

Flight of Freedom — Homosexuality and the Redirected Gender Roles in the Price of Salt

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Abstract—This essay aims to examine how the lesbian relationship between Therese and Carol in *The Price of Salt* redirects the way Therese performs her gender role. Hegemony of gender roles is redirected by homosexuality. Therese acts differently in her romantic relationship with Carol, compared to that with Richard, in terms of her gained subjectivity in various aspects, including emotional freedom, social position, and sexual desires.

Index Terms—Female subjectivity, gender roles, homosexuality, the price of salt.

I. CONTEXT

Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* is a novel that depicts a lesbian relationship between Therese, a salesclerk working in a New York department store who was previously in a relationship with a man named Richard, and Carol, a housewife struggling through divorce and custody battles, in the 1950s. They meet and gradually develop a romantic relationship. Though encountering obstacles, they commit to each other and decide to live together at the end.

II. INTRODUCTION

By comparing Therese in her relationship with Richard to that with Carol, I argue that the love and erotic desires that develops between the two women redirects the hegemony of traditional gender roles. In particular, homosexuality disrupts stereotypes and expectations enforced on women by the society, especially by the male part of it.

III. ANALYSIS

Portrayed mainly from Therese's perspective, the relationship between Richard and Therese is generally awkward and uncomfortable for Therese due to the emotionally subordinating role she plays. The proceeding of their relationship greatly falls under Richard's command, while Therese's feelings are granted much less significance. The introduction of Richard manifests his adeptness in relationships, for "he had once mentioned about five [of his ex-girlfriends]" [1] (p.26); in comparison, Therese is not as experienced or as passionate—she was dropped by her two ex-boyfriends "when they discovered she didn't care for an affair with them" [1] (p.27). Between Richard and Therese, there exists a natural difference in their attitudes about romantic relationships established between men and women: Richard has great passions and confidence, but Therese acts indifferently. Initially Therese tries to have affairs with

Richard but he "prefers to wait" [1] (p.27); he makes a plan for them to go to Europe next summer; he proposes several times to her. While Richard primarily directs and decides where the affair moves forward, Therese does not have the opportunity or willingness to act in this way; instead, she reacts to Richard's actions in a passive way. Then, Therese meets Carol and shows a strong affection to her. The connection between Therese and Carol draws her further from Richard. Sensing the growing independence of Therese's emotions, Richard feels frustrated and insecure about losing control of her. He is often sensitive to her mindlessness during their date, describing her as being "miles away" [1] (p.55)—ironic because when Therese goes on a road trip with Carol it is to be literally miles away. This shows Richard's anxiety towards the fact that she is no longer emotionally dependent on him, and that she possesses moods opaque to him. To confront Therese's emotional and physical escape, Richard makes an effort to regain dominance. In a quarrel he tries hard to persuade Therese that she is only in a "trance" [1] (p.162), and one day Carol will "get tired of her and kick her out" [1] (p.162). By belittling Therese's emotional partner, Richard expresses an eager need to pull Therese back on track, to have their relationship proceed as he expects. The end of their relationship is also decided solely by Richard. He declares in a break-up letter that he "had stopped loving Therese" [1] (p.265). From Therese's perspective, she has never loved Richard, but her protests have little influence on the relationship, which demonstrates that the leading factors of their affair are Richard's feelings and emotions.

The imbalanced position of Richard and Therese is also manifested in their respective occupations. Therese, as a doll seller at Frankenberg's, is dissatisfied with her job. The job is routine, boring, and not well-paid, being described as "pointless actions, meaningless chores that seemed to keep her from doing what she wanted to do" [1] (p.5). "Chores" is a word that often represents domestic labor, typically undertaken by housewives, suggesting that Therese's job resembles gendered housework. Though Therese desires to become a set designer, she is trapped in the current repetitive working style because her designs are not appreciated, meaning that she is left with no choice but to sell dolls. Her peers are all "fifty-year-old faces of women stricken with an everlasting exhaustion and terror" [1] (p.7), suggesting that none of them enjoys the job, but they have to do it continually for decades because no other options are offered. This reflects difficulties women generally face in job markets: both the scope and the social status of jobs they could choose are limited. Compared to Therese, Richard is much freer and more carefree in his job choice. Though his financial status is similar to that of Therese, he does not worry about unemployment, and he constantly changes his

Manuscript received March 9, 2020; revised July 23, 2020.

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field of work. “Richard got on with people, elbowed his way through the world in a way she [Therese] couldn’t” [1] (p.125). This discrepancy is gendered: Richard, as a man, holds a more advantaged position in society, and he has more space and options in considering a career life. Therese, however, needs to strive to maintain her current work. Moreover, dolls are toys that correlate with gender. Among the few children who come up to Therese’s counter, there is “very rarely a little boy” [1] (p.11), implying that the target consumers of dolls are mainly girls. The behavioral pattern of girls playing dolls contains an implied social expectation for young girls to learn maternity: the girls comb their hair, feed them, and sing them to sleep. Female stereotypes as the caregivers are enforced through doll purchases, and are passed on to the next generation unconsciously. Therese’s intense desire to escape from such a job is a demonstration of her inner resistance to traditional female roles.

Another inequality among gender roles can be witnessed through Richard’s constant assumption that Therese lacks the ability to understand sophisticated cultural topics. Aspiring to be a set designer, Therese always has the desire to pursue art, but Richard’s unconscious belittlement of her gives Therese a sense of inferiority regarding arts and literature. When Richard points Therese to a drawing and she is not paying attention, he says “you haven’t enough respect for technique, little girl.” [1] (p.53) Richard accuses her for not having enough “respect” and calls her “little girl”. “Little girls”, as is described in the previous paragraph, often play with dolls—in people’s expectation, they are sweet and innocent, and their only job is to learn how to be a good mother. This way of calling contains a frivolous tone and directly points to Therese’s gender, aiming to show the naivety in Therese’s female characteristics and placing her on a lower position in terms of appreciation of art. Perceiving such information, Therese’s opinions are gradually assimilated, and she starts to feel “a bit inferior when Richard talks with her about books” [1] (p.34). Richard’s influence on Therese is obvious, giving her a sense of insecurity and self-depreciation. His contempt could be explained in a gender context, with a conventional concept that men possess greater artistic sensibilities. Sherry B. Ortner discusses this context in her essay, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?”, which argues that women are viewed as closer to nature because of their physiology and traditional social roles, while men are “being seen as more unequivocally occupying the high ground of culture” [2]. Women’s bodies and biological functions demonstrate a direct connection to pregnancy and reproduction, leaving them little space to serve the society in other senses, including the pursuit of science, literature, or art, which requires complex mental work and could be concluded as the “cultural” aspect of human society. The recognition of men’s closer connection to culture creates a gender-based stratification in fields of art and literature. Though without realizing it, Therese feels pressured and uncomfortable about such biased assumptions, and her attitude is shown through her response to Richard: “a mocking frown” [1] (p.53).

Gender norms derive from women’s function of pregnancy and caregiving: they have to be softer, weaker, and more passive, in order to support the working husband

and to raise the children. Heterosexuality, then, is the driver of such gender roles. When Therese tentatively asks Richard whether he thinks homosexual desires could “happen to almost anyone,” Richard denies it by saying that those things “do not just happen,” and that “there’s always some reason for it in the background” [1] (p.100). This indicates that, for Richard, homosexuality stands on the opposite side of normal and natural heterosexual relationships. It is perceived to happen only when people’s natural desires to engage with those of their different gender is damaged for some reason. Adrienne Rich’s essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality”, argues that, through the manifestation and maintenance of male power, women have been convinced that “marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives” [3]. Women, from a young age, begin to receive such kinds of messages that heterosexuality is the only choice when considering an intimate relationship. This situation of forced heterosexuality creates imbalanced male-female power and gender roles. In Ortner’s essay, “humanity transcends the givens of natural existence...controls them in its interest” [2]. Because it is discussed in the previous paragraph that female to male is as nature to culture, this transcendence and control is demonstrated in sexual interactions between men and women. In erotic relationships, women are often perceived as the “sexual prey” of men. Her effort to act actively in a sexual relationship is denied and eliminated, because men are always the subject and the conqueror. So what the society generally accepts is a romantic relationship between the passive female and the active male. Therese has also expressed frustration towards the prevailing heterosexuality, saying that “It was so easy for a man and woman to find each other, to find someone who would do” [1] (163). She takes much time to be fully aware of her love for Carol, while struggling to fall in love with Richard. Finally she escapes from Richard, in a realization that her inferior position is caused by the heterosexual relationship with him. Given that normative gender opinions are created by normative heterosexuality, possible solutions to redirect binary gender impressions could be explored in the field of sexuality.

In the *Price of Salt*, new gender roles are created with homosexuality. Therese gets a glimpse of a different kind of gender performance in a lesbian relationship she witnesses at the bar; there are two girls “in slacks,” “one had hair cut like a boy’s” [1] (p.153). They are wearing slacks, which traditionally belong to male’s clothing, and one’s haircut is like “boy’s,” all suggesting that they are violating gender norms through male’s style of dressing. Judith Butler has examined dragging as a manifestation of parody, revealing the performativity of gender. Women in drag are “‘bad’ performers” of gender, and are thus being seen as “unnatural” [4]. Therese avoids “being seen looking at them” [1] (p.153), because it is a rarity for women to dress up like men, and Therese is afraid of exhibiting abnormality, but she realizes that, in a homosexual relationship, women could escape gender norms and adopt traits that are traditionally owned by men. Esther Newton’s essay about mannish lesbians argues that cross-dressing “stands for the New Women’s rebellion against the male order and, at the

same time, for the lesbian's desperate struggle to be and express her true self" [5]. As women's sexuality is denied and controlled by the male world, engaging in homosexual relationships, especially performing the butch role, "endows female with active lust" [5]. It declares women's "access to the broader world of male opportunity" [5] and female autonomy to their sexual feelings. Judith Halberstam also discusses about butch roles in her "Female Masculinity," using "female masculinity to explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity" [6]. As it is shown in *The Price of Salt*, Therese starts to perform a more active role in the homosexual relationship.

During the romantic relationship with Carol, Therese performs a different gender role in terms of working opportunities, emotional availability, and sexual desires. Therese quits being a doll seller when she is with Carol, as dolls are the gendered symbol for female, and she starts to fully engage in set design. At first Therese does not make much progress. Her first real job is recommended by Richard, her work is then rejected by the male producer Kettering, and Richard's friend, Phil's play may never be produced because of his capricious mind. Therese's job opportunities are still seized and held back by male workers in her field. However, after meeting Carol, Therese's works are appreciated by the famous producer Harkev. As a consequence she is sure of a job from him and also has a television assignment. Carol describes her as "coming out all of a sudden." and Therese feels that she "had been born since she left Carol" [1] (p.294). The experience with Carol gives Therese a boost in her fulfillment in work and causes vitality in Therese's career. "Coming out" also means for sexual minorities to confess their identities, so by describing Therese as "coming out", it is implied that she not only gains working opportunities but is also more confident and certain of her sexuality. Besides, Therese is invited to a cocktail party that famous actresses, producers and other artistic workers attend. This marks Therese's entrance into the field—what Netwon calls the "access to the broader world of male opportunity" [5]. After the acquaintance with Carol, Therese is able to explore her passions and become a culture producer. By making achievements in the artistic field independently, she breaks the common perception that female represents nature while male represents culture, as Sherry B. Ortner argues in her essay.

Moreover, compared to the polarized relationship Therese has with Richard, in which Richard controls the development of the relationship, the love between Therese and Carol contains less of a power differential. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Epistemology of the Closet", she discusses about how the construction and development of "sexual orientation" is also related to power relations [7]. In *Price of Salt*, when friendship between the two women starts to develop, Carol plays the dominant role. Carol is a unique woman to Therese, different from the women she usually gets in touch with at Frankenberg's, because she is "solid and strong" [1] (p.62). Therese uses one word to describe Carol, "pride" [1] (p.70), a characteristic that is uncommon among women at the period because, as is argued above, females are taught to be soft and gentle so as to be suitable caregivers. Amazed by the uniqueness of

Carol, "Therese tries to imitate her" [1](p.62), while confirming her affection for Carol. As their relationship proceeds, Therese shows more passion towards Carol. Compared to her repressive emotional status being with Richard, Therese has much more emotional freedom being with Carol. She is aware of her feelings, and she takes full control of them. Therese has been denying any feelings for Richard the whole time, but after only one date with Carol, Therese deems her feelings for Carol "almost like love," and identifies it as "blissful" [1] (p.52). As their relationship proceeds, Therese gains more self-consciousness: when she is invited to Carol's house and Carol asks her questions, she tells her "all that she feared and disliked" [1] (p.66) and all her emotions in the past years. With Carol, Therese is able to explore and face true feelings in her heart that have remained buried previously. Also, Therese starts to see the "distance" between her and Richard [1] (p.110): when Richard accuses of being "in a daze," she says that "I'm wide awake. I never felt more awake" [1] (p.162). In fact, Richard has always wanted them to travel to Europe, and Therese agrees insincerely, but after meeting Carol and hearing about her suggestion about a road travel in America, Therese declines Richard's proposal and decides to take the trip with Carol. The travel with Carol requires more courage and subjectivity, as Therese decides to pay for the trip. It means that Therese does not passively receive decisions from others, but makes the choice independently and actively; she dares to follow her love and take an adventure with Carol. So for Therese, the relationship with Carol vitalizes her romantic feelings and allows her to gain more self-assurance.

Additionally, Therese's sexual experience with Carol is different from the ones she had with Richard. Therese confesses to Carol that she has slept with Richard "two or three times," but her experiences are "unpleasant" with "wretched embarrassment" [1] (p.81). Therese avoids intimacy with Richard; she is not used to holding his arms and repels sexual intercourse with him. Carol encounters the same situation and she gives Therese an explanation, "sex flows more sluggishly in all of us than we care to believe, especially men care to believe" [1] (p.83). She suggests that heterosexual sex mainly serves male interests and desires, but is actually not as satisfying, especially for women. As is argued in the above paragraphs, women are often expected to be the "sexual prey" during intercourse, and they are not encouraged to obtain initiative and consciousness. During the road travel, Therese has intercourse with Carol, during which she is "conscious of Carol and nothing else" [1] (p.200). She enjoys and is totally immersed in the process. She feels like there is "an expanding space in which she took flight suddenly like a long arrow" [1] (p.200). The sex experience with Carol gives her a sense of freedom; it provides her an open "space" where she can take flight like an "arrow," fully exploring her passions and pleasure. "Arrow", seeing from its shape, is a phallic symbol. Being an "arrow" in the intercourse with Carol, Therese is masculinized: she gains more power and strength. Therese's senses and sexual feelings are also greatly activated through the sex with Carol. It is described that "as if their bodies are of some materials which put together inevitably create desire" [1] (p.233). Traditionally homosexual intercourse is

perceived as “embarrassing” and not “right,” but for Therese those are words describing sex with Richard; her experience with Carol is “inevitable,” making it seem more natural than heterosexuality. Because of the increased subjectivity Therese gains during sex with Carol, homosexuality and homosexual sex behavior is normalized for her.

This is not to deny that problems exist in the relationship between Carol and Therese, the most obvious of which is their class difference. Carol is successful in selling furniture, and her husband also belongs to the upper middle class, while Therese is only a sales clerk, living in a rented house with basically no savings. The economic gap between them causes several conflicts. Therese does not want to become dependent on Carol like she would on a man. Carol describes it as “a silly pride about money” [1] (p.137). She buys a handbag for Carol as a present, which exceeds her usual capacities for consumption. Carol wants Therese to take it back, but Therese refuses. When Carol points out that Therese is concerned about the money needed for the road trip, Therese claims that “I don’t care about money” [1] (p.137); when Carol proposes to pay for her and gives her a cheque, she “sticks it under the cloth on the table” [1](p.176). Therese desires to acquire an equal position with Carol, so in order to reduce hegemony in the relationship, they must navigate tensions between them, especially economically. However, the author leaves a happy ending. At the end, Carol and Therese meet again after Carol’s departure, facing the problem whether to continue their relationship or not. Carol makes clear that she is taking an apartment and wishes Therese could come and live with her. The final decision needs to be made by Therese. At the cocktail party, she ponders over the many possibilities of her romantic life: “one was Dannie,” an intelligent and determined man who may promise Therese a bright future; “one was Genevieve Cranell,” an actress of fame and high social status, who brings Therese instant pleasure and excitement; finally, “one was Carol” [1](p.305). Among them Carol may be the least desirable choice, as she cannot give Therese a “normal” heterosexual life, nor can she support Therese in her career as much as Cranell. But Therese chooses Carol, for she fully realizes her love for Carol, and decides to follow her heart. At the end of the book, Therese is the one who acts more. This shows that power differentials between them does not weaken Therese’s subjectivity. There is more possibility for Carol and Therese to work through agency or change inequality in the relationship than there is with a man.

IV. CONCLUSION

Therese exhibits more initiative and autonomy when being with Carol—from career progresses to autonomy to her emotions and desires. Homosexuality breaks imbalanced gender roles, initiating female agency in several social spheres. In turn, *The Price of Salt* explores how lesbianism may free women from performing a suppressed gender role. Female homosexuality has long remained invisible in the

world of what Rich called “compulsory heterosexuality.” Therese has complained about the difficulty for her to meet Carol—for a woman to establish a relationship with another woman. Therefore homosexuals ought to be allowed more opportunities to interact and socialize with each other, forming a community that is of equal normality as the heterosexual community. In our society today, gay bars and pubs could be constructed, and online websites or applications for homosexual dating could be designed and generalized to the public, increasing the possibility for homosexuals to find partners, while passing on a sense of belonging to them. While new gender roles are created by homosexuality, these roles need to be recognized by the public. The society should be aware that women are not tied to domestic life and passive choices; instead, they could also be competent in every field of work and could take control of their own lives.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Siyu Yang wrote the paper.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank my mentor, Michael Dango, for his guidance and advices on the essay.

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