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**The search for women`s freedom and sexual identity in Patricia**

**Highsmith`s novel *The Price of Salt***

Diplomová práce

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Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci na téma „The search for women`s freedom and sexual identity in Patricia Highsmith`s novel *The Price of Salt*“ vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

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Podpis .....

## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Annotation.....   | 4  |
| Anotace.....  | 5  |
| I. Introduction.....  | 6  |
| II. Critical overview.....  | 16 |
| 2.1. Queer history and queer rights movements.....                        | 16 |
| 2.2. Queer literary theory and the development of queer literature.....   | 21 |
| 2.3. Feminist movements and the establishment of a “woman” character..... | 28 |
| 2.4. Female voices and women`s literature.....                            | 34 |
| 2.5. Lesbians and Male gaze in post-war American Fiction.....             | 38 |
| III. The analysis of <i>The Price of Salt</i> by Patricia Highsmith.....  | 42 |
| 3.1. Life and work of Patricia Highsmith.....                             | 42 |
| 3.2. The Price of Salt: Plot summary.....                                 | 44 |
| 3.3. Themes of the novel.....   | 45 |
| 3.3.1. Personal growth and Maturation.....                                | 47 |
| 3.3.2. Society and Nonconformity.....                                     | 53 |
| 3.3.3. First love and Queer liberation.....                               | 59 |
| IV. Conclusion.....   | 64 |
| Bibliography.....   | 66 |

## Annotation

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Title of the thesis: The search for women`s freedom and sexual identity in Patricia Highsmith`s novel *The Price of Salt*

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This thesis will examine the relations and correlations between feminism and LGBTQ+ activism in the post-war US and before. It will use as a case study one of the first lesbian books published in the US *The Price of Salt* (1952) by Patricia Highsmith, her only book about an explicit lesbian relationship. The thesis will analyse how exactly the author of the book explores women's freedom and sexuality in a conservative American society.

In the context of the book's criticism of male-dominated society, which can be traced through the negative portrayal of traditional marriage and the partial romanticization of queer relationships, the narrative underscores the significance of personal autonomy and liberation from conservative society.

Keywords: feminism, intersectionality, queer theory, literature, lesbian pulp fiction, Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*

## Anotace

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Tato práce se zaměří na vztahy a souvislosti mezi feminismem a LGBTQ+ aktivismem v poválečných USA a dříve. Jako případovou studii použije jednu z prvních lesbických knih publikovaných ve Spojených státech, a to *Cena soli* (1952) od Patricie Highsmithové, jedinou její knihu o explicitní lesbickém vztahu. Práce analyzuje, jak autorka knihy zkoumá svobodu a sexualitu žen v konzervativní americké společnosti.

V kontextu kritiky knihy na mužským dominovanou společnost, která lze vysledovat skrze negativní zobrazení tradičního manželství a částečnou romantizaci queer vztahů, vyprávění zdůrazňuje význam osobní autonomie a osvobození od konzervativní společnosti.

Klíčová slova: feminismus, intersekcionalita, queer teorie, literatura, lesbian pulp fiction, Patricia Highsmith, *Cena soli*

## I. Introduction

In my thesis, I will delve into an analysis of the book *The Price of Salt* to explore how queer identity may influence the position of women in society. The main goal of my study is to analyze the novel from the perspective of a queer person and understand how the author of the book Patricia Highsmith employs themes of "sexual deviation" to depict women's liberation.

In exploring Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Price of Salt*, my objectives are to delve into the theme of societal constraints on women's freedom and sexual identity. I aim to analyze the characters' struggles with societal expectations, their quest for autonomy, and self-discovery. Furthermore, I seek to examine the portrayal of same-sex relationships in a conservative society within the novel and investigate the role of desire and passion in challenging traditional gender norms and expectations as depicted in the text. Finally, I aim to evaluate how the novel reflects the historical and cultural context of the 1950s regarding attitudes toward sexuality and gender roles.

For the analysis of the novel, I will use Feminist Theory, which examines how gender roles and power dynamics influence the characters' experiences and relationships in the novel. It also explores how societal expectations impact the protagonists' quest for freedom and self-discovery. Additionally, I will apply Queer Theory, which investigates how non-normative sexualities are represented and challenged in literature. In *The Price of Salt*, this theory will be used to analyze the characters' negotiation of their sexual identities and the societal norms that govern them. Also, I will examine *The Price of Salt* within the context of intersectional feminism and seek to identify correlations between different types of oppression.

The thesis is structured into two main chapters: "Critical Overview" and "Analysis of *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith." In the first part, I will introduce different concepts relevant to my work, along with perspectives associated with feminism and queerness. The introduction of Queer and Feminist theories, as well as the historical contexts of queer and feminist literature, is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of the book. This approach enables to uncover correlations between queer and feminist literature and facilitates the application of the concept of intersectionality. The concept of intersectionality is crucial to my research as it addresses the multifaceted nature of oppression that can impact different aspects of people's identities. In the second part, I will analyze the book and its themes to show how these two theories can be applied to a book about lesbian relationship.

The primary text of my work is *The Price of Salt*. The secondary literature includes academic studies on gender and feminist theory, along with various articles focusing on narrower topics such as different waves of feminism, the significance of queer representation in media, and the importance of lesbian pulp fiction, among others. For the explanation of Queer theory, my main sources are the works of Judith Butler, such as "Critically Queer" and *Gender Trouble*. In these works, Butler delves into themes of gender, gender expression, and heteronormativity. The history of feminism is well-reflected in articles by Sherry Sabbarwal, "The Changing Face of Feminism," and Martha Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism." The essay by Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, "The Laugh of the Medusa," provides insightful ideas for re-establishing the nature of women's writing, which are crucial for a Feminist literary theory. Anne Mulhall's "Queer Narrative" explores how narrative form and structure can challenge normative understandings of gender and sexuality. She demonstrates how queerness disrupts traditional narrative conventions, an idea crucial for my analysis of *The Price of Salt*.

The significance of this study lies in its broader discussion of feminist and queer literature, which has historically been overlooked in the literary field. With my thesis, I aim to highlight the importance of queer and feminist history and literature and to present a book that is significant for both queer and feminist literary traditions.

The oppression of women has always existed in the context of a patriarchal society. The issues of the imperfection of society have been put forward for discussion countless times. Women needed feminism as a form of resistance and liberation from conservative traditions.

It is difficult to consider feminism in isolation from the cultural specificity of a particular society. When activists or even people who are far from any kind of fight for equality and changing social rule try to talk about feminism or the concept of "women" in a more universal way, they do not usually consider the complexity and the uniqueness the female experience.

Many significant women who belonged to various movements of feminism, talked about their concept of "women". Judith Butler is an influential philosopher and gender theorist known for her significant contributions to the fields of philosophy, feminist theory, and queer studies. Butler's ideas have had a profound impact on feminist and queer theories, leading to a reevaluation of how society understands and constructs gender and sexuality. She sided with intersectional feminism, noting that oppression does not have a single face and a single "type" of the victim. She said that "it is impossible to separate "gender" from the political and cultural

intersections," noting that "gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities."<sup>1</sup> Thus, it follows that the concept of "woman" cannot have a universal definition if we perceive it as a social or political unit, and not as an abstract term.

However, if intersectionality binds separate systems of oppression into one large system, are all its members capable of existing in a single battle for the common good? It is impossible to give a definite answer to this question because there is no universal power of oppression that would force all women to stand on the side of "good" and possible prosperity, as well as there is no objective definition of "femininity". As it was said, any large system consists of subsystems that can exist outside of a single whole. Many branches of feminism appeared as a result of the dissimilarity of women`s experiences. Thus, for example, the movement of Black feminism was formed.

Of course, white and black feminism are not antipodes of each other, at least because of the existence of other types of feminism. At the moment when white women were dealing with their issues and trying to achieve visible "equality" for everyone, the voices of black women were always drowned out. The history "cannot forget the ways that suffragettes dismissed the voices of black women" writes activist Rachel Kargle, adding that "intersectionality in feminism is vital."<sup>2</sup> Without the voice of people of colour, women who face oppression in various spheres of public life, without their struggle, there would be no diversity in the ways to achieve the main goals of feminism.

Much has been said about intersectional feminism and its significance for feminism in general, but it is worth delving deeper into the history of intersectional feminism to understand its role in the historical context.

Intersectionality is the concept that was first proposed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw – an American civil rights advocate, who first used the term in her essays back in the late 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Becoming the "mother" of the theory of intersectionality, Crenshaw studied how social identities such as gender, sex, race, and others affect systems of oppression and people's place in the social hierarchy. Later, her theory gave impetus to the study of intersectionality in the

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 2006), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Kargle, "When Feminism Is White Supremacy in Heels," *Harper`s Bazaar*, August 16, 2018, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/politics/a22717725/what-is-toxic-white-feminism/>

<sup>3</sup> Kargle, "When Feminism Is White Supremacy in Heels".



context of feminism, the ideas of which became widespread in the early 2000s. And if we consider the racial issue in a certain context of integration, then intersectionality can satisfy the needs of women of colour, considering their "female" problems without detaching them from the racial issue.

However, as mentioned above, not only racial issues are on the agenda of intersectional feminism. Over time, women of various backgrounds sooner or later began their fight for equality. When the voices of white women and women of colour were already loudly heard around the world, queer women remained in the shadows. Their existence in many developed countries was under threat at the official level.

Heterosexual women made up the majority of women involved in feminism. Of course, as in the case of racial problems, they did not want to solve "unnecessary" issues of a minority whose welfare, at first glance, does not concern them in any way. However, liberation from patriarchal foundations and the dominance of men over the female mind and body played an even more personal role for them than for women, whose lives in one way or another will always be closely connected with the male population.

Why did I choose the term queer woman? This word did not exist as an everyday term in 1960s during the sexual revolution or the second wave of feminism. More binary and narrower terms put queer activists in a more advantageous position with loud slogans of lesbian separatists. However, in her essay based on her personal history, Kathy Rudy boldly notes that the term lesbian separatism is not inclusive enough, because many queer activists identified themselves as bisexual or asexual.<sup>4</sup> She also says that queer feminists in the 70s and 80s still focused on feminism and women's independence in general, while the questions of sexual preferences and gender identity were not yet raised.

Rudy recalls the dualism of lesbian feminism and its role in shaping one's lesbian narrative. The lesbian community was divided into women who genuinely preferred women and those lesbians whose preferences were determined by the political agenda. However, there is some logic in this – for women to completely free themselves from the influence of men, to achieve some semblance of separation, women have no choice but to choose other women for later life. Such rhetoric existed on the agenda of radical feminism, and at a time when it may have worked for feminism, it did not work at all for the liberation of sexual minorities.

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<sup>4</sup> Kathy Rudy, "Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism, and Queer Theory," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 193, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178457>.

Lesbian feminism in the 70s and 80s was seen as a political force, as a strong response to a patriarchal society. This type of feminism was closely related to the concept of "cultural feminism."<sup>5</sup> The term cultural feminism was first proposed by feminist Brooke Williams in 1975 and initially, this type of feminism was called radical. Later it became clear that radical and cultural feminisms have completely different goals and to some extent, they even contradict each other. The main idea of cultural feminism is the separation of "women's culture" from the patriarchal world. It sounds quite utopian, considering how closely the lives of people of all genders are connected. It is fair to assume that such a desire could easily arise in women who do not maintain any ties with men (if it is possible at all). And who, if not queer women can boast of such a privilege.

Thus, it can be concluded that cultural and lesbian feminism, despite the desire of women to change society and give women a slightly higher status than a "wife", had the right to exist. Again, we see segregation within the community, which has never been beneficial in carrying out the revolution. Lesbians, namely political lesbians, felt "special" in the feminist community. The complete rejection of all "male" gave women freedom from patriarchal society and gave them hope for a better future in a more isolated minor community.

Feminism and queer activism have always been connected. Among the women fighting for emancipation, there has always been someone whose husband was not waiting at home, who is forced to live under pressure not only from the sexist part of society but also from a homophobic/racist one. That is why intersectional feminism is the only right solution in the fight for equality. Only when minorities unite, they can resist the male-dominated society.

Let's go back in time to the second wave of feminism and consider the realities of American society before and during the sexual revolution. The struggles of women of that time seem more obvious to modern society than the problems of women today. However, they have certain similarities because the systematic problem does not change.

Women have always had certain responsibilities to society. During the Cold War, even though women could reap the benefits of the first wave of feminism, they could still be considered as a certain minority living according to the canons of the old hierarchy. The image of a typical American housewife eventually became a kind of caricature symbol of a dying era. Such modern TV series as "Why Women Kill" or "WandaVision" exploit the image of an

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<sup>5</sup> Jone Johnson Lewis, „Cultural Feminism: What Is the Essence of Being a Woman?“, ThoughtCo., May 30, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/cultural-feminism-definition-3528996>.

American housewife, utopian for the conservative part of society, but unacceptable for more progressive Americans.

Historian Elaine Tyler May wrote about the sacrifices that women had to make during this difficult period for them. Women gave up their careers for the sake of a family in which the wife stayed at home with the children, and the husband provided for the whole family.<sup>7</sup> Such an image was once considered the ideal unit of American society. The first wave of feminism, which ended around the 20s, had already borne all the fruits that it was capable of bearing, and the period from the 30s to the 60s can be described as a period of some kind of calm. Of course, feminist movements existed even then, but so far it was not clear in which direction women of America needed to move. Women achieved suffrage and relative freedoms, although, they still faced discrimination every day.

Politics and art have always been closely linked. To some extent, the political life of society has always been reflected in various forms of art. Orwell and his novel *1984* (1949), Ivan Turgenev and his novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862), literature has always been a way of expressing people's discontent, a way of influencing human consciousness. It is not surprising that female writers started to express their discontent in writing quite often.

Women's literature has always been the subject of lively discussion. At the moment when men were allowed to write about their authentic experiences in various spheres of life, giving readers a choice from a variety of books on various topics of human life, women have historically been driven into their small world, where they simply did not have enough opportunities to write about something other than "the difficult life of a woman."

Women authors wrote about their experiences exclusively in the context of their femininity, as if protecting themselves from something more. This trend is not surprising at all, given the fact that systematically it is still much more difficult for women to achieve recognition than for their male colleagues. In the context of world literature, the image of a woman (especially in novels written by men) was often reduced to several archetypes such as mother, wife, daughter, mistress, etc. Further characteristics were unnecessary because the plot rarely revolved around characters with feminine traits, which are the complete opposite of the role of the antagonist.

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<sup>7</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

However, it should be mentioned that throughout history, the image of women in literature has changed, as well as the voice of female authors has become louder. More stereotypical female images were left behind, as was the desire of women to write only in the context of the male gaze.

Elaine Showalter wrote about three historical stages of the development and change of women's literature. The first stage *Feminine* was far from segregation and the definition of femininity in its modern sense. Women chose male pseudonyms for themselves, leaving their essence behind the scenes, trying to adapt and assimilate to the male-dominated book market. The books often had romantic motives and an almost complete absence of feminist overtones.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the 19th century, the Feminist stage began, during which women found their voice and started criticizing the established social order. Virginia Woolf writes “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.”<sup>11</sup> It was time for women to get out of the cage of their submissive consciousness and start writing their own stories under their names. And it should be noted that Virginia Woolf was not only a female author but also a queer woman.

The second phase helped women gain the right to write their own stories. During the third phase which is called *Female*, women could relax a little, and move away from protests in their work to an honest study of female nature.<sup>12</sup> The stories of women could finally be different, telling about different women's experiences without looking around with fear of going too far in their liberation. Women's literature finally had a female face that the greatest and most talented authors were no longer afraid to show.

This, however, does not mean that women have stopped writing about their oppression, forgetting all the centuries-old experience of discrimination and silencing of women's experience. Now women have entered an era when they have a choice about what to write – whether it is a simple romantic story or a harsh long discourse about femininity and the system of oppression.

As mentioned earlier, feminism and queer activism are linked by the common systemic problem of patriarchy. In the USA in the 1950s, a boom of capitalism began. And any deviation

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), 100-101.

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Woolfe, *A Room of One's Own*, (Harlow, England: Penguin Books, 2004), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, 100.

from the existing systemic "norm" was considered a threat to American unity. Homosexuals were one such threat, although in reality conservative Americans simply wanted to find an enemy among their people. One of the ways to combat such a system was art in its various forms.

Feminist and queer literature remains on the periphery. Women interested in literature preferred to read about something more familiar, while books that carried the message of rejecting old norms were less positively received by people.

Queer and feminist literature were not only literary trends, they were also political statements. Now we can talk about some kind of normalization of such stories, but in the 1950s there was no question of any "new normal". Even though the topic of homosexuality has been openly or implicitly present in literature since the times of Ancient Greece, conservatives made us think that homosexuality as a phenomenon did not exist at all until the 19th and 20th centuries. From the ancient heroes of Achilles and Patroclus to the gothic novels of the 17th and 18th centuries, the theme of homosexuality has always been present in mainstream literature. An elementary example is *The Monk* (1796) by the British Gothic writer Matthew Gregory Lewis, in which the protagonist falls in love with a young novice who later turns out to be a woman.

Oscar Wilde's novels explored the theme of homosexuality, such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and *Teleny, or The Reverse of the Medal* (1893) (authorship has not been established until now, however, many literary scholars assume that the book was written by Oscar Wilde). Later novels such as *Giovanni's Room* (1956) by James Baldwin and *The Color Purple* (1983) by Alice Walker explored homosexuality more openly.

Thus, queer literature has always existed. Authors of various nationalities and backgrounds, despite all kinds of prohibitions, wrote about homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender people. Whether it is minimal mentions and allusions, or entire stories that revolve around queer people, queer literature has always found ways to get its ideas across to the reader, sometimes, perhaps, completely changing their attitude to existing society.

In this thesis, we will consider a book by a highly provocative author who was once called a suspense writer because of such novels as *Strangers on a Train* (1950) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955). Patricia Highsmith, being a queer woman herself, wrote one of the most significant lesbian novels, which became a kind of breakthrough in queer literature.

It is difficult to say unequivocally about Highsmith's contribution to the overall narrative of feminism and queer activism. Victoria Hesford, in her article on the work of the writer, wrote about Highsmith's view of "traditional relationships." "Her portrayals of heterosexual coupledness make the scenes of a marriage seem strange or even threatening."<sup>13</sup> writes Hesford. Perhaps the demonization of heterosexual relationships stems from Highsmith's personal experience. Her relationships with men were difficult, and throughout her life she preferred women.

The main characters of her novels are mostly men with obvious manifestations of sociopathy and psychopathy.<sup>14</sup> But in one of her books, which will be discussed in this work, this narrative is in the background, or, one might say, omitted altogether. Although in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the homosexual motif is obvious to some, the author herself does not provide an obvious answer to whether the protagonist, who in the first book becomes obsessed with a young man, was in fact homosexual. She later said, "I don't think Ripley is gay."<sup>15</sup> For many, the author's words did not become a stopping factor for building further theories about the hero's sexuality. The speculations started again after the release of a movie adaptation of the book in 1999.

Queer people got used to the lack of explicit representation in mainstream literature. However, such a representation may only be visible to members of the community but not to the general public. That is why it is so important to write stories about explicitly queer characters, and with *The Price of Salt* (1952), Highsmith gives us a queer love story, which is explored openly.

*The Price of Salt* is first and foremost a book about love. However, the motives of achieving independence and freedom through the adoption of one's own identity permeate history and have different ways of expression. What makes this book special is a happy ending that was very unusual for queer literature. However, let's not get ahead of ourselves, because the whole book is quite an interesting research subject, not only from the side of feminism and queer literary theory but also from the point of view of the growing public interest in new

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<sup>13</sup> Victoria Hesford, "Patriotic Perversions: Patricia Highsmith's Queer Vision of Cold War America in 'The Price of Salt', 'The Blunderer', and 'Deep Water.'", *Women's Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3/4 (2005), 217, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40004425>.

<sup>14</sup> Psychopathy is a neuropsychiatric disorder marked by deficient emotional responses, lack of empathy, and poor behavioral controls

<sup>15</sup> Kyle Munzenrieder, "The Talented Mr. Ripley Is Coming to TV—But Will He Be Gay?," *Wmagazine.com*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/the-talented-mr-ripley-tv-adaptation-gay>.

stories. Liberation from tradition and patriarchy works for the benefit not only of the oppressed groups but also for the benefit of those in whose hands the main political power is concentrated.

## II. Critical overview

### 2.1. Queer history and queer rights movements

Even though queer people have always existed and have been present in popular culture for several centuries, the question of the naturalness of sexual “deviations” is still very relevant. With the development of technology and the emergence of new means of transmitting information, inevitable changes occur in the very structure of society, which will always continuously strive for progress. And when we talk about progress, we do not mean only specific changes in various spheres of human life; we mean a rethinking of the very system of human life. Traditions and norms that existed, at first glance, for many centuries are rapidly losing their significance in the face of such necessary and absolutely inevitable progress.

First, it is worth understanding how relevant queer literary theory is in the context of modern society and modern literature and whether queer theory as a method of analysis can be applied to other media spaces. For understanding the basics of queer literary theory, we will start with the definition of the term "Queer". The exact origin of the word "queer" is unknown. The original term was primarily used to mean “strange, odd, funny, unusual.” It was only later in the 19th century that the word “queer” began to be used to refer to same-sex attracted men and was used rather with a negative connotation.<sup>16</sup> Later the term appeared in academic and literary fields. Judith Butler in one of her articles dedicated to queer theory wrote: ““Queer” derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult.”<sup>17</sup> For the majority of people the term „queer“ became a „shaming taboo“, but that was until the term was redefined by the queer community. Over time, acceptance of queer people has grown, and with it, the amount of representation of queer people in culture has grown as well. In the modern world, the term is often used as an umbrella term to denote sexual identity within a particular community.<sup>18</sup> This category includes all sexualities and gender identities that do not fall under the categories of “heterosexual” and/or “cisgender.”

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<sup>16</sup> Collins Dictionary, “Queer“, accessed November 5, 2023, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/queer>

<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, „Critically Queer“, *GLQ* 1, November 1993; 1 (1), 18, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-1-17>

<sup>18</sup> Kristen Barber, Danielle Antoinette, "Queer," in Encyclopedia Britannica, May 25, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/queer-sexual-politics>



As was mentioned before, the acceptance of queer people has grown, and so has the amount of open representation of queer people in literature, film, television, and other media spaces. It is worth stopping here and asking a reasonable question. Does acceptance in society lead to growth in representation, or does representation of queer people lead to greater acceptance of LGBT+ people in society? Unfortunately, there is no clear answer to this question. However, no doubt seeing LGBTQ+ characters and storylines on screen can “facilitate a deeper understanding of the lives of queer individuals within communities and families, fostering essential dialogues and promoting awareness.”<sup>19</sup> Of course, this statement applies to other forms of art, not just cinema.

Queer people have always been a part of human history, contributing to society, art, and culture since ancient times. Despite this rich heritage, the LGBT+ community has often faced marginalization, making them one of the quieter minorities. Comparing their struggles with women's rights and racial equality movements sheds light on the common themes of resilience and determination.

Through the ages, queer people have left their mark on literature, art, and societal norms. However, their stories have often been silenced, overshadowed by prevailing prejudices. By examining the shared challenges faced by women, racial minorities, and the queer community, we gain a deeper understanding of the fight for equality.

In acknowledging these struggles, societies can work towards a more compassionate and inclusive future. By amplifying queer voices and understanding their historical context, we pave the way for a world where everyone is heard, accepted, and celebrated, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

In this paper, I will not consider the situation around the world, because depending on the territory, cultural context, as well as many other factors, the situation of vulnerable groups of people varies greatly. Only 34 countries around the world allow same-sex marriage, and the status of women in society varies greatly. The United States of America, as one of the most influential and culturally diverse countries, has a strong influence on the world state of affairs.

The 1960s and 1970s were undoubtedly a turning point in the fight for equality. The Black Rights movement, Chicano movement, and Native American Renaissance helped national and racial minorities achieve more rights and strengthen their culture in the American

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<sup>19</sup> Autumn Cejer, „Why LGBTQ+ Representation Is So Important In Media“, ScreenRant, June 4, 2022, <https://screenrant.com/lgbtq-representation-media-important-why-queer-families/>.

mainstream. Along with the growing diversity in society, art also changed, new literary trends appeared, and “taboo” topics were raised by various mainstream authors.

American writer and activist Michael Bronski in his book *Queer History of the United States* claims that without queer writers, artists and activists The United States would not be the country it is today.<sup>20</sup> All people who chose to live openly and fight for their freedom contributed to much broader social progress, beyond LGBT+ rights. In his book Bronski says that a significant shift in queer rights movement happened in the 1950s. At that time the LGBT liberation and equal rights movements, influenced by structures of racial prejudice, primarily focused on legal equality rather than broader sexual liberation.<sup>21</sup>

The active movement for the rights of sexual minorities also began during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. However, the first LGBT+ organizations appeared back in the 1920s, but it was only in the second half of the 20th century that queer people managed to attract attention. The most important event in the history of queer activism was The Stonewall Riots, which became a kind of response to the endless oppression of queer people by the New York police.

After the end of World War 2, dramatic changes occurred in American society. People, frightened by a possible nuclear disaster and very disillusioned with their country's government, began to look for new forms of art and experiment with literary genres. Queer writers, poets, and artists began to look for their place in the new American realities. Writers such as Allen Ginsberg and James Baldwin openly addressed the topic of homosexuality in their works, for which they were strongly criticized by American conservative society. Nevertheless, such authors were not only not afraid to speak openly about taboo topics and provoke people with their writing, but they also dared to lead a lifestyle that was sharply condemned at that time. Fortunately, the 1950s and 1960s were perhaps one of the best periods for the establishment of a new social order and reshaping the art and culture in the USA.

What distinguished the writers of the new generation was their strong sense of justice. Allen Ginsberg and James Baldwin weren't just writers who enjoyed challenging their readers and going beyond the boundaries of "decency." They were also social activists, skilled orators, and revolutionaries. James Baldwin touched upon themes of homophobia, racism, and self-

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Bronski, *Queer History of the United States*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), xii.

<sup>21</sup> Bronski, *Queer History*, 93.

discovery in his works. Allen Ginsberg advocated for freedom of speech and art and also opposed the Vietnam War.

Gradually, queer literature also gained a foothold in mainstream American culture. Even though same-sex activities began to be decriminalized in the 1960s, many queer people still felt threatened and could not live their lives openly and freely.<sup>22</sup> The pervasive atmosphere of discrimination and fear persisted, leading many queer people to continue concealing their true identities. The fear of societal rejection and the potential consequences of being open about one's sexual orientation cast a shadow over the lives of many. Publicly acknowledging one's queerness often meant risking not only personal relationships but also professional areas. Queer individuals faced the daunting prospect of losing their careers, being rejected by their families, and enduring various forms of discrimination.

Internalized homophobia, a pervasive issue within the queer community, emerged as a shared struggle among individuals navigating their sexual identity. The deeply entrenched societal prejudices against non-heteronormative orientations often resulted in individuals internalizing feelings of shame and self-hatred.

The impact of internalized homophobia reverberated through various aspects of queer individuals' lives, influencing their mental and emotional well-being. The continuous battle against societal norms and expectations created internal conflicts, affecting relationships, self-esteem, and overall life satisfaction.

One of the most important literary figures of the second half of the 20th century, writer and activist Susan Sontag said in an interview with Time magazine: "I grew up in a time when the modus operandi was the 'open secret.' I'm used to that, and quite OK with it. Intellectually, I know why I haven't spoken more about my sexuality, but I do wonder if I haven't repressed something there to my detriment. Maybe I could have given comfort to some people if I had dealt with the subject of my private sexuality more, but it's never been my prime mission to give comfort, unless somebody's in drastic need. I'd rather give pleasure or shake things up."<sup>23</sup> At that time, being a woman, a queer woman, and a political activist at the same time was a brave and quite dangerous way of existence.

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<sup>22</sup> Adam Harrington, „The Gay Rights Movement In Illinois: A History“, Cbschicago, December 2, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220528161639/https://www.cbsnews.com/chicago/news/the-gay-rights-movement-in-illinois-a-history/>

<sup>23</sup> Brendan Lemon, „Why Sontag Didn't Want to Come Out: Her Words,“ Out, January 5, 2005, <https://www.out.com/entertainment/2005/01/05/why-sontag-didnt-want-come-out-her-words>.

However, despite these challenges, the resilience of the queer community remained a driving force for change. The struggles faced by individuals gradually paved the way for a more open dialogue about sexual orientation and identity. Over time, activists, artists, and writers challenged societal norms, fostering conversations that would eventually contribute to a more inclusive society.

As I mentioned earlier, after the 60s, themes of sexuality and queerness began to appear more often in American literature. One of the most important contributions to the discourse on queer identity in the context of intersectionality is Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple* (1982). Queer people and their representation in African American literature were considered by some critics and black rights activists to pose a threat to the movement's main goal of fighting racism. Christopher S. Lewis in his article "Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'" wrote: "The politics of hegemonic blackness considered these experiences and identities "disempowering" because they have typically been affiliated with vulnerability and shame."<sup>24</sup> These attitudes indicate that even in times of anti-discrimination movements, the discriminated groups, who themselves experience all the shortcomings of American society, were not ready to accept the concept of intersectionality and to fight for the rights of all members of their community without any exceptions. Like black women, black queer people remained the most vulnerable group in society, while suffering from several types of oppression.

While the fear of societal consequences still lingers, the journey toward acceptance continues. Queer literature, along with other forms of art and activism, plays a vital role in challenging prejudices, fostering dialogue, and ultimately, paving the way for a more tolerant and accepting society. The bravery of those who came before, and those who continue to fight for equality, serves as a beacon of hope, inspiring future generations to embrace their authentic selves, unburdened by the weight of societal discrimination.

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher S. Lewis, "Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'", *Rocky Mountain Review* 66, no. 2 (2012), 159, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41763555>.

## **2.2. Queer literary theory and the development of queer literature**

Queer literary theory offers a fresh perspective by delving into the intricate layers of characters and narratives, challenging the status quo of conventional readings. Instead of accepting gender norms, queer theorists explore the multifaceted ways in which characters navigate societal expectations. They analyse how individuals transcend prescribed roles, resist stereotypes, and embark on quests for self-identification.

In this approach, literature becomes a dynamic canvas where the complexities of human identities are celebrated. Queer theorists unpack the diverse spectrum of sexual orientations, gender expressions, and relationships, shedding light on the often-overlooked narratives of LGBTQ+ individuals. By examining the intersections of queerness with other social factors, such as race and class, queer literary analysis provides profound insights into the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

Queer literature has always been viewed as a political act. Language and literature have historically served as profound reflections of a society's culture, ideals and social structures. Through the art of storytelling and poetic expression, writers have not only conveyed their perspectives but also voiced important concerns about societal issues and political landscapes. This intersection between creativity and political activism is particularly evident in times of significant political movements.

During periods when the concept of multiculturalism gained prominence, literature became a powerful medium for marginalized communities, including the LGBTQ+ community, to share their narratives. Queer literature, in particular, blossomed during these times, providing a platform for voices often silenced or overlooked. These literary works not only delve into the diverse and complex experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals but also challenge societal norms and prejudices.

Queer literary theory not only challenges readers to critically engage with texts but also allows larger societal discussions about inclusivity, acceptance, and understanding. Through its exploration of fluid identities and diverse narratives, this approach offers a richer, more empathetic interpretation of literature, encouraging readers to embrace the complexities and challenges of human existence.

Queer literary theory owes a lot to the American activist, philosopher and gender studies scholar Judith Butler. Her concept of performativity and critique of the duality of gender have greatly influenced contemporary literary analysis as well as the perception of queerness in American society. Perhaps one of the most significant books on queer theory in her career is *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

In her book, she spends a lot of time on the theory of performativity within gender identity: “As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performance, gender is an “act,” as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism ...”<sup>25</sup> Butler views gender not as something given at birth, but as an aspect of identity that is formed in a person throughout their life. However, the characteristics usually prescribed for a particular gender are not always able to resolve issues of gender identity. Thus, both queer and gender theories can be interpreted in many completely different ways. Just like gender according to Butler queer theory is a spectrum, a field worth studying.

Butler's work also greatly influenced the concept of poststructuralism. Just like the poststructuralists, Butler criticizes the concepts of binary oppositions and hierarchical structures, viewing gender and sexuality as a spectrum rather than a set of opposites. Also, in her work, she talks about how gender norms and gender stereotypes can cause fundamental harm to society, personal development, and self-perception. In her opinion, “the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a pre-emptive and violent circumscription of reality.”<sup>26</sup> Like patriarchy, gender norms harm society and all its members, regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation.

One cannot help but recognize the fact that it is the most marginalized members of society who are the main victims of gender norms. Their very existence leads to gender and class inequality. Criticizing structuralism and the unjustifiability of the existence of dominant concepts in society and literature, Butler wrote: “The naturalization of both heterosexuality and masculine sexual agency are discursive constructions nowhere accounted for but everywhere assumed within this founding structuralist frame.”<sup>27</sup> These concepts are constructed through language and discourse rather than being inherent or biological and because they are embedded in the foundational aspects of society and culture they are rarely critically examined or analysed.

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<sup>25</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 187.

<sup>26</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, XXIII.

<sup>27</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 55.

Some scholars associate gender and sexual oppression with the existing dominance of Western society, which has always viewed other cultures and other ways of being as a threat to the well-being of white Western society: “Western colonial norms of gender and sexuality were used to create a distinction between primitive natives and civilized settlers. Although European colonists brought with them rigid ideas about the rectitude of heterosexuality and strictly binary gender, many native cultures recognized a plurality of genders.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, we can conclude that gender oppression, justified by existing gender norms, is also inextricably linked with other types of oppression, such as racism, nationalism and queerphobia.

Throughout history, diverse cultures have embraced the naturalness of homosexuality, recognizing it as an intrinsic aspect of human diversity. However, Western ideologies, rooted in traditional societal norms, often stigmatized any deviation from the established heterosexual norm as a sexual deviation. In many ways, the experiences of homosexual individuals paralleled those of colonized people, both facing societal prejudice and marginalization.

Queer people were, and still are, perceived as those challenging existing traditions, potentially disrupting the social order. This fear of disruption often led to the suppression of queer identities and the imposition of societal expectations. One significant aspect where this discrimination was evident is in the process of growing up. Society's attitudes and prejudices cast a shadow on the personal journeys of queer individuals, making the acceptance of their identity a difficult task.

Queer literature, a diverse and significant genre, delves deep into the human experience, especially during pivotal moments like coming out. This process, crucial for queer individuals, is often navigated in their youth, making it a focal point in many queer literary works. One cannot overlook the profound impact of coming-out stories in this genre. Renowned English Literature Professor, Anne Mulhall, drew parallels between the coming-out story and bildungsroman, highlighting their shared themes of quest and self-discovery: “In narrative terms, the coming-out story bears similarities to the bildungsroman. The two narrative types involve a quest, often of a young person leaving their rural origins and journeying to the metropolis, eventually achieving maturity and social integration.”<sup>29</sup> It is the process of self-realization that is the key aspect of coming-out stories.

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<sup>28</sup> Anne Mulhall, „Queer Narrative“ in *Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies* ed. by Siobhan Somerville, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 144.

<sup>29</sup> Mulhall, „Queer Narrative“, 146.

At the heart of coming-out stories lies the journey of self-realization, a transformative odyssey that unfolds over the years. While this process is undeniably challenging, the true complexities emerge in the subsequent stages. Acceptance, both within the individual's family and society at large, becomes a daunting quest toward social integration. Queer narratives, particularly those exploring coming out, grapple with two central themes: "Internal conflict" and "Conflict between me and society." Unlike bildungsroman, where protagonists integrate into heteronormative society, coming-out stories emphasize personal liberation and self-awareness.<sup>30</sup> The significance of these stories extends beyond the LGBT+ community; they resonate with anyone facing discrimination or societal rejection. These narratives also touch those navigating challenging life moments related to self-discovery and self-identification.

It is crucial to recognize the intertwined nature of queer theory and queer literature with feminist movements, the Black Rights movement, and other minority rights struggles. In the past, white and straight-dominated societies marginalized non-traditional individuals, imposing their ideals and norms that did not reflect reality.

Furthermore, oppressors not only stifled marginalized voices but also imposed taboos on topics challenging the established order, including discussions about sex and sexuality. Michel Foucault noted how these topics were censored. Scholars and politicians deemed them indecent and undesirable.: "Areas were thus established, if not of utter silence, at least of tact and discretion."<sup>31</sup> With such claims, the whole aspect of human experience was erased. The elite controlled what to say and how to say it, which of course affected world literature. Without the opportunity to talk about the topics of sex and sexuality, queer literature aimed at revealing issues of sexuality and identity cannot exist.

Queer narratives, spanning from ancient Roman and Greek myths to contemporary bestsellers, have evolved significantly throughout history. The 19th century, marked by heavy censorship of explicit LGBT+ stories, presented challenges for queer writers. However, this does not mean that queer writers completely denied themselves self-expression. Despite restrictions, these writers expressed queer themes using metaphor and subtext to navigate societal norms.

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<sup>30</sup> Andrea Gutenberg, "Coming-Out Story," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), 130.

<sup>31</sup>Michelle Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, (New York: Random House, 1978), 18.



The coded language of the 19th-century narratives provides insights into the struggles faced by queer people within the rigid cultural context. The resilience of these writers in addressing queer experiences reflects the enduring nature of artistic expression despite societal constraints.

Emily Dickinson was an American poet known for her unique and innovative approach to poetry. Her poems explore various themes, including nature, death, love, immortality, and the self. Dickinson's contemplation of these subjects often takes on a deeply personal and introspective tone. Her poetry is quite difficult to interpret, but in some of her poems we can observe queer motifs:

*“Tis true, Your Garden led the Bloom,  
For mine—in Frosts—was sown—  
And yet, one Summer, we were Queens—  
But You—were crowned in June”<sup>32</sup>*

It is easy to speculate on the sexuality of someone as mysterious as Emily Dickinson. Her poems are full of metaphors and symbolism. However, we know for sure that many of Dickinson's poems were edited before publication, and only in the second half of the 20th century, some of the writer's original poems were presented to the public.

Historians and literary critics are also interested in the relationship between Dickinson and her brother's wife Susan Gilbert: “Dickinson wrote more letters to her than any other person she was in correspondence with.”<sup>33</sup> Many agree that the women really had a relationship, and even though it is impossible to prove the veracity of this statement, it is already more difficult to deny the presence of queer motives in Dickinson's poetry.

Censorship has cast its shadow on literary classics all over the world. In both the USA and Europe, renowned works faced censorship. For example, Oscar Wilde's seminal novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), a masterpiece of the 19th century and a magnum opus of the famous queer writer who himself faced legal repercussions for his homosexuality, suffered from censorship. The novel underwent alterations that aimed to cut off “... material which made more

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<sup>32</sup> Emily Dickinson, „Ourselves were wed one summer—dear,“ All Poetry, accessed November 22, 2023, <https://allpoetry.com/Ourselves-were-wed-one-summerdear>

<sup>33</sup> Jessica DeMarco-Jacobson, „And they were... roommates?: The erasure of queer love,“ Oxford University's Student Newspaper, January 18, 2022, <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2022/01/18/and-they-were-roommates-erasure/>

explicit the homoerotic nature of artist Basil Hallward's feelings for Dorian Gray and which accentuated elements of homosexuality in Gray himself.”<sup>34</sup> Despite these adjustments, the queer themes persisted in the book upon its initial release.

Virginia Woolf, a prominent figure in literature, significantly contributed to queer literature and feminism. Her novel *Orlando* (1928) was allegedly inspired by her lover Vita Sackville-West, who was also a famous author at that time. This extraordinary work spans four centuries, with the protagonist, Orlando, navigating through various historical and social epochs. Starting as a man, Orlando experiences an abrupt transformation into a woman, allowing Woolf to delve into profound themes of identity and gender.

Although we must mention that the novel doesn't deal directly with queerness, but with metaphorical queerness. Woolf does not make her character explicitly transgender or non-binary, instead she literally (and magically) transforms her character to explore the nature of femininity and masculinity. *Orlando* was ground-breaking for its era, metaphorically addressing gender and sexuality at a time when such topics were rarely discussed in literature. The book's bold exploration of these themes, despite its controversial nature, speaks to Woolf's commitment to challenging societal norms and pushing the boundaries of literary expression.

The evolution of queer representation in literature witnessed a transformative shift in the mid-20th century. While earlier narratives often incorporated subtle and metaphorical queerness, the latter half of the century ushered in a bold era marked by openly queer stories.

In the earlier phases, queer motives and representations existed as nuanced metaphors, veiled beneath layers of symbolism and subtlety due to societal constraints and censorship norms. Authors navigated the constraints of their time, using coded language and metaphors to address queer themes.

However, as societal attitudes began to shift literature too underwent a profound transformation. The mid-20th century saw the emergence of openly queer stories that defied traditional norms and embraced a more direct and unapologetic portrayal of queer experiences. Writers found the courage to explore and articulate the complexities of queer identities, relationships, and struggles without relying on metaphorical subtext.

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<sup>34</sup> Alison Flood, “Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray published,” *The Guardian*, April 27, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/27/dorian-gray-oscar-wilde-uncensored>

This transition not only reflected a growing societal acceptance of diverse sexual orientations but also empowered authors to tell their stories authentically. The shift from subtle metaphors to bold narratives marked a crucial milestone in queer literature, allowing for a more honest and inclusive representation of the LGBTQ+ community.

### **2.3. Feminist movements and the establishment of a “woman” character**

In this chapter I would like to pay attention to the history of feminism, and also focus on the main issues that were raised by women during their fight for human rights.

Certainly, delving into the historical context of women's liberation reveals a complex way of struggles and achievements, with distinct waves of feminism shaping the course of progress. These waves, each with its unique focus and goals, are essential for understanding the nuanced evolution of the women's rights movement.

The first wave of feminism, focusing on suffrage, secured voting rights for (white) women about a century ago. The second wave expanded its scope in the 1960s, addressing issues like workplace discrimination and reproductive rights. The third wave, emerging in the 1990s, takes an intersectional approach, acknowledging diverse experiences.

Despite these strides, systematic discrimination persists. Gender gaps persist in wages and leadership, and reproductive rights face ongoing challenges. Progress toward gender equality is neither automatic nor linear, emphasizing the need for continued advocacy and an inclusive approach to address the complexities of the struggle for women's rights.

It is worth noting that many famous feminists and feminist writers were not heterosexual women. Famous queer women who contributed to feminism include Judith Butler, Susan Sontag, Virginia Woolf, Alice Walker, Emily Dickinson and many others. Feminists of all sexual orientations, through their contributions to the deconstruction of gender and sexuality, have automatically deconstructed the male and hetero-centrism that defined American society. Once again, it should be emphasized how important the concept of intersectionality is for the concept of social equality. From this, we can conclude that without feminism LGBT+ activism, as well as other types of activism, is impossible.

It is also essential to recognize that the waves of feminism discussed in this chapter primarily pertain to the feminist movements in the United States and certain Western European countries. The trajectory of feminism, however, extends far beyond these regions, revealing a diverse variety of women's movements worldwide. Particularly in post-colonial territories, the landscape of feminism manifested distinct characteristics, often significantly divergent from the narratives unfolding in the Western world.

In various regions across the globe, women's movements were shaped by unique historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts. The struggles faced by women in post-colonial territories were intertwined with the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and the fight against various forms of oppression beyond gender. These movements often engaged in intersectional analyses, considering factors such as race, class, and ethnicity in addition to gender.

The first wave of feminism centred on the pursuit of gender equality, with a primary focus on securing women's right to vote. Those women who identified as suffragettes were driven by the aspiration to attain voting rights for women, but feminists of that period wanted to establish a foundation for broader equality between the sexes.<sup>35</sup>

American historian and professor Nancy F. Cott specializing in gender topics in the United States in her book *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* focused on feminism of the first half of the 20th century. She noted that feminists, despite their desire to achieve equality, also wanted to emphasize the individuality and difference of women from men. “They promoted gender consciousness while hoping at the same time to abolish gender roles.”<sup>36</sup> It is not surprising that for conservatives such rhetoric was quite confusing.

During that era, considerable attention was directed towards the plight of working women, shedding light on historical disparities in pay and restricted access to certain professions. Despite legal rights enabling women to apply for specific jobs, systemic biases were pervasive in both employers and universities, with a preference towards men.<sup>37</sup>

The efforts of feminists of that time marked a crucial milestone in challenging societal norms that restricted women's participation in the democratic process. Women “aspired to be like men, looking for equal political, economic, social, and even equal medical rights...”<sup>38</sup> Despite the fact that the demands were partially met and women received the right to vote and slightly better working opportunities many of the problems that women faced were not even on the public agenda. The first wave of feminism was predominantly white and heterosexual, while black feminists and queer women mostly remained silent (or silenced).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2018, 21.

<sup>36</sup> William L. O'Neill, "Book Review: The Grounding of Modern Feminism. by Nancy F. Cott", (1990), *Constitutional Commentary*, 1131, 140, <https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/concomm/1131/>.

<sup>37</sup> Sherry Sabbarwal, “The Changing Face of Feminism: Dilemmas of the Feminist Academic”, *Sociological Bulletin* 49, no. 2 (2000), 269, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23620118>.

<sup>38</sup> Sabbarwal, “The Changing Face of Feminism“, 269.

<sup>39</sup> Martha Rampton, “Four Waves of Feminism,” Pacific University, October 25, 2015, <https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism>.

Feminism at the beginning of the 20th century existed exclusively as a political ideology aimed at obtaining legal rights for women, whose position in society was not necessarily in a critical state at that time. Of course, it is worth considering that not all suffragettes and feminists came from the upper or upper-middle class. Many women were single mothers, and suffered from domestic violence or mental illness. But one cannot deny the suffragettes had many privileges that could contribute to their success in the political and social arena. The first wave of feminism differed significantly from the more radical approach of the second wave.

The second wave of feminism, gaining momentum in the 1960s and extending into the 1980s, broadened the scope of the movement. It addressed issues beyond legal rights, delving into reproductive rights, and further discussion of workplace discrimination, and societal expectations. This wave sought to dismantle deeply rooted gender norms and advocated for more equal opportunities in education and employment. It was also during this period that women of colour and queer people became more socially active, creating their own civil rights movements.<sup>40</sup>

Second wave feminism became much more radical. Women fought not only for basic rights, they wanted to redefine the role of women in society through the deconstruction of gender roles and also through the introduction of new fields of study in sociology. Thus, Women's Studies departments emerged whose goals were to raise awareness and promote consciousness about women's oppression. In essence, the studies sought to address the gendered imbalance within social sciences by questioning the notable absence of women's perspectives. It aims to rectify this gap by highlighting and challenging the lack of representation of women's viewpoints in the field of social sciences.<sup>41</sup> Historically, women were almost completely excluded from the academic field and could only be studied by male academics. Thus, people could only hear a man's voice and a man's perspective on women's problems, which, of course, was not an accurate reflection of the existing reality.

Within the historical narrative, men and women were often framed within binary oppositions, wherein men became synonymous with attributes such as rationality, logic, and

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<sup>40</sup> Laura Brunell, Elinor Burkett, "Feminism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed February 28, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism>.

<sup>41</sup> Sabbarwal, "The Changing Face of Feminism," 267.

intelligence. Conversely, the societal role of women was defined by characteristics like emotionality, sentimentality, and kindness.<sup>42</sup>

Amidst the second wave of feminism, a profound shift in historical consciousness emerged. It prompted a critical reevaluation of the universal gender norms that had been deeply ingrained in society. During this transformative period, individuals began to question the prevailing attitudes towards gender, recognizing the imperative of integrating women into the broader social and gender discourse.

The second wave of feminism sparked an increasingly critical examination of the diverse experiences among women, including disparities based on social class, race, and sexuality. Acknowledging the initial prevalence of a predominantly white face in feminism, numerous issues affecting marginalized communities persisted beyond the first wave. In the latter half of the 20th century, the emergence of various feminist branches, notably "multiracial feminism," sought to address the complex challenges faced by women from diverse cultural backgrounds. This evolution marked a pivotal moment in feminist discourse, as it recognized the imperative of inclusivity and intersectionality in addressing the multifaceted struggles faced by women across different social and cultural contexts.<sup>43</sup>

This reevaluation became an essential component of societal progress, as women asserted the necessity of their inclusion in the prevailing social and gender narrative. This inclusion was not merely a matter of recognition but a foundational prerequisite for the sustenance of a legal and democratic state. The second wave of feminism, therefore, catalysed challenging the previously accepted dichotomies and paving the way for a more inclusive societal framework.

The third wave of feminism, while inheriting some themes from its predecessor, distinguished itself by celebrating individuality and recognizing the unique role of feminism in the lives of every woman and gender non-conforming person. Unlike the second wave, which emphasized unity and a common vision for women's rights, the third wave embraced diversity: "Third-wavers embrace a multiplicity of identities, accept the messiness of lived contradiction, and eschew a unifying agenda; these hallmarks make third-wave feminism difficult to define."<sup>44</sup> In the 1990s, the idea that feminism could take on diverse forms gained momentum. Feminist

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<sup>42</sup> Minda Rae Amiran, "What Women's Literature?", *College English* 39, no. 6 (1978), 654 - 655, <https://doi.org/10.2307/375866>.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism", 338-9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178747>.

<sup>44</sup> R. Claire Snyder, "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay", *Signs* 34, no. 1 (2008), 177, <https://doi.org/10.1086/588436>.

unity was built on recognizing these differences and collectively seeking unique ways to transform existing societal norms.

Although the second wave of feminism was more inclusive than the first one, feminism still largely reflected the needs of white and privileged feminists. Third-wave feminists criticized their predecessors for being too narrow in their advocacy, which did not pay enough attention to inclusion and diversity.

In 1989 Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality. This term illuminated the reality that women face various forms of discrimination not only based on gender, which is a common experience, but also on factors such as race, sexuality, health, and social status. These profound insights emerged as women of colour and queer people, inspired by the legacies of second-wave feminism and civil rights movements, became active participants whose voices not only resonated but held the power to reshape the established norms. The evolving landscape of feminism underscored the significance of inclusivity and the understanding that the collective strength of the movement derived from embracing and amplifying the diverse narratives of all women and gender non-conforming individuals.

Rebecca Walker, feminist activist and also a daughter of a famous American writer Alice Walker, characterized the third wave of feminism as angry and resentful. In her short article titled “Becoming the Third Wave” she writes: “I intend to fight back. I have uncovered and unleashed more repressed anger than I thought possible.”<sup>45</sup> Walker delves into the depths of her emotions as she contemplates the profound implications of the Senate hearings that involved Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill. She concludes that the court did not have the goal of getting to the bottom of the truth; it was rather about “checking and redefining the extent of women’s credibility and power.”<sup>46</sup> Men accused of sexual harassment and violence still often escape consequences, while women's voices are doubted and dismissed. This realization fuels a passionate call to action among third-wave feminists, who strive to dismantle oppressive systems and ensure accountability for gender-based violence.

The fourth wave of feminism, which started around 2012, carries on the ideas of earlier feminist movements but with a focus on modern issues like women's empowerment, sexual harassment, body-shaming, and cyberbullying. Using the internet as a key tool, activists can reach people all over the world, sharing information and building solidarity. This wave also

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<sup>45</sup> Rebecca Walker, “Becoming the 3rd wave,” *Ms.*, 12, no. 2, January-February 1992, 86.

<sup>46</sup> Walker, “Becoming the 3rd wave,” 86.



emphasizes the idea of intersectionality, which means recognizing how different forms of discrimination overlap. So, feminists now work to support not just women, but also transgender individuals, queer communities, people of colour, and others facing marginalization.<sup>47</sup>

As the feminist movement has grown, so too have the complexities and disagreements within its spaces. While feminists share common goals, such as gender equality, differences have emerged on issues like the inclusion of trans women and the prevalence of exclusive white feminism. These disagreements have led to criticism both within and outside feminist circles, with some questioning the movement's unity and effectiveness. However, despite these challenges, feminism remains a vital force in society, evolving to address diverse perspectives and continuing to gain strength as it advocates for justice and equality for all genders. Through ongoing dialogue and inclusivity, feminism can further expand its impact and relevance in shaping a more equitable future for everyone.

It is remarkable to reflect on the stark contrast in the position of women on the world stage within the span of just 60 years. In 1959-1961, the Senate comprised only two women, underscoring the severe lack of female representation in politics. However, by 2023-2025, this number had surged to 25, marking a significant shift.<sup>48</sup> This increase not only highlights the expanding role of women in politics but also signifies their growing influence on global discourse and societal dynamics, challenging historical perceptions of their marginalization and underscoring the importance of their voices in shaping the future. Thanks to these figures, we can easily conclude that women had no place in politics; accordingly, they did not have a significant influence on the world discourse, even in relation to their position in society.

Throughout different eras, women, each with their dreams, were connected by a shared mission: to change society and break down unfair power structures that kept gender inequality alive. From the suffragette movements fighting for the right to vote to modern-day activists pushing for equal pay, and reproductive rights, and battling against sexual harassment and body shaming, women have always stood together, fighting against injustice. Their stories of bravery and unity across time show us how they've worked together to make the world a fairer place. They inspire us to keep fighting for what's right and to never give up on the quest for equality.

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<sup>47</sup> Brunell, Elinor Burkett, "Feminism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>48</sup> Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, „History of Women in the U.S.Congress,“ accessed February 2, 2024, <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/levels-office/congress/history-women-us-congress>

## 2.4. Female voices and women`s literature

Throughout history, women faced barriers not only in the political and social realms but also in the literary arena. While women writers have always been present, their works often lacked the same recognition and popularity enjoyed by their male counterparts. This was largely due to the dominance of men in shaping global trends in both politics and literature. As a result, women writers often felt constrained in fully expressing and reflecting women's experiences in their literary works. Despite these challenges, women persisted in their efforts to carve out space for their voices and perspectives within the literary landscape, contributing insights and narratives that created the broader cultural dialogue. Though their journey was fraught with obstacles, the resilience and determination of women writers ultimately paved the way for greater inclusivity and diversity in literature.

The question of the place of women in literature and their limitations in it was raised by the French feminist, philosopher and writer Hélène Cixous. Her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" is a seminal feminist work in feminist theory. Published in 1975, the essay explores women's writing and creativity, encouraging women to break free from traditional literary constraints. Cixous urges women to embrace their own voices, reclaim their bodies, and celebrate their unique experiences in a male-dominated world. Cixous emphasizes the importance of women's laughter, a metaphor for the liberating force of their expression. The essay has had a profound impact on feminist literary theory and continues to be influential in discussions about women's agency and empowerment.

Cixous in her essay introduces the concept of *écriture féminine*, or "women's writing," which she defines as follows: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from them bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement."<sup>49</sup> In her opinion, women's writing is a way to liberate women from the male-dominated world "where a woman has never turned to speak..."<sup>50</sup>. If we give women the right to build their narratives around women's issues

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<sup>49</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976), 875, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>.

<sup>50</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 879.

and also allow the female point of view to enter the literary discourse, a whole field of discussion and debate opens up before us.

In her impactful essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous urges women to discover their "sorties" or paths to liberation from the limitations imposed by patriarchal society and conventional gender norms. She sees writing as "an act that will also be marked by woman's seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression."<sup>51</sup> Cixous goes beyond merely advocating for women to engage in writing; her call extends to challenging the authority of men in dictating the "universal truth." Instead, she encourages women to assert their own narratives and actively participate in shaping and reshaping their history through writing.

In literature, female characters often find themselves confined within limiting stereotypes. In her insightful essay "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature," literary historian Cynthia Griffin Wolff delves into this issue, emphasizing that the problem lies not merely in the presence of women in literature but rather in how they are portrayed. Wolff highlights a historical perspective, citing periods since the Renaissance when women writers were prolific, and female characters frequently took centre stage in novels.<sup>52</sup> Works like Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) showcased the prominence of female protagonists during this era. However, despite this representation, the depiction of women often fell into stereotypes that persist today, shaping both literary portrayals and real-life perceptions. The enduring influence of these stereotypes underscores the importance of critically examining and challenging traditional gender roles in literature to foster more nuanced and authentic representations of women's experiences.

Cynthia Wolff expressed her ideas about the position of women in literature. In literature, men's dilemmas frequently take centre stage, often overshadowing the significance of women's issues. These male-centric narratives tend to be perceived as weightier and more important by readers. Women's problems, on the other hand, often revolve around their relationship with a man or their roles as mothers, relegating their narratives to secondary status. Even when female characters emerge as protagonists, they are often depicted within a framework that revolves around male characters, highlighting their dependency and subservience. Rarely do conflicts between two women take precedence in literature, and even

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<sup>51</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 880.

<sup>52</sup> Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature", *The Massachusetts Review* 13, no. 1/2 (1972), 205, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25088222>.

if the relationship between a man and a woman is not so important to the plot, problems of motherhood come to the fore. This prevailing narrative structure perpetuates gender stereotypes and reinforces the notion that women's experiences are inherently less significant than those of men.<sup>53</sup>

Wolff's exploration of "The Sentimental Stereotype" sheds light on a pervasive portrayal of women as excessively sentimental beings whose emotions overshadow their rational faculties. This stereotype not only permeates literature but also influences real-world perceptions of women, reinforcing a societal framework where women are confined to roles defined by emotionality, sentimentality, and kindness. As Wolff astutely observes, "With this obsessive focus on emotionality, women have increasingly come to be defined as purely emotional, without rational competence worth mentioning."<sup>54</sup> This portrayal serves as a tool within patriarchal structures, perpetuating the notion of women's emotional immaturity and justifying their exclusion from positions of power. Such stereotypes, entrenched in societal norms, not only limit women's agency but also hinder their advancement in various spheres.

Women's literature often refers to literature about women, written by women. But can "women's literature" be considered a separate literary genre along with comedy, tragedy, or fantasy? Are there universal criteria by which the literature of women is significantly and always different from the literature of men? And how correct is it to highlight works written by women in a separate section, thus emphasizing the innate differences between the sexes? These questions have been pondered by numerous researchers and feminists across different eras, suggesting that perhaps the answer lies within the narratives crafted by women. These narratives delve deep into their authentic personal experiences, exploring themes of gender, sexuality, and societal attitudes toward women's freedom.

Minda Rae Amiran delved into the concept of "women's literature" in her essay titled "What Women's Literature?" In her work, she challenges the prevailing notion that the focus on "women's literature" is demeaning and contends that its inclusion in English departments undermines women's liberation. She finds „the present interest in 'women's literature' degrading, and the teaching of women's literature in English departments a subversion of women's liberation."<sup>55</sup> It is important to note that this perspective was articulated in the 1970s,

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<sup>53</sup> Wolff, "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature," 206-207.

<sup>54</sup> Wolff, "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature," 211.

<sup>55</sup> Minda Rae Amiran, "What Women's Literature?", *College English* 39, no. 6 (1978), 653, <https://doi.org/10.2307/375866>.

and the landscape surrounding women's issues and the definition of "women's literature" has likely evolved significantly since then.

Certain themes tend to be more prevalent in women's literature, focusing on topics where men's perspectives may be less represented. Themes such as motherhood, sexual violence (depicted from the viewpoint of the victim), and the pursuit of equality and women's emancipation often garner significant attention from female writers. However, not all women writers exclusively address these "feminine" topics. In contemporary literature, many women opt for more universal themes, such as self-discovery, societal challenges, and familial dynamics, which are equally explored by both sexes. Generalizing literature based solely on gender overlooks the voices of gender-nonconforming people and disregards the diverse cultural perspectives that shape human identity. Such oversights contribute to the marginalization of certain narratives and limit the richness and inclusivity of literary discourse. As Amiran observes, "masculine and feminine are defined quite differently in different societies."<sup>56</sup> Considering these points, one might question whether the concept of women's literature truly exists, or if most "women's" issues are fundamentally human in nature.

I believe that women's literature does not inherently aim to oppose men's literature. Rather, its emergence stems from the historical lack of authentic female voices in a predominantly male-centric literary field. While women have always written, societal constraints limited the scope of their narratives and characters for both genders. Amiran aptly suggests that "the only truthful writers about women have been those women who have freed themselves from the false images perpetrated by men."<sup>57</sup> This underscores the need for women's literature to challenge stereotypes and reshape societal perceptions of women. However, men too can contribute to breaking stereotypes and portraying women's experiences truthfully and honestly. In this evolving landscape, labelling literature solely as "women's literature" seems inadequate. As society progresses, Hélène Cixous's call for women to write for liberation and redefine "womanhood" remains pertinent. While the term "women's literature" once served as a rallying cry for protest and solidarity, today's women writers enjoy greater freedom to explore diverse themes and genres without significant restrictions. While complete equality in the literary arena remains a work in progress, significant strides have been made since the term "women's literature" was necessary half a century ago.

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<sup>56</sup> Amiran, "What Women's Literature?" 654.

<sup>57</sup> Amiran, "What Women's Literature?" 658.

## 2.5. Lesbians and Male gaze in post-war American Fiction

Before delving into our analysis of *The Price of Salt*, it is worth acknowledging the unique historical context in which this book was written. As mentioned earlier, American literature has long been characterized by male centrism, with even works authored by women, particularly prior to the 1970s, often catering more to male audiences. Male protagonists typically received greater attention and development, while female characters frequently conformed to existing literary stereotypes.

The situation was even more dire for LGBT+ characters, whose stories were either non-existent or marginalized due to societal discrimination. However, the landscape began to shift significantly in 1950s, marked by a notable increase in attention to queer women's narratives. This raises intriguing questions: How could lesbian literature achieve widespread publication, and why would stories of female love capture the interest of male readers?

This phenomenon suggests a potential mainstreaming of queer literature dating back nearly a century, challenging the notion that authentic representations of women and queer individuals only emerged with major feminist and LGBTQ+ movements. However, the reality is far from straightforward, as it reveals a complex interplay between historical contexts, societal attitudes, and artistic expressions that have both uplifted and marginalized these voices throughout literary history.

Lesbian pulp fiction emerged as a distinctive genre during the mid-20th century, gaining prominence particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. These novels were typically published as paperback books and were often sold in drugstores, bus stations, and other venues frequented by the general public. Despite their topics such book achieved millions in sales and were widely-read by both conservative and liberal American population.<sup>58</sup> Lesbian fiction at that time was not properly explored or analysed by literary critics or even readers themselves, it was purely consumed mostly by male heterosexual audience for some kind of perverted pleasure. I am not even sure that lesbian pulp fiction could have been regarded as legitimate literature by mainstream literary circles at that time.

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<sup>58</sup> Yvonne Keller, “‘Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife so Passionately?’: Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 385. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068271>.

Lesbian pulp fiction existed within intriguing parameters. On one hand, the majority of books in this genre targeted a male audience. Even when authored by women or queer women (often under pseudonyms, as in the case of *The Price of Salt*), writers often adhered to existing norms, wherein queer women ultimately found themselves in "traditional" heterosexual relationships or met tragic ends, such as suicide.<sup>59</sup>

A crucial aspect of these books was their covers, which frequently suggested sexual relationships between women and overly sexualized the heroines by depicting them in provocative attire. While these covers offered readers a glimpse of the book's content, they didn't always accurately represent its actual themes.<sup>60</sup> The covers of these books, with their provocative imagery and suggestive titles, were perhaps the most overt expression of the genre's intentions. While they undoubtedly played a role in attracting readership, they also perpetuated stereotypes and reinforced societal prejudices. Nevertheless, for many queer women, these novels provided a rare opportunity to see themselves reflected in popular culture, albeit through a distorted lens.

Such perverted and sexualized depictions of lesbian love were not confined to literature only. In films of the 1960s and 1970s, tropes like the "dangerous lesbian" seducing an innocent woman or the "unhappy, desperate lesbian" in love with a heterosexual counterpart were quite popular.<sup>61</sup> Despite their often misleading and harmful portrayals of queer women, these films provided lesbians with rare opportunities to see themselves represented in popular culture. Moreover, in contemporary times, these movies offer us the opportunity to study the evolution of queer representation throughout the years, providing valuable insights into societal shifts, cultural attitudes, and cinematic trends regarding LGBTQ+ identities.

Lesbian pulp fiction, while not emblematic of queer literature as a whole, holds undeniable significance within the LGBTQ+ literary landscape. Despite the genre's historical lack of efforts to challenge stereotypes or normalize queer love, and its longstanding neglect by queer and feminist activists, its impact on the visibility and cultural representation of queer women cannot be overlooked.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Christopher Nealon, "Invert-History: The Ambivalence of Lesbian Pulp Fiction", *New Literary History* 31, no. 4 (2000), 745, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057634>.

<sup>60</sup> Keller, "Was It Right to Love Her Brother's Wife so Passionately?" 397.

<sup>61</sup> Examples of such movies are: "The Children's Hour" (1961), "Daughters of Darkness" (1971), "Vampyros Lesbos" (1971)

<sup>62</sup> Keller, "Was It Right to Love Her Brother's Wife so Passionately?" 385-386.

In lesbian pulp fiction, prevalent themes and characters often reflect a complex blend of homoeroticism and homophobia, encapsulating societal attitudes of the time. Despite this, certain queer writers sought to challenge stereotypes by crafting narratives that diverged from the norm, offering lesbian couples the possibility of a happier ending, though within the constraints of the genre.<sup>63</sup> These efforts, while limited, contributed to a broader exploration of queer representation in literature.

Claire Morgan's<sup>64</sup> *The Price of Salt* was one of those books written during a period of great interest in lesbian fiction, which “broke the mold of lesbian formula fiction, which until then had been aimed at heterosexual males.”<sup>65</sup> Unlike its mainstream counterparts, the novel delves deep into the lives of its heroines, eliciting genuine sympathy from readers. Their relationships are not merely depicted through the lens of sexual desire but are rooted in authentic love and connection, transcending societal expectations.

What sets Highsmith's work apart is its subtle and nuanced portrayal of intimacy, devoid of the gratuitous sex scenes often associated with the genre. Furthermore, the absence of punitive consequences for the protagonists' actions challenges the prevailing narrative of lesbian fiction at the time. Instead, she intricately crafts her characters, placing them in compelling life situations that resonate with authenticity. In Highsmith's narrative, the male characters serve as foils, embodying narrow-mindedness and intolerance, thereby highlighting the societal barriers faced by the protagonists.

Through *The Price of Salt*, Morgan delivers a profoundly moving and authentic love story, devoid of the self-loathing and despair often associated with portrayals of queer women in literature. This departure from the norm resonated deeply with queer readers, especially with queer women, offering a much-needed representation that authentically celebrated their identities and desires.

Additionally, the book delves into universal themes, presenting readers with narratives encompassing elements of romance, emancipation, and identity. It explores the complexities of social anxiety and dissatisfaction with the prevailing status quo, providing a multifaceted exploration of the human experience.

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<sup>63</sup> Keller, “Was It Right to Love Her Brother's Wife so Passionately?” 392.

<sup>64</sup> Claire Morgan is the pseudonym of Patricia Highsmith. *The Price of Salt* was published under the pseudonym Claire Morgan due to its lesbian themes, as Highsmith feared potential repercussions for her career at the time.

<sup>65</sup> Marie J. Kuda, Review of *Highsmith: Another View*, by Marijane Meaker, *The Women's Review of Books* 21, no. 3 (2003), 7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/402419>



In my analysis, I aim to illustrate how Patricia Highsmith utilizes motifs of self-discovery and first love to portray women's liberation in *The Price of Salt*. Additionally, I will examine the book within its historical and cultural context to explore the natural social progression and the universality of the themes addressed by the author. Central to my analysis will be the significance of queer relationships in facilitating the development of queer identity and advancing women's emancipation.

### III. The analysis of *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith

#### 3.1. Life and work of Patricia Highsmith

Patricia Highsmith (1921–1995) was an American author known for her psychological thrillers and suspenseful novels. Her life and work are characterized by a complex interplay of personal experiences, literary achievements, and a unique narrative style.

Patricia Highsmith's personality was characterized by a combination of complexity, introspection, and a certain level of mysteriousness. Highsmith was known to be introverted and valued her solitude and her writing often reflected an intimate exploration of the human mind, showcasing a deep understanding of psychological complexities of the human mind.

As an author, she consistently crafted characters that defied societal norms and conventions. Her protagonists, often complex, morally ambiguous and lacking the consistency, stood as rebellious figures challenging the status quo.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps her unconventional writing and such unique characters were the result of her own personal crises.

Highsmith's own nonconformity was a defining aspect of her identity, particularly evident in her fluid sexuality, a facet that ran counter to the prevailing social attitudes of her time. In an era marked by rigid expectations surrounding sexual orientation, Highsmith's open exploration of her identity challenged societal conventions. This aspect of her personal life became a wellspring of inspiration for her writing, influencing the nuanced portrayal of relationships, identity, and sexuality in her novels.<sup>67</sup> She had relationships with both men and women which was reflected in her writing.

Her exploration of unconventional characters and relationships, notably exemplified in works like *The Price of Salt*, provided a voice for those marginalized by societal expectations. Through her narratives, Highsmith not only challenged established norms but also offered readers a lens through which to reconsider and question prevailing attitudes toward love, identity, and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. *The Price of Salt* stands out as one of Patricia Highsmith's most introspective works, delving into the protagonist's inner turmoil not

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<sup>66</sup> Rennie McDougall, „The Many Faces of Patricia Highsmith,“ The New York Times Style Magazine, April 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/t-magazine/patricia-highsmith-talented-mr-ripley.html>.

<sup>67</sup> McDougall, „The Many Faces of Patricia Highsmith.“

as a result of inherent perversity or mental instability, but rather as a consequence of her struggle against societal taboos.

Patricia Highsmith herself was a figure of controversy, known to swing between extremes of desire and repulsion in her personal life. Her characters often reflect this dichotomy, with Tom Ripley widely considered as her literary alter ego.<sup>68</sup> While Highsmith was drawn to themes of repulsion and perversion, *The Price of Salt* offers a glimpse into her capacity for portraying sincere and sensual love.

In this novel, Highsmith reveals a different facet of her characters and herself, exploring the complexities of genuine emotion amidst societal constraints. Through her nuanced storytelling, she challenges readers to confront their preconceptions and biases, ultimately offering a deeper understanding of human nature and the power of love.

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<sup>68</sup> McDougall, „The Many Faces of Patricia Highsmith.“

### 3.2. The Price of Salt: Plot summary

*The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith, originally published in 1952 under the pseudonym Claire Morgan, stands as a pioneering work in the realm of literature, particularly for its exploration of a lesbian love story during a time when such narratives were largely absent from mainstream discourse. Highsmith's novel later republished under her real name, remains celebrated for its candid portrayal of love and desire against the backdrop of societal norms and expectations in 1950s New York City.

At the heart of the story are the two main characters, Therese Belivet and Carol Aird. Therese is a young and ambitious set designer, dissatisfied with the confines of her life and yearning for something more. Despite her strong personality and aspirations, she finds herself entangled in an unhappy relationship with her boyfriend, Richard. On the other hand, Carol Aird is portrayed as a mysterious and sophisticated woman undergoing a tumultuous divorce and custody battle.

Their paths cross unexpectedly when Carol visits the department store where Therese works. The encounter sparks a connection that defies societal conventions, leading to a complex and passionate love affair between the two women. As Carol navigates the challenges of her divorce and custody battle, her relationship with Therese intensifies, despite the looming disapproval of society and legal complications.

Throughout the novel, Highsmith intricately explores the emotional depths of love, desire, and societal expectations, as the characters grapple with their evolving connection amidst the constraints of the era. The narrative delves into the complexities of navigating love and identity in a society that often seeks to confine and restrict individual expression.

Despite the obstacles they face, Therese and Carol's relationship serves as a testament to the resilience of love and the enduring human spirit. Their story challenges societal norms and underscores the importance of authenticity and self-discovery in the pursuit of happiness and fulfilment.

### 3.3. Themes of the novel

Despite being categorized within the genre of lesbian pulp fiction, which is often overlooked in discussions of literary merit, *The Price of Salt* stands out for its profound exploration of numerous relevant themes that transcend its genre. Through its narrative, the novel explores societal attitudes towards women, the complex perceptions of queer women within patriarchal structures, and the repercussions of divorce, offering readers a window into the societal norms and struggles of its time. Furthermore, it delves into more universal topics such as loneliness, jealousy, unfulfilled ambitions, love and personal growth.

In *The Price of Salt*, Therese, the central character, embarks on a journey characterized by the intoxicating excitement of first love intertwined with the harsh realities of societal judgment and rejection. As she navigates her life, she not only experiences the exhilaration of newfound affection but also encounters instances of social ostracism and condemnation. These adversities, compounded by societal pressures and expectations, inflict emotional turmoil and psychological strain, forcing Therese to grapple with existential questions regarding her autonomy, pursuit of happiness, and resilience in the face of struggle. Through Therese's journey, the novel delves into the complexities of emotional growth and self-discovery amidst societal constraints, prompting readers to contemplate the enduring quest for personal freedom and fulfilment amid societal disapproval. This multifaceted exploration of love, resilience, and personal evolution will serve as the central focus of my analysis of *The Price of Salt*. I will analyze how personal freedom and self-discovery can lead to maturation and personal growth.

An obstacle to personal development frequently encountered is the societal norms imposed on individuals, particularly women striving for fulfilment beyond traditional roles. Therese's subtle defiance of societal expectations prompts reflection on the origins of these constraints and their impact on personal growth. The second aspect I will explore in my thesis is connected to the themes of society and nonconformity. I will delve into the correlation between these two aspects and examine the level of resilience necessary to pursue personal freedom, especially within the context of women's autonomy and self-determination.

Lastly, I will delve into the theme of first love and queer liberation which serves as a poignant conclusion to the narrative. Despite the prevailing social prohibitions of the era, *The Price of Salt* offers a rare glimpse of a happy ending within its genre, providing queer readers with a glimmer of hope amidst the societal constraints of the 1950s. As the story unfolds, the

heroines navigate the complexities of their burgeoning romance, grappling with the societal norms that seek to suppress their desires and autonomy. I will analyze how love and human connection help individuals discover themselves and attain personal freedom.

Throughout the novel, Therese and Carol are forced to make sacrifices and confront the harsh realities of a society that vehemently opposes their love. Yet, amidst the challenges and obstacles they face, they find solace in each other's embrace and the authenticity of their connection. The central question lingers: Was it worth defying societal norms and risking everything for the chance at love and self-acceptance?

### 3.3.1. Personal growth and Maturation

The narrative unfolds with a poignant depiction of the main character's mundane everyday life. Highsmith unveils the depths of Therese's dissatisfaction from the outset, as she grapples with the stark contrast between her current reality and her aspirations. Trapped in the confines of a job at a department store, Therese's dreams of pursuing a career in scenic design remain elusive, casting a shadow of hopelessness over her outlook.

Therese's disillusionment with her job is palpable, vividly depicted through her perception of the store as akin to a prison: "The store was organized so much like a prison, it frightened her now and then to realize she was part of it."<sup>69</sup> The suffocating atmosphere evokes a sense of dread within her, making her worry even more about getting stuck in a life where she is not happy. Her youthful optimism is contrasted with a pervasive sense of uncertainty, hindered by a lack of confidence to break free from the shackles of her fears.

A pivotal moment that underscores Therese's apprehension unfolds during a meeting with her colleague, Mrs. Robichek, when Therese realizes that all she can see in her is her "terrible shocking ugliness."<sup>70</sup> The prospect of being trapped in the confines of the store indefinitely instils a profound fear within Therese, who recoils at the thought of succumbing to a fate marked by perpetual exhaustion and despair. She is afraid of turning into a typical woman working there "with a face... stricken with an everlasting exhaustion and terror."<sup>71</sup> The spectre of hopelessness looms large, driving her desire to break free from the chains of her circumstances before they tighten their grip.

Even though she holds onto a glimmer of hope for change, Therese feels stuck in her situation, unable to see a way out. The idea of escaping seems tempting, but she feels weighed down by her circumstances: "It was easy, after all, simply to open the door and escape. It was easy, she thought, because she was not really escaping at all."<sup>72</sup> Highsmith captures Therese's inner struggles so vividly, showing the battle between wanting to break free and feeling trapped.

Certainly, Therese's entrapment within her circumstances largely stems from her gender, contributing to her passivity and uncertainty. However, this aspect will be explored further in

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<sup>69</sup> Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004), 12.

<sup>70</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 20.

<sup>71</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 23.

the subsequent chapter. Now, I aim to delve into the internal journey of the protagonist, charting her evolution from a “naive child” to a resilient adult woman capable of navigating the challenges of the world.

At the onset of the story, a significant facet of Therese's character lies in how others perceive her, shaping her own self-image. Surrounded by older and seemingly more accomplished people, she can't help but feel inferior and insignificant. In her interactions with Carol, her love interest, Therese yearns to convey a sense of importance, hoping that her job will serve as validation: “Therese had intended to tell her about the job at the Black Cat Theater. That would count for something, she thought, that would be the single important thing she could tell about herself.”<sup>73</sup>

Partly conforming to societal norms and partly seeking a semblance of normalcy, Therese finds herself in a relationship with Richard, who envisions a future with her firmly settled within societal confines. Unwilling to conform to this fate, Therese experiences not anger or despair, but rather guilt towards Richard (and society) for not reciprocating his feelings: “Yet the simple fact that she wasn't in love with him made Therese feel guilty...”<sup>74</sup> Despite these feelings, her faint yet lingering ambitions drive her further away from her current relationship towards the yet unexplored and tempting opportunity of a real connection.

During her subsequent encounters with Carol, Therese notices the casual manner in which Carol comments on her appearance: “You`re a very pretty girl,”... She might have been speaking of a doll, Therese thought, so casually had she told her she was pretty.”<sup>75</sup> This seemingly innocuous remark strikes Therese as objectifying, reducing her to a mere doll in others' eyes. In her own mind, Therese grapples with misguided perceptions about herself, internalizing societal stereotypes about young, unmarried women.

Carol's characterization of Therese as a child serves to both diminish her and shield her from the harsh realities of the world: “You`re a child.”<sup>76</sup> This simple statement encapsulates how Therese is perceived by others, contrasting starkly with her own self-perception. From a young age, Therese has grappled with loneliness, pain, and disappointment, unable to articulate her feelings for fear of being misunderstood. In her imagination, Therese longs to confide in

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<sup>73</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 64.

<sup>74</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 57.

<sup>75</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 50.

<sup>76</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 66.



Carol about “all that she feared and disliked, all of her loneliness, of Richard, and of gigantic disappointments.”<sup>77</sup> But she does not trust Carol and does not seek understanding.

Despite Therese's less-than-ideal situation and her own negative self-perception, her youth affords her the potential for a different life. Carol expresses envy at Therese's ability to move to New York: “Disappeared! I like that. And how lucky you are to be just able to do it. You’re free. Do you realize that?”<sup>78</sup> Although she understands Carol's intention to highlight her opportunities, she knows her aspirations may never be fully embraced.

Meeting Carol proves transformative for Therese. Previously lacking in courage and purpose, her encounter with Carol fills up her life with newfound meaning and anticipation: “A world was born around her, like a bright forest with a million shimmering leaves.”<sup>79</sup> Even amidst her feelings of liberation and hopefulness, Therese remains acutely aware of her limitations and the illusory nature of her newfound freedom. This awareness adds a layer of complexity to her emotional journey as she navigates the uncertainties of her evolving circumstances.

Carol's perception of Therese as a helpless “angel”<sup>80</sup> further reinforces Therese's internal struggle with her evolving identity. The changes unfolding in her life don't erase the feeling of being confined; her newfound existence sometimes feels like an illusion: “...the big cream-colored car was gone, like a thing she had imagined, like one of the birds in a dream.”<sup>81</sup> Despite Carol's well-intentioned gestures, such as offering financial assistance, Therese rejects any implication of dependence, preferring to assert her independence on her terms. Carol's actions inadvertently underscore the societal barriers Therese faces in her quest for autonomy.

As Therese undergoes mental growth, she develops a newfound assertiveness and confronts her circumstances head-on. In a crucial moment with Richard, she boldly demands solitude, signalling her departure from her previous passive demeanour: “Richard, I feel like being alone – the rest of the afternoon.”<sup>82</sup> Richard, taken aback by her assertiveness, acknowledges Therese's transformation, which defies his expectations of her.

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<sup>77</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 68.

<sup>78</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 70.

<sup>79</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 74.

<sup>80</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 78.

<sup>81</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 91.

<sup>82</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 108.

In Therese's journey of self-discovery, pivotal moments arise as she navigates the complexities of relationships and societal expectations. When she decides to accompany Carol on a New Year's trip, Richard's reaction underscores the tension between her desire for independence and others' perceptions of her capabilities: "You so rarely make up your mind about anything. You'll probably change your mind again."<sup>83</sup> Despite her efforts to assert herself, Therese grapples with the need to appear mature and decisive: "I don't think so,"<sup>84</sup> she retorts, signaling her evolving self-awareness.

As Therese explores her burgeoning feelings for Carol, societal norms and age dynamics come into play. Richard dismisses her attraction to Carol as childish infatuation: "Don't you think it's pretty silly? It's like a crush that schoolgirls get."<sup>85</sup> His scepticism reflects broader societal attitudes towards unconventional relationships, highlighting Therese's struggle to assert her agency amidst external judgments. Richard's concerns may stem from his desire to enlighten Therese about the realities of their world. However, I intend to explore the themes of first love and the societal influences on the protagonist's character more extensively in the following chapters.

The turning point in Therese's journey occurs with her decision to part ways with Richard, symbolizing her break from her former self: "...I'm not the same person."<sup>86</sup> This declaration marks her embrace of newfound independence and self-discovery, setting her on a path of personal growth and exploration. However, this path is still unexplored and frightening. Therese has to get used to her new circumstances. "Perhaps it was freedom itself that choked her." – the narrator shows us the darker side of her liberation.

Despite her newfound confidence, Therese grapples with lingering perceptions of her youth and inexperience. Carol's reminders, "You're much too young to know your own mind,"<sup>87</sup> or "you're too young to make enormous decisions"<sup>88</sup> serve as a constant reminder of society's expectations and the challenges Therese faces in asserting her identity. Although Carol still perceives Therese as a young, clueless girl, she acknowledges that Therese's naivety stems not only from her inexperience but also from her unique perspective and difference from anyone

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<sup>83</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 147.

<sup>84</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 147.

<sup>85</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 154.

<sup>86</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 156.

<sup>87</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 160.

<sup>88</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 194.

else Carol has encountered. Carol admits that Therese has her "private conception of everything,"<sup>89</sup> which can sometimes not only alienate people but also draw them towards her.

Carol and Therese's relationship marks a crucial moment for the latter, prompting her to contemplate her role in the world more deeply. However, their perspectives on the relationship diverge significantly. While Therese sees it as an opportunity for personal liberation, Carol views it as hindering Therese's personal growth: "I was exactly the wrong person for you to know – because I indulge you and keep you from growing up."<sup>90</sup> This dynamic is reminiscent of themes often found in lesbian pulp fiction, where a mature woman seduces a younger, more naive girl. Yet, Highsmith instils Therese with qualities of independence and a love for freedom, complicating this portrayal and preventing her from being seen merely as a victim of circumstances.

After Therese and Carol parted ways, Therese experienced feelings of emptiness and loneliness, yet she harboured no regrets about their relationship. Every experience shared with Carol, even their conflicts and misunderstandings, as well as the pain of separation from someone dear to her, contributed to Therese's understanding of her place in the world and her own self-worth. Despite others (her friends) possibly failing to recognize her transformation, Therese was keenly aware of the changes within herself: "I mean you're so young, Therese,"<sup>91</sup> but Therese "did not feel young."<sup>92</sup> Reflecting on her life, Therese realized the extent of her growth and maturation in just a few months: "Everything she had now, the clothes she remembered in her closet in New York, seemed juvenile, like clothes that had belonged to her years ago."<sup>93</sup> Her self-perception has changed, which affects her relationship with Carol, for whom she once sacrificed everything. „You sound different,"<sup>94</sup> Carol says when meeting Therese after a long separation. When Carol noted a change in Therese's demeanour upon their reunion, and later invited her to reconnect, Therese declined—an assertion of her newfound maturity and ability to prioritize her own needs. This departure from her previous behaviour surprises Therese: "When has she ever refused Carol when Carol wanted to see her?"<sup>95</sup>

As Therese continued to evolve and grow, she never imagined she would develop the courage and ambition to pursue her own path, both professionally and in terms of self-

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<sup>89</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 177.

<sup>90</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 199.

<sup>91</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 269.

<sup>92</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 269.

<sup>93</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 271.

<sup>94</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 273.

<sup>95</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 274.

discovery. Now, those close to her acknowledge these changes, recognizing her newfound maturity: “And now—you're all grown up—with grown-up hair and grown-up clothes.”<sup>96</sup> Carol's perception of Therese has shifted from seeing her as a “pretty girl” to viewing her as a grown woman.

With newfound self-confidence and a deeper understanding of herself and her capabilities, Therese gained spiritual maturity, empowering her to make her own choices and chart her own path in life.

As I explore Patricia Highsmith's narrative, it becomes clear that she purposely avoids creating Therese as a flawless or universally likable character. Instead, Therese emerges as a complex figure, filled with uncertainties and nuanced traits that sometimes work for her and sometimes against her. She can be selfish or assertive yet also display moments of naivety and kindness. Besides often being driven by her emotions, she possesses a high level of self-understanding and rationality, especially in the end of the book, when she finally confronts Carol and refuses to go live with her by her first call. However, amidst these contradictions, Therese's authenticity resonates, allowing readers to genuinely empathize with her. Highsmith skilfully portrays Therese's journey from youthful uncertainty and awkwardness to a woman with her own unique perspectives on life.

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<sup>96</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 275.

### 3.3.2. Society and Nonconformity

One of the central themes of my thesis revolves around the individual's struggle against societal norms. This theme closely ties to the influence of society on personal identity and worldview formation. In this chapter, I will explore the extent of societal impact on shaping life values and deeply ingrained social norms within the human psyche. Moving beyond internal self-perception, I will examine society's treatment of non-conforming people and its potential hindrance to personal development. Gender dynamics will also be addressed. I will pay attention to gender issues, since social rules largely affected women, despite the fact that men also suffered and still suffer from patriarchal systems.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, at the beginning of the book, the main character Therese is depicted as working in a store, involved in a relationship with a young man, and leading a relatively quiet life. Despite her aspirations for her dream job and experiencing her first love, Therese grapples with doubts and insecurities imposed by society.

Already in the first chapters of the book, Highsmith points out the gap between the financial capabilities of men and women. For Richard, “It was easier for him to save money,”<sup>97</sup> while Therese, “After nearly two years in New York, she had only about five hundred dollars of it.”<sup>98</sup> The dynamics between Therese and Richard largely depend on the differences in their social status. This contrast underscores the societal dynamics influencing Therese and Richard's relationship, wherein societal norms dictate that men typically provide for their partners financially. In the eyes of society, they are an ideal couple in which the man takes care of his woman, at least financially.

Richard dreams of going to Europe with Therese, although he perfectly understands her financial situation and is ready to spend money on her. Therese understands that this is an absolutely normal state of affairs in society, however, thinking about this, she understands that “...she would be accepting most of the money for the trip with him, she thought with a familiar sense of guilt.”<sup>99</sup> Part of her guilt is due to her desire for financial independence, part due to the fact that “she still wasn't in love with him.”<sup>100</sup> On top of that, Therese is troubled by the notion

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<sup>97</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 27.

<sup>98</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 27.

<sup>99</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 33.

<sup>100</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 33.

that others might perceive her relationship with Richard as motivated by financial gain or social advancement, even though she alone harbours this concern: “Therese felt a throb of embarrassment as she walked along behind Richard, like a dangling appendage, because Phil and Danny would naturally think she was Richard’s mistress.”<sup>101</sup>

Attitudes towards women during that era are vividly illustrated through the dynamics between Therese and Richard. While Therese appears to lead a dual existence, conforming to societal norms on one hand while yearning for freedom on the other, Richard remains oblivious to the possibility of any alteration in his idealized life. His perception is entrenched in the belief that his position in Therese's life is immutable and secure, stemming from the notion that he was her first sexual partner: "Richard's attitude was that his place in her life was unassailable, her tie with him permanent and beyond question, because he was the first man she had slept with."<sup>102</sup> This mindset reflects the societal expectations imposed on young unmarried women, yet Therese defies these conventions.

The true clash between the protagonist and societal norms commenced with her encounter with Carol. It was from that pivotal moment that Therese began to comprehend the constraints society imposes on love and self-expression, particularly the limitations placed on women. Following their initial meeting at the store, Therese sends Carol a Christmas card. In their subsequent conversation, Therese's inquiry, “I’m sure you thought it was a man who sent you the Christmas card, didn’t you?”<sup>103</sup> reveals her awareness of societal expectations regarding expressions of affection. Therese, like many, assumed that only men were permitted to exhibit such gestures of attention, highlighting the prevailing gender norms of the time.

Moreover, Carol's disclosure of her divorce, although not unusual for the period, remains a deviation from societal norms. During one of their subsequent encounters, Carol reflects on the turmoil in her personal life following her marital separation: “...I don’t feel like seeing people I generally see just now. One can’t, really. Everything’s supposed to be done in pairs.”<sup>104</sup> Carol's remark underscores the societal pressure for women to adhere to conventional norms, even in their social interactions. This narrative illuminates the stifling confines within which women were expected to operate, as well as Therese's growing awareness of these restrictions through her association with Carol.

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<sup>101</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 33.

<sup>102</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 108.

<sup>103</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 51.

<sup>104</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 103.

Carol confides in Therese about her marriage. During one of their meetings, Carol shares her candid perception of her relationship with her husband, Harge. She asserts that what he feels “It's not love. It's a compulsion,”<sup>105</sup> She expresses the feeling that “he wants to control”<sup>106</sup> her. Through Carol and Harge's relationship, Therese begins to grasp the stark realities of societal constraints. Carol's revelations shed light on the societal expectation that women serve as nothing more than ornamental attachments to their husbands. Carol further emphasizes this point by stating, “I've never done anything to embarrass him socially, and that's all he cares about really.”<sup>107</sup> This underscores the societal pressure on women to prioritize their husband's social standing over their well-being and happiness.

Therese eventually realizes that she cannot conform to society's expectations. With an internal awareness of her otherness, she acknowledges that she differs from what society, and especially Richard, desires from her: “He resented the fact that she wasn't and could never be what he wished her to be, a girl who loved him passionately and would love to go to Europe with him.”<sup>108</sup> She has never fit that mold. Being a compliant wife with no aspirations or personal dreams is not in her nature. She has always yearned for more, and the confines of a traditional family life would never satisfy her ambitions. Despite noticing changes in Therese, Richard still seeks to spend time with her. He suggests a dinner with a couple of his friends, but Therese recoils at the idea: “Two of the most boring people she had ever met, a shoe clerk and a secretary, happily married on West Twentieth Street, and she knew Richard meant to show her an ideal life in theirs...”<sup>109</sup> Therese has already decided that she will not conform to this ideal, as her vision of an “ideal life” differs significantly.

When Therese revealed the truth about Carol to Richard, he struggled to comprehend how his seemingly idyllic life could be so abruptly disrupted. “Therese, you're like a person gone so crazy, you think you're saner than ever!”<sup>110</sup> Richard attempted to persuade Therese that her actions and desires were misguided, insisting that in their society, they could not simply discard the conventions that defined them as respectable members of community. Even after Therese departed with Carol, Richard remained “absolutely confident that they could be happy

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<sup>105</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 130.

<sup>106</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 130.

<sup>107</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 131.

<sup>108</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 145.

<sup>109</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 146.

<sup>110</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 155.

together.”<sup>111</sup> While Therese understood and respected his sentiments, she remained resolute in her decision not to revert to her previous life.

However, for Therese, matters were far less complex. Despite her involvement with Richard, she remained unmarried and childless, rendering it comparatively simpler for her to break away from her existing life and embrace new horizons. Within societal norms, she scarcely constituted a complete individual, whereas “Carol had lived like a human being, had married, and had a child.”<sup>112</sup> This discrepancy in their social standings adds another layer of conflict to the narrative. While Therese only briefly navigated the confines of societal expectations, Carol's entrenched familial commitments made her vulnerability more pronounced: “When you have a husband and child, it's a bit different.”<sup>113</sup> Therese understands that Carol faces even greater stakes due to their relationship.

Therese frequently thinks about the unfairness of her and Carol's predicament. While others can openly display affection and love in public, she and Carol are relegated to the shadows: “She thought of people she had seen holding hands in movies, and why shouldn't she and Carol?”<sup>114</sup> I appreciate how Highsmith subtly exposes the homophobic sentiments of the era through the genuine emotions of the main character, who fails to comprehend why her love is deemed unacceptable, and why society fails to recognize the authenticity and freedom in their relationship.

Homophobic attitudes prevalent in society can profoundly influence individuals' internalized homophobia. Through the character of Carol, we witness how internal fears and societal stigmatization contribute to self-loathing. When Therese questions the legitimacy of their relationship, asking, “Is it anything to be ashamed of?”<sup>115</sup> Carol's response is blunt: “Yes. Do you know that, don't you?”<sup>116</sup> She further remarks, “In the eyes of the world it's an abomination.”<sup>117</sup> These exchanges raise questions about whether Carol's self-perception is genuinely reflective of her inner feelings or if it is a result of societal conditioning. It is likely that years of societal condemnation have ingrained such self-doubt in Carol that she struggles to recognize the authenticity of her emotions.

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<sup>111</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 184.

<sup>112</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 178.

<sup>113</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 196.

<sup>114</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 193.

<sup>115</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 198.

<sup>116</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 198

<sup>117</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 198.



Carol alludes to her past experiences with non-heterosexual relationships: "...I'd heard of girls who preferred girls. But the books also tell you it goes away after that age."<sup>118</sup> Lesbian relationships were often dismissed, as evidenced by Richard's fervent attempts to convince Therese that her feelings were fleeting, that she was abnormal, and that he could guide her back to the "right" path.

The pivotal moment in the book occurs when Carol and Therese discover that Harge has hired a detective to spy on them during their trip: "Harge has had a detective following us since Chicago."<sup>119</sup> This revelation highlights the persistent intrusion of societal norms, even as the women attempt to break free from their familiar surroundings. Harge's motive is clear – to manipulate and coerce Carol. Faced with the ultimatum of returning to her husband and relinquishing her autonomy or losing custody of her daughter, Carol finds herself at a crossroads. While the mother's instinctual choice is apparent, Therese, having embraced a newfound sense of freedom with Carol, complicates the decision.

Therese's apprehension resurfaces, reminiscent of the fear she left behind in New York along with her former life: "She watched the road behind them for another patrol car, for the detective's car, and for the nameless, shapeless thing she felt pursuing them from Colorado Springs."<sup>120</sup> This detective subplot serves as a metaphor, symbolizing the barriers and threats that queer love and women's autonomy face in the real world.

As Therese and Carol prepare to part ways, Therese expresses her love for Carol, a genuine human emotion beyond their control. However, Carol's response, "But do you see what it means?"<sup>121</sup> underscores the harsh reality that their love requires perpetual sacrifice, continually challenged by societal norms that marginalize those who deviate from the norm. Carol's journey is fraught with challenges. She has to face "detectives, the divorce, the hostility"<sup>122</sup> – all because they dared to love each other.

Therese encounters hostility as well, exemplified by Richard's letter expressing his disgust towards her: "...the upper-most emotion I feel towards you is one that was present from the first – disgust."<sup>123</sup> Despite societal perceptions, the most distressing consequence for Therese is her inability to be with Carol. In one of her letters, Carol vividly portrays her

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<sup>118</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 195.

<sup>119</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 206.

<sup>120</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 222.

<sup>121</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 232.

<sup>122</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 236.

<sup>123</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 248.

predicament: “There were a dozen faces that opened their mouths and spoke like the judges of doomsday – reminding me of my duties, my position, and my future.”<sup>124</sup> Carol faces a harrowing decision, torn between sacrificing her child or forfeiting a crucial aspect of her identity. This narrative underscores the profound personal sacrifices and agonizing choices individuals must confront when challenging societal norms, highlighting the injustice and emotional turmoil inherent in seeking love and autonomy beyond conventional boundaries.

After enduring a series of challenges, Carol ultimately makes a poignant decision: “I refused to live by the list of silly promises they'd made up like a list of misdemeanours – even if it did mean that they'd lock Rindy away from me...”<sup>125</sup> This choice exemplifies her commitment to freedom, even at the heart-breaking cost of losing custody of her child. While controversial, this decision also reflects Carol's growth influenced by Therese's free-spirited and defiant nature. Despite societal pressures, both women refuse to suppress their innermost desires for love and autonomy. Together, they embrace the uncertainty of their future, united by their shared resolve to defy societal norms and pursue their own happiness.

Highsmith skilfully examines the societal norms and legal restrictions that impact Carol and Therese's relationship, highlighting the oppressive nature of the cultural landscape in the 1950s. The character of Carol Aird faces societal expectations and legal challenges in her divorce and custody battle. Her journey can be seen as a quest for the freedom to live authentically, unburdened by the constraints of societal norms.

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<sup>124</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 254.

<sup>125</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 277.

### 3.3.3. First love and Queer liberation

In the following chapter, I plan to delve into the themes of first love and personal liberation. These themes are closely linked to my previous discussions, particularly regarding the protagonist's journey towards self-identity and societal perceptions of queer love. By examining the dynamics of romantic relationships, I aim to uncover the transformative potential of love in shaping individual growth and self-discovery. Through the experiences of the main characters, I will explore the complexities of navigating romantic entanglements in a society that often imposes rigid norms and expectations. My analysis will provide insights into the profound impact of love on one's journey towards personal fulfilment and liberation.

The central love story challenges the norms of the time, as two women find love in a society that is largely intolerant. Their pursuit of happiness and fulfilment becomes a powerful representation of the search for freedom within the realm of personal relationships. The characters navigate societal prejudices and personal sacrifices in their pursuit of a genuine connection. The novel illustrates the challenges faced by those seeking the freedom to love whomever they want. The novel delves into the complexities of love and the sacrifices individuals make for their relationships, even when faced with societal disapproval.

Therese, the central character in the book, endured a childhood devoid of parental affection and lacked any profound romantic attachments by the age of 19. Despite Richard's presence in her life, she could not muster romantic feelings for him, although “the fact remained that she liked him better than any one person she had ever known, certainly any man.”<sup>126</sup> She found genuine enjoyment in Richard's company, yet she understood that she couldn't fulfil his desires.

However, Therese's perspective on Richard underwent a profound shift with the arrival of Carol. It would not be accurate to label it as love at first sight; rather, Therese felt drawn to something new, particularly captivated by Carol's striking beauty: “Her eyes, grey and unassuming in colour, emanated a commanding presence akin to light or fire. Ensnared by their gaze, Therese found herself unable to avert her own.”<sup>127</sup> In Carol's description, Highsmith places the emphasis on her eyes, deliberately steering away from a sexualized portrayal of the character, often appearing in the books of genre lesbian pulp fiction. This approach accentuates

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<sup>126</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 33.

<sup>127</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 39.

the possibility of a profound mental connection between the characters, even as Therese's underlying sexual attraction remains subtly woven into the narrative.

After their first encounter in the store, Carol and Therese go to the restaurant together, which, for Therese, is an important moment. The fact that someone as fascinating as Carol could pay attention to Therese probably took her by surprise: “Therese thought her beautiful, though her face was a blur now because she could not bear to look at it directly.”<sup>128</sup> Carol was interested in Therese as well, considering the fact, that it was her idea to meet for the second time.

Therese finds herself deeply overwhelmed by her emotions, caught off-guard by their intensity. “She stood with a pen poised over the card, thinking of what she might have written – “You are magnificent” or even “I love you”.”<sup>129</sup> Carol occupies her thoughts entirely, yet Therese grapples with her understanding of love, particularly in the context of same-sex attraction: “It would be almost like love, what she felt for Carol, except that Carol was a woman.”<sup>130</sup> Her confusion stems from both her limited experience in romantic relationships and the societal taboos surrounding queer relationships at the time.

Despite her uncertainty, Therese recognizes the uniqueness of her feelings: “She had never loved anyone before Carol...”<sup>131</sup> This realization marks the beginning of Therese's journey toward understanding her authentic emotions and achieving self-liberation.

In earlier chapters, I have explored Therese's growing assertiveness and self-assurance following her encounter with Carol. Love serves as a catalyst for her newfound perspective, prompting her to reevaluate various aspects of her life, including her work, ambitions, and social interactions. With Carol's influence, Therese gains the courage to break free from her stagnant relationship with Richard, embarking on a path towards something entirely new. Stepping out of her comfort zone opens doors to fresh opportunities for self-discovery and fulfilment.

Therese's fixation on Carol reached such intensity that she found herself unable to focus on anything else: “Therese longed for the store again, yearned for Monday, anticipating the chance of encountering Carol once more.”<sup>132</sup> Even her perception of work, once likened to a prison, underwent a profound shift as she now eagerly anticipates each day, solely for the

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<sup>128</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 49.

<sup>129</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 44.

<sup>130</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 54.

<sup>131</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 64.

<sup>132</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 74.

prospect of encountering the object of her affection. These moments of longing not only consumed her thoughts but also came to define her entire existence. Previously characterized by passivity and aimlessness, Therese's life now revolved around the anticipation of seeing Carol, imbuing her existence with newfound purpose and vitality.

At one moment, what appears to Therese as an undying feeling can turn into anxiety. She was told that “love usually dies after two years of marriage.”<sup>133</sup> Carol tells her “to enjoy [love], it's harder later on.”<sup>134</sup> Therese consumes all the views on love and relationships she encounters because she wants to understand what she feels towards Carol and decide for herself if it is worth risking her quiet life for a chance to be happy. And she was in fact happy, “She was happier than any of them.”<sup>135</sup> Thought Therese while she was on a dinner with Richard.

As Therese grappled with her first romantic feelings, jealousy began to surface. She found herself envious of Carol's husband and even more jealous of Carol's friend Abby. However, amidst these tumultuous emotions, a realization emerged: “She longed for Carol.”<sup>136</sup> Therese enjoyed this unfamiliar feeling of being in love, and she cherished every moment of it: “Carol was like a secret spreading through her, spreading through this house, too, like a light invisible to everyone but her.”<sup>137</sup> She even found joy in her discreetness because the world did not matter at that moment.

As Therese delves deeper into her relationship with Carol, she begins to grasp its unique nature: “It was so easy for a man and woman to find each other, to find someone who would do, but for her to have found Carol...”<sup>138</sup> She acknowledges the unconventional yet profoundly pure nature of her attraction. Despite societal norms urging her towards a conventional path—settling with a man like Richard, starting a family, and embracing a simple, predictable life—Therese recognizes that this narrative does not align with her truth. Instead, she confronts the complexities of her desires, embracing the authenticity of her feelings for Carol despite the challenges they may pose.

Queer narratives frequently confront the issue of homophobia, and *The Price of Salt* is no different. Richard and supposedly people around just could not comprehend the fact, that she is in love with a woman: “Richard was so frankly trying to convince her she was

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<sup>133</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 78.

<sup>134</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 83.

<sup>135</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 94.

<sup>136</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 91.

<sup>137</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 93.

<sup>138</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 156.

unhealthy.”<sup>139</sup> Despite the pressure and judgment from those around her, Therese remains resolute in her conviction. She refuses to internalize societal prejudice and shame, believing that her love for Carol is valid and worthy. Through Therese's defiance and self-assurance, *The Price of Salt* emerges as a powerful testament to the resilience and authenticity of queer love in the face of societal condemnation.

Shortly after embarking on their trip together, the affair between the women ignites, sparking a complex relationship fraught with passion, fear, uncertainties, and even obsession. “I love you,”<sup>140</sup> Therese finally declares, finding her voice and her freedom. Yet, her inexperience leaves her grappling with the elusive concept of love: “What was it to love someone, what was love exactly, and why did it end or not end?”<sup>141</sup> These questions haunt Therese, yearning for answers that elude her grasp.

Carol reciprocates Therese's feelings. Their first manifestation of feelings feels so natural as if there were nothing strange in their connection: “Then she kissed Therese on the lips, as if they had kissed a thousand times before.”<sup>142</sup> At this moment, Therese can finally breathe because she has known her first love. Even if their relationship does not evolve into something more profound, Therese acknowledges Carol's significance as not just another love interest but as the first woman she has fallen for. In many ways, Carol becomes a catalyst for Therese's sexual awakening, a realization underscored by her admission to Carol: “You're exactly the right person for me to know,”<sup>143</sup> a sentiment expressed after Carol reveals her own doubts about their relationship.

The relationship between women gets intense when they find out about a private detective hired by Carol's husband. Now Therese is hunted not by her innate fear of love and commitment, she is afraid by the consequences of that love: “How is it possible to be afraid and in love, Therese thought. The two things did not go together.”<sup>144</sup> Indeed it is quite rare to experience love and fear of that love at the same time, but not in the case of non-heterosexual relationships. For queer characters fear of rejection and the consequences of being out can be the most crucial factor in their self-development and can even contribute to the identity crisis.

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<sup>139</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 158.

<sup>140</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 188.

<sup>141</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 197.

<sup>142</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 189.

<sup>143</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 199.

<sup>144</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 209.

Even though Therese and Carol had to break up at some point, specifically after their trip was sabotaged by external forces, Therese did not lose the faith that they can still be together. Even though it seemed delusional to hope for a happy ending, Therese believed that nothing mattered “except being with Carol, anywhere, anyhow”<sup>145</sup> She felt lonely again and only this hope helped her to mature and realize the realities of the world they stuck in.

It took Carol sometime to understand that the life without love and freedom is impossible for her. She had to give up a lot to be free and open about her sexuality. When she finally meets Therese again, she wants them to start a life together to try and live like a normal couple (even though they both understand it is not entirely possible). Therese hesitates, takes her time to think about this offer, but finally she realizes: “...it was Carol she loved and would always love.”<sup>146</sup> This way Therese fully embraces her queer identity after months of fears and uncertainties. Highsmith breaks down the genre of queer fiction and boldly rewards her characters with a happy ending.

In conclusion, *The Price of Salt* intricately weaves together themes of first love and personal liberation, presenting a poignant exploration of self-identity and societal perceptions of queer love. Through the experiences of Therese and Carol, the novel delves into the transformative potential of love in shaping individual growth and self-discovery. Despite facing societal prejudices and personal sacrifices, the characters navigate their pursuit of happiness and fulfilment, challenging the norms of the time. Therese's journey towards understanding her authentic emotions and embracing her queer identity is a testament to the resilience of love in the face of the conservative world. Ultimately, *The Price of Salt* defies conventional narratives of queer fiction, boldly rewarding its characters with a hopeful and fulfilling conclusion.

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<sup>145</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 235.

<sup>146</sup> Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*, 287.

## IV. Conclusion

The evolution of queer and feminist literature marks a remarkable journey towards recognition as indispensable elements of literary discourse. Women and queer people have continually struggled with articulating their genuine experiences on paper, and the struggle persists. In my thesis, I have cited a modest selection of literary critics, authors, and activists who have propelled the ideals of inclusivity and intersectionality, advancing progress for subsequent generations of women and queer writers worldwide.

Despite notable advancements, queer voices remain somewhat marginalized in the literary landscape, though the proliferation of queer literature, particularly in the US, has significantly increased since the 1950s. Queer writers now have the opportunity to share their narratives and garner equitable recognition and acclaim alongside their non-queer counterparts. Although queer literature has existed for generations, its evolution from subtextual depictions of queerness to narratives where queer characters openly live their lives as central figures is a testament to societal shifts in attitudes towards sexual minorities. As society has grown more accepting, so too has the visibility and acceptance of queer stories, which have progressed to mainstream recognition.

Even during eras when queer themes were deemed taboo, courageous authors dared to present authentic queer narratives with empathy and sincerity. Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* exemplifies one such work. As analysed above, Highsmith's novel deftly navigates the complexities of queer love, offering a poignant portrayal that challenges prevailing societal norms and prejudices.

*The Price of Salt* holds profound significance in feminist and queer literature by pioneering the representation of a same-sex love story in the conservative 1950s. The novel challenges stereotypes, subverts heteronormative tropes, and provides a nuanced exploration of female empowerment. By focusing on the journeys of Carol and Therese, it contributes to the broader discourse on women's agency, liberation through queer love, and critiques societal attitudes. The novel's literary innovation and positive resolution for its queer characters have had a lasting impact on subsequent works, making it a seminal contribution to the ongoing quest for gender and sexual equality in literature.

In the context of feminist literature, *The Price of Salt* is notable for its depiction of complex female characters who defy traditional gender roles and expectations. The protagonist,



Therese, is a young woman striving for independence and self-discovery in a male-dominated society. Through Therese's journey, the novel explores themes of agency, autonomy, and the pursuit of personal fulfilment. Therese's refusal to conform to societal expectations, particularly in her pursuit of a romantic relationship with another woman, reflects a feminist defiance against patriarchal norms and constraints.

Moreover, *The Price of Salt* challenges conventional notions of female sexuality and desire. The novel portrays Therese and Carol's relationship with depth and sensitivity, presenting their love as genuine and profound. By centring their romantic connection, Highsmith subverts heteronormative narratives that prioritize male-female relationships. Instead, she offers a nuanced portrayal of same-sex desire, affirming the validity and significance of queer love.

*The Price of Salt* holds a seminal position as one of the earliest works to feature a positive representation of lesbian relationships. At a time when queer characters were often relegated to tragic or marginal roles, Highsmith's novel offers a refreshing and empowering depiction of queer love. Highsmith shows what it is like being a queer woman. Through the lens of Therese's journey, *The Price of Salt* offers a compelling exploration of self-discovery, desire, and the complexities of queer love in a society fraught with taboos and constraints.

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