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ENG 482

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“Their eyes met at the same instant”: The Queer Gothic and Triumphant Romance of *The Price of Salt*

Introduction

The Price of Salt by Patricia Highsmith is a seminal 20th century lesbian text famous for its suspenseful tone, slow burn romance, and narrow escape from the entrappings of the literary modes of mid-century lesbian pulp fiction. The novel provides its reader with a case study in the ways our dominant culture and narratives influence us and how we can push back against them, for it rejects the tendency held by much of English literature written prior to the last quarter of the twentieth century to punish the lesbian at the conclusion of her story for her deviance from the social status quo, lest the reader walk away with the impression that queerness has been endorsed rather than condemned. Catharine Stimpson discusses this phenomenon in “Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English,” describing how “as if making an implicit, perhaps unconscious pact with her culture, the lesbian writer who rejects both silence and excessive coding can claim the right to write for the public in exchange for adopting the narrative of damnation” (247). This formulaic “narrative of damnation” that is so often applied to the conclusions of lesbian literature borrows its structure from a perhaps unexpected influence: the Gothic. *The Price of Salt*, first published in 1952, serves as a prime example of this Queer Gothic phenomenon, exhibiting the genre’s role in constructing the damnation narrative in lesbian fiction and experimenting with the fallouts of that narrative’s appearance in queer literature.

Highsmith's first and only explicitly queer novel follows the story of the young and frightened Therese Belivet as she finds herself falling in love with the older, sophisticated, and reliably mysterious Carol Aird, the lesbian storyline characterized by Gothic constructions of setting, the application of the uncanny, associations of violent acts with sexual ones, and the nerve-wracking paranoid chase. The association of Therese and Carol's queer love story with these fatalistic Gothic tropes, themes, and motifs sets the reader up to expect a punishment at the end of the novel with which to counterbalance the women's cultural transgression. This expectation is founded in the fact of the Gothic's tendency to utilize a binary of transgression and retribution, and the subliminal impact that binary has on the reader. In "Queer Gothic," George Haggerty describes how the Gothic seeks to explore in its texts that which is "transgressive, sexually coded, and resistant to dominant ideology," therefore necessitating "resolutions [that] repeatedly insist on order restored and (often) on the reassertion of heteronormative prerogative" (384, 386). Where there is not order or heterosexuality restored, there is in its place some form of self-inflicted, subconscious, or socially enforced punishment; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out in her book *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* that the Gothic engages with characters who "reflect...on how poisoned and poisonous they feel because of their guilt and shame" (10). Mary Shelley's foundational Gothic text *Frankenstein*, for example, is perhaps the most easily recognizable instance of self-enforced punishment as retribution for an atrocity committed, as Dr. Frankenstein condemns himself to the agonizing pursuit of his monster, "wanderings...which are to cease but with life," in the name of revenge both against the creature for his murderous action and against himself for his hubris exhibited in creating life from death (178). Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* too deals with a ruminations on guilt and shame as punishment for transgressing, as Laura is plagued by "the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door" long

after the vampire is killed, a haunting that ostensibly serves as a constant subconscious reminder of the sexual and sensual transgressions she committed in allowing herself to be courted by another woman (139). This structure is utilized so often in the Gothic genre that it enables unconscious associations between a transgression/retribution binary and other Gothic themes and motifs, so that where there is one the reader therefore expects the other. In “‘The Haunting Idea’: Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory,” Diana Wallace comments on our uncanny ability as readers to “recognize even half-submerged associations,” an ability which perhaps reflects the Gothic itself, that which is “half-submerged” being the prime territory of the genre (27).

In understanding the impact of this subtly constructed yet tonally potent Gothic tragic formula on *The Price of Salt* specifically, Stimpson continues to be useful: her designation of an almost identical formula used in the conclusion of lesbian storylines, dubbed “the dying fall, a narrative of damnation, of the lesbian’s suffering as a lonely outcast,” offers a vocabulary for the strong connection between the Gothic and the lesbian novel (244). Stimpson describes Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* as a paradigm of this “dying fall” narrative. In a similar vein, *The Price of Salt* is a paradigm of the intertextual relationship between Gothic and 20th-century queer literature, for the utilization of Gothic conventions to construct the book’s queer narrative make the two inseparable. This relationship sets the reader up for an expectation of Stimpson’s “dying fall,” a formula specifically geared towards the conclusion of a deviancy narrative, deviancy in turn being a prevalent theme in both the Gothic and the lesbian novel.

However, the actual conclusion of *The Price of Salt* is an optimistic one, reflecting Stimpson’s proffered alternative to the “dying fall” – “the enabling escape, a narrative of the reversal of such descending trajectories, of the lesbian’s rebellion against social stigma and self-

contempt” (244). After many trials and tribulations that seem will certainly keep them apart, Carol and Therese are reunited against all odds, the final passage of the book providing a promising sense of a romantic, domestic queer life ahead of them. *The Price of Salt* therefore engages this “enabling escape” narrative for Therese and Carol – even though, as Stimpson notes, “the [dying fall] has been dominant during the twentieth century” – by reuniting the two women under incredibly optimistic circumstances, breaking free of the Gothic conventions, associations, and formulas the novel employs for the majority of its page count (244). By meddling with this formulaic approach, the genre of the novel is also affected, and re-reading Therese and Carol’s story with the context of their optimistic future alters the tone of the entire relationship. In these pages I will argue that *The Price of Salt*’s genre hinges on its conclusion, and through the abandonment of its tragic formula and unraveling of its Gothic construction, the novel’s final scene sheds light on itself, transforming the book from a Gothic tragedy to a romance proper.

In order to explore the impact of this genre-bending, we must first delineate how each foundation of the Gothic genre at play in *The Price of Salt* contributes to the reader’s expectation of a formulaically tragic end. These include the use of Gothic settings and atmospheres, moments of uncanny recognition, the coalescence of death and sex, and what Sedgwick describes as “Gothic paranoid homophobia,” beneath each of which pulse currents of uncanniness, paranoia, and antagonism of both the Other and the Self (*Conventions* xii). To begin, an exploration of the uncanny and a close reading of the catalytic moment of Carol and Therese’s first meeting is necessary in order to illustrate the ways in which the novel’s central relationship is characterized by terror and uncanniness from the beginning, creating an inherently Gothic foundation for their kindling love affair. An analysis of Therese’s tendency to associate death and sex as well as a

close look at the manifestation of the Gothic chase in the novel will then provide further evidence of the stronghold *The Price of Salt*'s Gothic influence has on its queer narrative. Once that Gothic influence and its effect has been thoroughly established, a close reading of the final scene is necessary in order to illuminate the radical shift of formula and genre that occurs therein. Sedgwick's designation of paranoid and reparative readings are of use here and will be employed to help communicate the radical shift in the novel's approach to its queer narrative and the reverberations of that shift. Finally, revisiting the moment of the lover's meeting scene with the context of Therese and Carol's queer happy ending serves to prove with finality how *The Price of Salt*'s conclusion impacts not only the events and development of romance that occur after the final pages of the book, but also all that came before.

The Uncanny: It Takes One to Know One

Though the Gothic is a genre of often indefinable pluralities, there is a generally agreed upon set of aesthetic, thematic, and structural elements by which it is characterized. Sedgwick deftly lays them out for her reader in *Conventions*:

You know the important features of its mise-en-scene: an oppressive ruin, a wild landscape, a Catholic or feudal society. You know about the trembling sensibility of the heroine and the impetuosity of her lover. You know about the tyrannical older man with the piercing glance who is going to imprison and try to rape or murder them...You also know that, whether with more or less relevance to the main plot, certain characteristic preoccupations will be aired. These include priesthood and monastic institutions; sleeplike and deathlike states; subterranean spaces and live burial; doubles; the discovery of obscure family ties; affinities between narrative and pictorial art; possibilities of incest; unnatural echoes or silences, unintelligible writings, and the unspeakable; garrulous retainers; the poisonous effects of guilt and shame; nocturnal landscapes and dreams; apparitions from the past (9-10).

Gothic novels, in their most recognizable form, contain some or all of these conventions, and though my analysis here will not explore every single one of their appearances in *The Price of*

Salt in depth, it is worth at least briefly noting where in the novel they are reflected: Therese regards her department store job at the beginning of the novel as a kind of “oppressive ruin;” the “wild landscape” is evoked in her and Carol’s cross-country journey throughout the middle of the novel; invocations of Catholicism and “monastic institutions” are provided when it is revealed that Therese was raised in the homosocial environment of a Catholic boarding school for girls; our heroine is certainly “trembling,” and her lover, Carol, is certainly “impetuous;” the antagonistic “tyrannical older man” seeking to figuratively “imprison” them is represented in Carol’s husband, Harge; “affinities between narrative and pictorial art” and “apparitions from the past” occur with Therese’s terrifying recognition of a portrait from her childhood that looks just like Carol; “possibilities of incest” are reflected in Therese and Carol’s tendency to assume the positions of mother and daughter; Therese comes across a plurality of “doubles” onto whom she projects her turmoil of emotions; both “the unspeakable” and “the poisonous effects of guilt and shame” are evoked by the novel’s lurid exploration of the queer.

The primary purpose of all these Gothic conventions is their keen ability to help us explore of what Sedgwick refers to as a “spatial metaphor of depth...taking that metaphor to represent a model of the human self” (*Conventions* 11). In other words, the Gothic utilizes the external and metaphorical landscapes of its texts in order to attempt to understand the internal emotional and psychological landscape of one, typically deeply troubled, central character. The mutual recognition that occurs here between Gothic conventions and the Gothic protagonist is built upon a foundation of uncanniness, which is to say, as I will explore further, the ability to recognize something coupled with the inability to articulate how or why you recognize it.

In his chapter in *The Routledge Companion to the Gothic*, David Punter points out how the uncanny “relates directly to the Gothic and its insistence on forms of knowledge which run

counter to everyday expectations” (131-2). The uncanny, he argues, is itself uncannily similar to the Gothic in that it explores “such experience [which] continually overflows the bounds of reason,” making it not just a suitable vessel for communicating those unspeakable themes the Gothic endeavors to explore, but perhaps the *only* suitable vessel. Defined by Sigmund Freud in his essay “The Uncanny” as “that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar,” uncanniness has a multitude of manifestations both in life and in literature (1). Each of these manifestations does share, however, a foundation in acts of recognition that resonate for the subject as horrifying – moments of such intense unsettlement that there exists no other accurate vocabulary other than “uncanny.”

In order to establish the novel’s Gothic atmosphere, *The Price of Salt* utilizes a sense of the uncanny to communicate the tense and off-putting feeling that plagues Therese within Frankenberg’s department store, where she works. She describes this feeling as “the sense that everyone was incommunicado with everyone else and living on an entirely wrong plane, so that the meaning, the message, the love, or whatever it was that each life contained, never could find its expression...words seemed to hover over dead, unstirring things” (2-3). This description reflects Sedgwick’s designation of the “oppressive ruin” of the Gothic novel, and the idea of living on “an entirely wrong plane” evokes an unsettling presentiment of paranoia – a feeling of uncanniness – that has to do with existing in a place that feels familiar but simultaneously incorrect or defiled in some way (9). With all this in mind, one can see how the novel is here constructing Therese’s existence within the structure of Frankenberg’s, and by extension within the structure of her whole life, with a kind of uncanny, oppressive purgatory that makes her “anxious” (3). In doing so these opening passages are setting the potent Gothic tone of the novel. This tone in turn sets the reader up to expect a narrative structure reflecting the Gothic’s

tendency to dive deep into the world of the Self and explore the transgressions that await there – a process that begins almost immediately.

In her article “Uncanny Recognition: Queer Theory’s Debt to the Gothic,” Mair Rigby defines the Gothic phenomenon of uncanny recognition through the queer lens as “moments of strange recognition that...often convey an impression of uncanny queer awareness underscored by a suggestively erotic enthrallment to a dangerous supernatural figure who threatens to bring out something the protagonist (and the reader) suspects ought to remain repressed” (51). Rigby deftly provides evidence of a strong connection between these intuitive acts of recognition in the Gothic and the experience of queer recognition, arguing that both are situated firmly in the experience of the uncanny. One of the central definitions of the phenomenon offered by Freud, the same definition upon which Rigby draws, is that which describes the experience of uncovering “something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light” (13). The psychoanalyst elaborates on this description by explaining how the elusive “something” that is hidden and then unhidden typically comes as an unwelcome surprise because it “has been estranged by the process of repression” (13). Here, Freud is making the distinction that a specific kind of uncanny situation or realization occurs when one is reminded of something which has been consciously, even purposefully, forgotten but has unconsciously remained. This dynamic operates as an explanation for moments of unsettling intuition or premonition, such as the experience of meeting someone for the first time but feeling as though you have met them before, or, perhaps, the inarticulate recognition associated with discovering queerness.

All of these nuances of the uncanny are at play in the first meeting between Carol and Therese in *The Price of Salt*:

Their eyes met at the same instant, Therese glancing up from a box she was opening, and the woman just turning her head so she looked directly at Therese. She was tall and fair, her long figure graceful in the loose fur coat that she held open with a hand on her waist. Her eyes were gray, colorless, yet dominant as light or fire, and caught by them, Therese could not look away. She heard the customer in front of her repeat a question, and Therese stood there, mute. The woman was looking at Therese, too, with a preoccupied expression as if half her mind were on whatever it was she meant to buy here, and though there were a number of salesgirls between them, Therese felt sure the woman would come to her. Then Therese saw her walk slowly toward the counter, heard her heart stumble to catch up with the moment it had let pass, and felt her face grow hot as the woman came nearer and nearer (27).

There are multiple details of this meeting which lend it to being a situation of Gothic uncanny recognition. The statement that “Therese could not look away,” and the specification of the young girl being “caught” by Carol’s “dominant” eyes invokes the Gothic tropes of victimization and dynamics of submission, both sexual and social. The fact that “Therese felt sure the woman would come to her” and a moment later “she saw [Carol] walk slowly toward the counter” evokes Punter’s designation that the experience of “‘premonition’ and the fulfilment of that premonition” is an inherently uncanny experience (135). But perhaps most strikingly, the fact that “their eyes met at the same instant” indicates the uncanny. Freud writes that “what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar...something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar to make it uncanny” (2). In this case, Carol is unfamiliar to Therese and vice versa because they are strangers, but when the dimensions of their perfect synchronicity and their immediate queer understanding are added, it becomes uncanny. The opening line of this passage in which our lovers meet exposes a strong, pervasive sense of intuition flowing between them, ostensibly for no reason at all. Such a situation seems to walk the line between the known and the unknown, seems to say *if I do not know you, why does it seem like I do? Or if I do know you, why am I unable to recognize you on a conscious level?*

The queer context of the novel is especially illuminating here insofar as what Rigby refers to as “an uncanny queer awareness” (51). The question *if I do not know you, why does it feel like I do?* is answered by queer context with the simple statement *because you’re like me* – though it should be noted that the question of exactly *how* this is known remains inarticulate. *If I do know you, why am I unable to recognize you on a conscious level?* is answered by the fact of cultural designations of homosexuality as something deviant to be ostracized and, as Freud puts it, “estranged by the process of repression” (13). With these questions and their answers in mind, one can see how the culturally enforced consequences of queerness doom the “queer awareness” of the Self and the Other to the language of the unspeakable – a realm of subtext, nonverbal cues, tropes, motifs, and metaphors that, as Sedgwick points out by including “the unspeakable” in her list of conventions, we see so commonly in the Gothic as a method of exploring acts and ideas that are condemned by ruling cultural systems (10).

What is so relevant about Therese and Carol’s catalytic meeting in *The Price of Salt* is how the dynamics of synchronicity, submission, premonition, and the permeating sense of the uncanny are all rooted in this Gothic theme of the unspeakable due to the fact of queerness being a culturally transgressive subject. The feeling that arises in Therese the moment she and Carol lock eyes for the first time is inarticulate and frightening not only because Therese does not have access to a vocabulary for this recognition of queerness both in Carol and in herself, but also because Carol somehow understands this unspeakable ‘something’ despite the absence of articulation. This is an ability which, in the eyes of the system that seeks to oppress them, should not exist, but its extent is seen in the way Carol and Therese are physically synchronized, can predict one another’s movements, and are able to acknowledge each other as homosexual without ever needing to speak the word – the uncanny is the language of the unspeakable in

practice. To engage in even a silent conversation regarding that which has been condemned by the ruling structure as taboo, however, is a dangerous act, and doing so instills in Therese and the reader a fear of her newfound transgression being discovered and subsequently punished, as the Gothic formula and our own socialization trains us to expect. Therese stands mute, her heart stops, her face is hot; she can “neither quite face nor look away from” Carol because she is simultaneously enthralled and terrified (27).

Furthermore, to return to Rigby’s designation of a “dangerous supernatural figure threatening to bring something out” in the protagonist, though Carol is not a supernatural creature in a literal sense, she does operate as one in this moment of uncanny recognition (51). In this sense, a comparison of Therese and Carol’s first meeting with that of Laura and Carmilla from Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s 1871 vampire novella *Carmilla* is helpful:

What was it that, as I reached her bedside and began my greeting, struck me dumb in a moment and made me recoil from her? I will tell you: I saw the very face which had visited me in my childhood at night, which remained so fixed in my memory, and on which I had for so many years so often ruminated with horror. It was pretty, even beautiful, and wore the same melancholy expression as when I first beheld it. Her countenance kindled into a strange, fixed smile of recognition (28).

Here, Laura’s recognition of the beautiful Carmilla from a dream she had in childhood evokes that aspect of the uncanny which deals with knowing something one should not be able to know, or experiencing a kind of premonition that stems from intuition or visions, such as in dreams. Not only does this initial moment of “the first unexpected recognition” in *Carmilla* echo that which Therese and Carol experience, but so does the ensuing relationship as described by Laura through the fact that she “felt rather unaccountably towards the beautiful stranger. I did feel, as she said, ‘drawn towards her,’ but there was also something of repulsion” (31, 30). Though the queer under- and overtones of *Carmilla* are evident, Laura’s confounding feelings towards her

companion are eventually explained away by the fact of Carmilla's vampirism – Wallace explains that “we often turn to metaphor as a figure of comparison when something is ‘unspeakable’ (itself a key Gothic trope) or cannot be articulated in any other way” (27). Queerness certainly falls under this umbrella of that which is unspeakable and inarticulate, that which requires dilution or translation through metaphor due to our cultural circumstance – even the fact of the word *queer* being now synonymous with homosexuality is evidence of this. In *The Price of Salt*, Therese's sense of her relationship with Carol being a “morass of love and hate and resentment,” much like Laura's simultaneous attraction and aversion regarding Carmilla, has to do with not literal vampirism, but with the explicit lesbianism of the novel for which *Carmilla* seems to be using vampirism as a metaphor (228). All this is to say that the fact of Carol occupying this “dangerous” and “supernatural” archetypal role has nothing to do with Carol herself, but rather with the awakening of desire she causes in Therese, a desire which is culturally designated as non-normative and therefore must remain repressed and unspoken in order to appease the homophobic heteropatriarchy.

However, in the same way that Punter describes the uncanny as having the unsettling quality of “continu[ing] to surge upwards and threaten our everyday lives,” queerness also refuses to disappear, even when it is repressed (131). This is why Rigby designates “queerness as uncanny, as something familiar but frightening, something that always returns” (51, emphasis mine). Therese understands queer recognition as dangerous, and yet her lesbianism refuses to be re-hidden after its uncovering. This tension creates a dynamic in which, though the cultural systems that designate the queer *queer* are the truest threat, what the homosexual person is trained to be afraid of is not the ruling system, but the Self. We see this clearly in the designation of the vampire as a metaphor for queerness, a monster that must be defeated. In *The Price of*

Salt, Therese reflects on this feeling after the initial discovery of her affair with Carol has been made, and “suddenly what she and Carol had together seemed no longer love or anything happy but a monster between them, with each of them caught in a fist” (199).

In the moment of Therese and Carol’s meeting, the queer application of uncanny recognition illustrates for the reader the effects of Therese discovering something she does not want to know intellectually, but already knows intuitively. Her understanding that this ‘something’ should be repressed – an understanding that is a product of her socialization under the homophobic heteropatriarchy – does not prevent it from surging upwards, for as Rigby reminds us, the uncanny nature of queerness is that it “always returns” (51). This passage, like that which depicts the first waking meeting between Carmilla and Laura, reflects the Gothic tendency, as described by Punter, to use the uncanny as a way of “suggesting another realm which we have perhaps only experienced in dream, in haunting, in our sense of something archaic, something which indeed lies within our psyche but at a level so deep that we know it only phantasmally” (131). Laura’s startling recognition of Carmilla is rooted in her experience of the vampire “in dreams, in haunting.” For Therese, her “sense of something archaic” that has buried itself deep “within [her] psyche” is her homosexuality itself – queerness is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, so that when it emerges it is recognized, but the fact of that recognition is itself frightening. The palpable tension between Therese, Carol, and both the queer and the homophobic understandings that each of them hold engages with the uncanny and employs the language of the unspeakable, therefore immediately associating their relationship with a sense of transgression being committed. Both the internalized and externalized homophobic forces acting upon Therese and Carol impact their relationship from the beginning, establishing a foundation of paranoia as the launch point of their love affair. The inescapable dangers of being a lesbian

recognizing queerness in both the Other and the Self establishes for Therese and Carol not just a socially-facing relationship colored with negative associations of secrecy, stifled desire, and fear of prosecution, but also a defiled intuitive relationship; the paranoia associated with the potential discovery of their transgression permeates for the reader and the characters into the women's sense of synchronicity and premonitions about the other, and so their uncanny, almost psychic connection is not celebrated by the structure of the novel, but rather constructed as a warning of approaching danger.

Excessive Passions: Death and Sex

As the relationship between Therese and Carol develops, the Gothicism that colors Therese's queer desire continues to show its face more and more clearly. One common Gothic theme the text continually turns to in order to convey the sheer depth of Therese's desire is that of invocations and glorifications of death, as well as the equation of fatalistic passions with sexual ones. Upon Therese's first ride in Carol's car, for example, the narration describes how "they roared into the Lincoln tunnel" and "a wild, inexplicable excitement mounted in Therese as she stared through the windshield. She wished the tunnel might cave in and kill them both, that their bodies might be dragged out together" (47). The specification of Therese's "wild, inexplicable excitement" as she "felt Carol glancing at her from time to time" pulsates with the sexual tension that is typical of a romance (47). However, the feeling budding within Therese quickly moves from a normative display of attraction into a depiction of Gothic eroticism when her reflections on her excitement at her physical proximity to and movement through space alongside Carol is equated with her longing for herself and her soon-to-be lover to be killed by a collapsing Lincoln Tunnel (47). The spatial location of a tunnel and the invocation of its collapse also reflect Sedgwick's designation of the Gothic motif of "subterranean spaces and live burial,"

further displaying the inherent Gothic nature of this expression of sexuality on Therese's part (*Conventions* 10).

The scene is reminiscent of what Haggerty describes as the “extreme and excessive desire” and “violent sexuality” of the Gothic novel (395). Therese's desire for Carol bubbles over into violence not only because of its sheer quantity, but also because of the necessity of repressing queer attraction as mandated by the heteropatriarchal, homophobic world in which she lives. As Punter reminds us, what is repressed only “continues to surge upwards” (131). In the settings that characterize the Gothic, described by Rigby as “textual worlds of excess and danger,” this uncontrollable upsurge of transgressive sexual desire – whether the transgression manifests as queer or as monstrous or incestuous, as is common in the traditional Gothic – is repressed, and what emerges in its place is violence (47). The emotional, psychological, and bodily manifestation of this intersection subsequently appears in these novels through the act of sex, or violent death, or both, and the conflation of the two creates either a vehicle of catharsis when the act of desire is executed or a source of further pent-up aggression when it continues to be repressed.

This trope as it appears in *The Price of Salt* is further solidified during Therese's first visit to Carol's home. Once inside, sitting on Carol's bed, Therese “looked up at [Carol], unable to bear her eyes now but bearing them nevertheless, not caring if she died that instant, if Carol strangled her, prostrate and vulnerable in her bed” (51). Here, even more explicitly than in the exhibition of Therese's violent desire in the Lincoln Tunnel, the text draws a connection between death and sexual encounter. Therese's desire not only to meet death “in [Carol's] bed,” but also to be killed by her companion through strangulation exhibits the intensity of her erotic submission and the depth of her conflation between her queer desire and death itself.

With such a strong evocation of this Gothic motif, *The Price of Salt* displays Therese's relationship to her own lesbianism at this moment in the novel, and through that display the probability of a tragic end to the queer storyline is communicated to the reader. The sheer intensity of Therese's correlation between same-sex desire and death shows that the only possible ending she can envision for herself and Carol if she were to act upon her urges is one in which she or both of them die, ideally together; or, alternately, Therese's infatuation with the connection between sex and death displays how she would rather die knowing that she were with Carol, the object and therefore representation of her transgressive lust, than continue living the purgatorial life she was entrapped in before meeting her. Either way, there is no happy ending – at least one that involves remaining alive, for the idea of dying is equated with a sort of twisted happiness that appears to be majorly reliant on relief – that Therese can possibly see as an outcome of this queer relationship. Therese's operation within what Stimpson refers to as the “Western cultural tradition that links sex and death” reflects how the constructed morals of the dominant culture, such as the characterization of non-normative expressions of sexuality as sins that necessitate gruesome punishment, affects her relationship with the culturally transgressive aspects of her own identity (251). Because Therese is the scope through which the reader is viewing the novel, we are inclined to occupy her same nihilistic position.

The Paranoid Reading

As depicted by the novel's employment of the uncanny and even more explicitly by Therese's conflation of death and sex, the narrative's continual construction of Therese's queer journey through the use of the Gothic establishes the expectation of Stimpson's “dying fall” and engenders the assumption of a tragic conclusion as retribution for the lesbian's “punishable deviancy” (248). This occurs partially because the reader is asked to expect a violent conclusion

where Therese expects it for herself. The construction of this expectation is furthered as Carol and Therese attempt to leave behind their lives in New York City in favor of a road trip across America, a strong manifestation of Sedgwick's "wild" Gothic landscape (*Conventions* 10). Their restlessness to get away operates in relationship with Therese's desire to escape the oppressive landscape of her life in New York, including the expectation of a heterosexual relationship with her former boyfriend, Richard. For Carol, the weight of her divorce proceedings and her tedious custody negotiations with her husband Harge over their daughter Rindy are poised as factors that drive her away from the city. The women's developing romance is here seemingly tied up in a sense of escape, a feeling that "they were running away from something," and the act of their cross-country migration is therefore associated with attempting to outrun some kind of inevitable, inarticulate, constantly-approaching threat (177).

In this section of the novel in which Carol and Therese are on the road, the incredible scale of the West reveals itself before them in the Gothic motif of what Haggerty points out as a Radcliffean "evocation of female anxiety" through the "gloomy and sublime" landscape (389). The novel's narration describes how "the West unfolded like a magic carpet, dotted with the neat, tight units of farmhouse, barn, and silo that they could see for half an hour before they came abreast of them," the sheer magnitude of the emptiness its own kind of terrifying grandeur (172). This geographic Gothicism is solidified in the fact that Therese's constant anxiety, with which the reader is at this point well acquainted, does not leave her upon the change of scenery; Therese "felt there were thousands of words choking her throat, and perhaps only distance, thousands of miles, could straighten them out," but simultaneously acknowledges that "it was freedom itself that choked her" (149). In evoking the physical Gothic landscape in such strong association with Therese's emotional and psychological landscape, *The Price of Salt* is here

leaning in to Haggerty's "gloomy and sublime" geographies of the Gothic that reflect a plurality of the protagonist's anxieties, as well as in Sedgwick's designation of the Gothic "spatial metaphor" that translates the depth of landscapes as the internal depth of the Self (*Conventions* 11). Therese consistently projects her mind and emotions onto the physical world, as seen in her projection of her desires for figurative escape onto the literal movement across the American West. She ponders that perhaps "only distance" can remedy her anxiety while also citing distance, space, and "freedom" as her anxiety's source, displaying clearly the paradoxical nature of a queer woman attempting to carve out space for herself in a heteropatriarchal world.

The gloomy Western landscape that characterizes Therese and Carol's journey is further understood as a Gothic manifestation of terror, anxiety, and paranoia because of its participation in what Sedgwick refers to as the "tableau that is seen as embodying primal human essence or originary truth: the tableau of two men chasing one another across a landscape" (*Conventions* ix). This tableau, described by Sedgwick as being simultaneously homophobic and homoerotic, was made famous and canonized within Gothic literature by *Frankenstein* and his monster, and its manifestation appears in *The Price of Salt* in Carol and Therese – as a queer entity – being chased across the broad, empty countryside of America by a detective sent by Harge to obtain evidence of Carol's lesbianism. As Therese and Carol come to realize they are being chased, Therese describes the situation as "odd and rather terrifying" (178). She is constantly watching out the window for their pursuer, the act of running from the mysterious man harboring an "uncertainty that was somehow more horrible" than the act of confronting him outright (187). These symptoms reflect how the Gothic chase, as modeled by *Frankenstein*, serves as a breeding ground for paranoia, which serves as an outlet of fear before suspicion is proven or disproven. In her book *Touching, Feeling* Sedgwick elaborates that the paranoid "is closely tied to a notion of

the inevitable” (147). Therese and Carol, rightfully so, believe “the whole world was ready to be their enemy,” and in this belief the tension of the inevitable – specifically the inevitability of being discovered, punished, and separated – is constant (199).

Sedgwick also proposes in *Touching, Feeling* a distinction between a “paranoid reading” and a “reparative reading,” describing the paranoid position as a common approach to the queer text (123). Invocations of Gothic settings, the uncanny, violent passions, and adversarial chases across terrifying physical and emotional landscapes situate our protagonist, Therese, in Sedgwick’s “paranoid position – understandably marked by hatred, envy, and anxiety;” this is a position “of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around one” (*Feeling* 128). *The Price of Salt*’s use of the Gothic, and thus the paranoid structures here described by Sedgwick that are implicit in the genre, ensures that the audience’s reading of *The Price of Salt* is a paranoid one, which is not so much a choice on the part of the reader but rather is necessitated by the text’s approach to itself. Because Therese, as the vessel through which the narration is conveyed, occupies the paranoid position, the reader can only be expected to take that position as well. Therefore, we are very well prepared by the text to witness a “dying fall,” expecting tragedy at every turn just as Therese does, for as Sedgwick points out, “paranoia tends to be contagious” (*Feeling* 126).

Furthermore, the anxiety Therese experiences at the offset of and throughout her cross-country journey with Carol can be read as the product of what Sedgwick describes as “the absolute omnipresence of this homophobic, paranoid tableau, *in the absence of* a widely-available sense of possible homosexual role or culture, and *in the absence of* any felt specificity of...homosexual desire in the culture at large” (*Conventions* x, emphasis original). While the

detective functions as the other half of Sedgwick's omnipresent "homophobic, paranoid tableau," also terrifying to Therese is the empty space surrounding her, the "*absence of* a widely-available sense of possible homosexual role or culture." In this sense, the queer Self also operates for Therese as an apparitional antagonist. She cannot imagine how herself and Carol fit into the world in their new roles as same-sex companions with a mutual queer desire, but that queer desire continues to pursue her. According to the dominant culture queerness requires repression, but she has chosen to act upon it by running away with Carol, actively engaging with her transgressive sexuality and therefore opening herself and her lesbianism up to condemnation, including condemnation simultaneously by and of herself.

Therese conflates this inarticulate anxiety with the very specified anxiety borne of being pursued by the detective. As she watches the road for "the detective's car," she also keeps an eye out for "the nameless, shapeless thing she felt pursuing them" and notes that there is "a tremendous sorrow hanging over them, ahead of them, that was just beginning to reveal the edge of itself, that they were driving into" (192, 199). Therese is afraid of something unspeakable and apparitional that she associates with but is not embodied in the detective; she remains afraid and inarticulate even after the immediate threat of the man chasing them has subsided. Her fear of the detective's pursuit translates easily into a fear of her own lesbianism – the queer Self constantly both the pursued and the pursuer – when the immediate threat of the detective retreats. This reflects the Gothic tendency of both the protagonist and the narrative itself to occupy the paranoid position, a position which necessitates being prepared at all costs. Sedgwick writes that from the paranoid stance, "no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader" – or, in my reading, to the protagonist – "as *new*" (*Feeling* 146, emphasis original). Therese must, at all times, harbor fear – a necessity that does not bode well for the conclusion of

her and Carol's love story. Dr. Frankenstein provides an apt summation of this paranoid Gothic phenomenon when he refers to the "irresistible, disastrous future" (Shelley 163). The future is already understood as being inevitably "disastrous," so being prepared for that disaster is, from the paranoid position, "irresistible."

Therese's masterclass in paranoia that occurs throughout *The Price of Salt's* Gothic chase precipitates a series of emotionally complex events that quickly begin to unfold. After Carol retreats to New York to engage in the custody battle over Rindy, in which Harge has gained traction with the condemning proof of his wife's lesbianism through the work of the detective, Therese is left alone out West to ruminate on her affair with Carol for several weeks. At the end of this interstitial period, Therese regards herself and is regarded by her friend Dannie as looking "grown up all of a sudden," and she comes to feel as though Carol has committed a "betrayal" against her (231, 224). The reader is here led to expect that the lesbian has seen the error of her ways and will renounce and repent; as depicted in *Carmilla*, transgressing to the world of the monstrous or the queer (or both) is permissible so long as the young heroine learns her lesson. Carol's order that the two lovers cannot have any contact with each other, however, is violated when she asks to see Therese upon the younger woman's return to the city. In their scene of tense reunification, the reader comes to understand that Carol has lost custody of Rindy, and over dinner Carol proposes that her and Therese live together. This proposition suddenly and somewhat shockingly offers to both Therese and the reader the creation of a new domestic sphere not defined by heteronormativity, one that could potentially serve as a queer refuge from the trials and tribulations the couple has faced thus far. In keeping with the novel's Gothic formula, Therese rejects this proposal, and in this moment the reader is more confident than ever in how the book will end: a final estrangement of the two women and a reflection from Therese

on what she has learned from their torrid love affair, on how guilty or ruined she feels, on how she has matured into either a respectable – which is to say heterosexual – member of society, or, as Stimpson designates, a “suffering” and “lonely” lesbian (244). This expectation is a product of the paranoid position with which we are approaching the text, that approach in turn a product of how the text has presented itself through its Gothic structure.

However, *The Price of Salt* here leads us astray. A major shift occurs upon the introduction of a relatively minute character, Genevieve Cranell, an actress Therese meets at a cocktail party mere hours after her rejection of Carol. Upon her entrance, Genevieve “glanced around the room, and Therese saw the glance linger on her for an instant, while in Therese there took place a shock a little like that she had known when she had seen Carol for the first time” (Highsmith 245). This brief “shock” signifies the introduction of a new potential romantic interest for Therese, and in that introduction the novel cracks wide open multiple possibilities for various endings, and the reader is, perhaps for the first time, unsure in this moment of which direction it will lead – the paranoid structure the novel has established through its utilization of the Gothic is beginning to unravel.

The Reparative Reading

As I have argued, in the Gothic tradition the conclusion of the novel is typically wrapped up neatly in either the defeat of the monster, a heterosexual marriage, or some marker of a return to normalcy, along with a reflection on the horrible ‘thing’ that occurred to the protagonist. These neat and tidy endings appear almost in retribution for the discussion of such transgressive, erotic, and often grotesque matters that are typical to the genre; Haggerty reminds us that “Gothic resolutions repeatedly insist on order restored and (often) on the reassertion of heteronormative prerogative” (386). However, to continue evoking Sedgwick, it is helpful to

pose the thought that if “a paranoid reading practice is closely tied to a notion of the inevitable” – as is displayed for us in the Gothic tragic formula’s transgression/retribution binary and Stimpson’s “dying fall,” both of which engage with the inevitability of punishment and suffering – then “there are other features of queer reading that can attune it exquisitely to a heartbeat of contingency” (*Feeling* 147). *The Price of Salt* offers this alternate and more optimistic queer reading, designated by Stimpson as the “enabling escape” and by Sedgwick as the “reparative reading,” upon its unexpected and sanguine conclusion. The end of the novel is a practice in contingency in and of itself, for when Therese stands at the crossroads of indecision and unclear futures, where “her consciousness had stopped in a tangle where a dozen threads crossed and knotted,” then the reader too is paralyzed and must quickly adapt to the reparative approach that is so suddenly taking shape (247).

For Therese, of the “threads” of her consciousness that emerge in these final moments, “one was Dannie. One was Carol. One was Genevieve Cranell. One went on and on and out of it, but her mind was caught at the intersection” (247). With the mention of his name, it becomes possible that *The Price of Salt* will end in a neat heterosexual pairing between Therese and her friend Dannie, the story of Carol and Therese’s romance therefore demeaned to a vessel for the younger woman’s maturation. Therese “felt herself fall a little deeper into the network, and she clutched at Dannie,” conveying how she longs for the easy and conventional way out of her predicament, an acknowledgement by the text of how it could – and perhaps in the eyes of the dominant culture, how it is supposed – to end (247). However, the novel dispels the possibility of Dannie almost immediately, as “the strong black thread” representing a future with Therese’s final possible heterosexual love interest “did not lead anywhere. She knew as if some prognostic voice were speaking now that she would not go further with Dannie” (247).

With the dismissal of Dannie, the conflict that has now been established as a decision Therese must make between Genevieve and Carol becomes seemingly obvious to her. While Genevieve in her newness evokes excitement in Therese, she nonetheless “knew suddenly that Genevieve Cranell would never mean anything to her, nothing apart from this half hour at the cocktail party, that the excitement she felt now would not continue” (246-247). In this moment of back-to-back uncanny intuitive realization on the part of Therese, the book is exhibiting what Stimpson describes as “the lesbian’s rebellion against social stigma and self-contempt,” an integral aspect of the “enabling escape” (244). “Social stigma” is rejected with the dismissal of Dannie and the urge to retreat into a heterosexual relationship; queerness is prioritized and deemed valuable by Therese in the making of that decision, and she is therefore rejecting culturally enforced and internalized standards of heteronormativity. “Self-contempt” is subsequently pushed back against with the dismissal of Genevieve Cranell. Not only does Therese acknowledge that she would not be happy with this woman, but she also prioritizes that happiness; she is refusing to accept the contempt of flirtation and surface-level connection and therefore be condemned to what Stimpson calls the “descending trajectories” that seem to be all that await the lesbian who refuses to renounce her lesbianism. Finally, with Therese’s realization that “it was Carol she loved and would always love...it would be Carol, in a thousand cities, a thousand houses, in foreign lands where they would go together, in heaven and in hell,” queerness is not only accepted, not only prioritized, but also *celebrated* (249). Therese runs joyfully, uninhibited, through the streets of New York, a sense of liberation at last achieved. In fact, as she suddenly exits the cocktail party, the narration states that Therese once again feels “as if she were running away from something,” the use of this phrase echoing its first paranoid appearance during the chase across the American West (248). This time, however, the phrase is

colored with an air of optimism and romantic grandeur, of actual escape; instead of “running away from something” and approaching “a tremendous sorrow” Therese is “running away from something...toward Carol,” and therefore toward that reparative, romantic, queer domestic sphere (192, 248).

Similarly, the last moments of the novel entail Therese bursting into the restaurant where she knows Carol is, wondering on her way there if “perhaps Carol knew at this moment, because Carol had known such things before” (248). When Therese remarks that Carol has “known such things before,” she is remarking on the pair’s uncanny, almost psychic connection. Until this point in the novel, that connection has been associated with the intense need to be able to predict the horrors the homophobic heteropatriarchal world around them has in store, the “notion of the inevitable” harbored by both the characters and the reader surrounding the consequences of the discovery of Carol and Therese’s relationship (*Feeling* 147). In short, the women’s uncanny, intuitive, queer *knowing* has, throughout the novel, taken the paranoid position. In this moment, however, Carol’s queer intuition is poised as romantic, as the inextricable psychic connection between lovers that we as a culture yearn after en masse in our ever-popular narratives of twin flames and true love. This is the reparative reading at work.

In a microcosmic sense, these subtle shifts reflect what is happening to the whole of the novel upon its optimistic conclusion. Therese is here transitioning rapidly from the paranoid position, a byproduct of the narrative’s use of the Gothic, to the reparative one, and the novel therefore does the same. Sedgwick writes that “to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise” (*Feeling* 146). Operating now in this reparative vein, Therese’s

surrender of her expectation that it is inevitable for her and Carol to be unhappy allows the reader to surrender the same assumption.

In her discussion of the role of surprise in these paranoid/reparative readings, Sedgwick acknowledges that even from the reparative position “there can be terrible surprises” (146). This is certainly true in *The Price of Salt*. However, Sedgwick clarifies that the reparative reading is characterized by the approach that “*because* there can be terrible surprises...there can also be good ones” (146, emphasis mine). Therese is pleasantly surprised by her final realization of her devotion to Carol, and thus the reader is also caught off guard by the optimistic turn taken by the conclusion of the novel, evoking the “heartbeat of contingency” to which Sedgwick refers (147). Therefore, even though we have spent the duration of *The Price of Salt* braced for the worst, the possibility of a happy ending quickly reveals itself, a pleasant and “necessary” surprise.

M.H. Abrams’ *Glossary of Literary Terms* defines the conclusion of a tragedy as being “disastrous...for the protagonist” (212). As I have thoroughly investigated, this “disastrous” end is what the reader is trained to expect from *The Price of Salt* due to its use of the Gothic, its invocation of the lesbian’s “dying fall,” and the paranoid approach to its own narrative that in turn encourages the reader to assume the paranoid position. Abrams also offers us the definition of romance in the English literary tradition, wherein “the course of this love does not run smooth, yet overcomes all difficulties to end in a happy union” (29). The smiles plastered on both Carol and Therese’s faces and the sense of liberation from the oppressive heteropatriarchy at the conclusion of the novel both contribute to the couple’s reunification being a “happy” one, as does the novel’s simple yet beautifully optimistic final line: “Therese walked toward her” (249). With the context of the optimistic lesbian future of *The Price of Salt*, Stimpson’s “enabling escape” is successfully fulfilled, the entirety of the novel is able to be retroactively understood

from the reparative position. With this application of a new reading, the formulaic genre of Gothic tragedy is abandoned in lieu of the romance.

Revisiting the scene of Therese and Carol's first meeting helps us understand this retroactive genre shift. With the context of the optimistic future laid out for them by the final scene of the novel, the tone of the passage is altered from one that bolsters the pervasive sense of doom created by the heteropatriarchal cultural circumstance to one that challenges it. The quickened pace of Therese's heart and her inability to speak, the fact that she "could not look away," and the way "her face grew hot" are inclined to be interpreted upon the first read from the paranoid position due to the novel's Gothic contexts, therefore rendering them as warning signs of forthcoming danger rather than as symptoms of the romantic notion love at first sight (27). However, we later know that neither woman dies in retribution for her deviance, that the lovers are not permanently estranged from each other and sentenced to lives of regret and bitterness, that, as in Abrams' definition of the romance, Therese and Carol "overcome all difficulties to end in a happy union" (29). This knowledge allows the reader to enjoy the intuitive connection and sexual tension between Therese and Carol rather than fear it. From the reparative position offered to us by the novel's conclusion, it is finally possible that upon locking eyes with Carol for the first time Therese stands mute, her heart stops, and her face is hot not because she is already aware and terrified of her imminent and unavoidable tragic end, but because she is falling in love.

What is most necessary to understand about the genre shift of this novel is the aspect of Abrams' definition which acknowledges the "difficulties" the lovers face not in spite of the romantic arc, but as an integral element of it (29). Sedgwick's reparative reading in particular shows us that the queer happy ending is not defined by a lack of sacrifice, loss, or hardship.

Rather, the queer happy ending is built upon the belief that queer love, romance, and joy are *able to coexist* with sacrifice, loss, and hardship. The possibility of one is not eliminated by the existence of the other, and perhaps it is this understanding that allows us, as Therese and Carol come to do, to truly and fully taste the salt of life.

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