a narrative.

In *Ripley*, coding, tropes, and genre combine to produce, in Tom, a character that represents all of society's worst fears about gay people. "The risk that the homosexual poses in this novel is obvious; he is violent, hysterical, and prone to brooding passions", which "would seem to be a homophobic portrait" (Haggerty 163). The genre builds on this. Every crime novel needs a criminal, and Tom with his troubled psyche fits this role perfectly. His sexuality plays a central role in his violence and his ability to get away with it, which suggests that he is dangerous largely because he is gay. And yet, while the tropes do their job of assigning negative traits to the gay character, their effect is undermined by Highsmith's lack of follow-through. She abandons convention by failing to pass judgement on Tom, throughout the novel but most obviously at the end. This opens up a number of possible interpretations of what the novel is using its gay elements for: to warn about gay violence, or to approve of it; to illustrate the psychological impact of homophobia, or to attribute that psychology to simply being gay; to portray society as a danger to gay people, or vice versa, or both. "A murderous queer character can both participate in and subvert the homophobic paradigm", and Tom Ripley exemplifies this

contradiction (Schildcrout 131). The coding used to indicate his sexuality keeps both it and its function ambiguous, limiting the novel's radical potential. But what the novel does within the parameters set by its time, genre, and Highsmith herself remains distinctly unsettling and quietly subversive.

There are few parameters limiting the radicalism of *The Price of Salt*. It does not look like a 1950s lesbian narrative, either in its lack of tropes or in its original packaging as a literary hardback. This relative invisibility allows it to challenge heteronormativity on its own terms, without replicating the culture's homophobic ideas in the process. The issues Therese and Carol face are not attributed to their lesbianism but the way lesbianism is treated in 1950s America. As women, there are limited spaces they are allowed to occupy; spaces such as marriage, the home and gendered work, which all enforce traditional heterosexual femininity. As lesbians, they deviate from this femininity, but deviation does not fit into either the geographical or ideological landscape of their culture. Both public and private spaces work to expose and punish it. Therese and Carol are barred from the home and policed in the city and on the road, but even as some spaces close to them, others open. Lesbianism frees them from male control, and, with the anonymity of the city and the independence of the working world, they find everything they need to build a life together. The novel engages in subtle but serious social critique while resisting the tragic convention and the sensationalising tropes of its contemporaries. It is an anomaly for the 1950s, but a welcome one, an early example of what gay storytelling could be when it did not have to compromise to be published.

Together, *Ripley* and *Salt* illustrate the way Highsmith used gay narratives to explore her favourite themes. While each novel carries quite different connotations as a gay novel, as a Highsmith novel they both set out to disrupt conventions of genre and morality. By siding undeniably with her gay characters, whatever their faults, Highsmith was positioning American society as the enemy. Her individualistic sympathies lend themselves well to gay themes, such as alienation, discrimination, and disregard for social norms. Highsmith "regarded the criminal as the perfect example of the twentieth-century existentialist hero" (Wilson 5). Therese and Carol are treated like criminals, and Tom most certainly is one. That Carol is punished by the law while Tom is not exemplifies Highsmith's interest in exposing "hypocritical and phony" morality (Highsmith, qtd. in Jordison). A society that automatically equates lesbianism with criminality,

while failing to see a real criminal like Tom because he can perform normality, does so at its own peril. This foolishly inept society is further ridiculed through the happy endings Therese, Carol, and Tom each find. In Highsmith novels, gay characters cannot be easily contained. Approaching her work with the question of whether or not it is positive or progressive representation is reductive. She did not want to be seen as a gay pioneer. *Salt* remained her only lesbian novel, and gay elements in her other novels usually took the form of unarticulated subtext. What her work shows instead is her interest in exploring the complexities of human nature, which the conformist culture of the 1950s sought to suppress in the name of morality. She sought to upend that morality, and literary conventions along with it, by writing about ordinary people who became killers, crimes that went unpunished, and amidst that, gay characters allowed to be happy.

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