The Price of McCarthyism: Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*, and Gore Vidal's *The City and The Pillar* as a Queer Response to McCarthyism

Raquel Sánchez Albano
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Raquel Sánchez Albano

Tutora: Laura Arce Álvarez
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

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INTRODUCTION

The lesbian and gay literary production of the 40s and 50s in the United States were forged by U.S. Senator Joseph Raymond McCarthy's policies in what has come to be known as one of the most politically and ideologically controversial periods in recent U.S. history. The main focus of this project will be to question and argue, to what extent the ideology historically known as 'McCarthyism' was a major influence on the censorship, alienation and prosecution of female, and male queer collectives in the United States, both in the fictional and non-fictional realm.

To do so, I will examine the works of the American novelist Patricia Highsmith, together with writer and intellectual Gore Vidal, and their respective novels *The Price of Salt* (1952) and *The Pillar and The City* (published four years earlier in 1948), — both of which are considered to be pioneering examples of Western, 20th century modern queer fiction, to compare and contrast the texts with one and other, but also with the socio-historical, political and literary context in which they were written. Paying special attention to the queer coming-of-age discoveries of the main protagonists of the two novels, how they are perceived in their corresponding societal spheres and their interactions with the queer and non-queer world, this project will also take into consideration critical feminist, queer, gender, and Marxist theory, amongst others, to support the ideas hereby mentioned, as well as the main thesis of this project.

Thus, this project will also attempt to understand to what extent such an agitated period, in which the everyday atmosphere of political fear and hysteria interjecting with a threat to homosexuality, became a major influence for this train of literary proliferation and solid representation for the first time of queer communities, and queer characters.

A telling example of this political climate was the consideration of the analysed novels as pulp fiction. Although none of the books that will be analysed should be considered pulp literature strictly, publishers and mainstream readers played safe labelling these as gay and lesbian pulps, usually associated with sensationalist narrations and marginal characters. Vidal and Highsmith's books, nonetheless, defied the literary and societal conventions of these sub-genres, proposing new and more complex representations of queer identities and breaking with the structure narratives that dominated them.

To achieve this, I will look closely at the political and literary outlook in which these two novels were published, by means of examining David K. Johnson's book *The Lavender Scare the Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* and other texts dealing with the impact of McCarthyism and the Cold War in U.S. society. I will also discuss the contributions made by Lillian Faderman in her book *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* mainly, as well as those by Diane Hamer and Michael Bronski on the topic of gay and lesbian works of fiction produced at that time.

Furthermore, I will also look at critical queer and gender theory principally by academics such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky-Sedgewick on the concepts of sex and gender binaries, as well as compulsive heterosexuality, heteronormativity and heterosexism. These will also be complimented with some of the ideas by Mercè Cuenca, Adrienne Rich and Michael Warner amongst others, on toxic masculinity, otherness and homosocial desire, to name a few.

CHAPTER 1: MCCARTHYISM AND THE LAVENDER SCARE: A HISTORICAL APPROACH TO GAY AND LESBIAN PULP FICTION IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE 40S-50S

Defining McCarthyism: McCarthy and the 50s Red and Lavender paranoia:

> As one of our outstanding historical figures once said, 'When a great democracy is destroyed, it will not be from enemies from without, but rather because of enemies from within.' [. . .] The reason why we find ourselves in a position of impotency is not because our only powerful potential enemy has sent men to invade our shores . . . but rather because of the traitorous actions of those who have been treated so well by this Nation. (Senator Joseph McCarty on his Wheeling, West Virginia speech, 1950)[1]

Very few political figures and statesmen have had a political, social and even cultural impact like that of Joseph McCarthy. What has come to be known as McCarthyism has had a severe impact in the 20th century history of the United States. The figure of the U.S. Senator Joseph Raymond McCarthy (1908, Wisconsin – 1957, Maryland) is one that not only has survived the passing of time but, if anything, has become increasingly relevant to the general outlook of the time of political, and social turmoil that the late 1940s and 50s in U.S. saw, a period the name of which is indebted to the very same man; the McCarthy era. With the end of World War II , and the beginning of what is commonly known as the Second Red Scare (1947-1960)[2], the shadow cast by the infamous tactics

[1] Taken from the transcript of his famous speech "Enemies within", which can be found in *History Matters'* "Enemies from Within": Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's Accusations of Disloyalty".

[2] This term has been generally used to identify a second period of widespread hysteria with regards of Communist and radical, anti-capitalist, left-wing ideologies in the United States that took place after the

of strong rhetoric and unrefuted-fact delivering speeches of Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy on the offices of Harry S. Truman and of president Dwight David Eisenhower, together with the famous witch-hunting trials by the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and its aftershock in American society, have become heavily associated, as part of our cultural memory in the 21st century, with the political agenda of the U.S. during those years. Nonetheless, although McCarthyism and the Cold War years have been historically associated with the prosecution of Communist symphathisers, the truth is that it also stirred other communities who were also stroken by McCarthyism, and have not always been recognised as such.

The list of fiction, drama and cinema which either depicted or were inspired by the atmosphere of fear and proceedings of the McCarthy period then and now, are as varied as they are incisive. From Arthur Miller's Salem-witch-trials-inspired play *The Crucible* (1953) or Irwin Shaw's novel *The Troubled Air* (1951), written during the outbreak of McCarthyism, to the hearings and censorship in the cinematographic and literary production of that time, featured in mainstream western films such as *The Front* (1976), *One of the Hollywood Ten* (2001*), Guilty bv Suspicion* (1991), *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005) and the recent biopic of blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, *Trumbo* (2015), including a glimpse to the Soviet-American government conspiracies, and narratives about the 'other,' like Guillermo del Toro's acclaimed film *The Shape of Water* (2017) or the very recent adaption of Highsmith's novel, *Carol* (2015). Based on the number of times McCarthyism and its influence has been portrayed on the screen, it is safe to assert that there has been in the last fifteen to twenty years, and still is, a fervent interest to explore some of the issues at the core of McCarthyism and how it became a

First Red Scare (1917-1920), fearing that the spirit of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia and the popularity of European-born anarchism, would permeate the American society. See works cited for Landon R. Y. Storrs' *McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare,* 2015.

turning point in the history of the United States. Nevertheless, even if McCarthyism has been historically associated with the politics of prosecution, and censorship of Communist or Soviet ideologies — making special emphasis on Communist associations and some artistic spheres—, there was another more hidden part of the United States that would be targeted by the moralistic McCarthyite practices overlooked for many years by history, and most of those who have kept a record about this conflicted time in the U.S. history: the gay and lesbian community.

McCarthy's contributions to the McCarthyistic ethos itself, even if owned on its namesake, were something that started not as a political tactic to target dangerous citizens accused of Communist or Soviet affiliations, but rather more like the spreading of a rumour that had already taken on from an earlier time, and infiltrating U.S. society for more than a decade. After World War II (1939-1945), the establishment of the Iron Curtain that divided Europe into West and Soviet, and the unknown political post-war prospect of how overseas countries — namely China's commitment to Communist with the creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 — were perceived as a turning point in the still recently established 20th century capitalism. All these historical connection, together with the foundation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948, were seen as a latent threat that could impact the current Capitalist/Communist binary that had already rooted upon the European continent, were the front against which the more conservative, right-wing, Christian, capitalist and patriotic American identity was challenged.

Furthermore, the increasing number of affiliations to the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) had reached by 1940[3] —approximately 75,000 after the anti-

[3] See Weir, 148–49.

capitalistic backlash of the aftermath of the Great Depression —, as well as a general weariness over the Soviet Union's possession of the atomic bomb, were also part of the picture of what McCarthy describes in his Wheeling, West Virginia speech quoted above; a growing threat to the essence of American society for what it was known to be, only highlighted by several important cases of alleged Soviet espionage. A turning point for the fear of espionage was exacerbated after the case of the Rosenbergs' imprisonment and execution under the suspicion (never proved) of being Soviet spies in 1953[4], as well as of those of Federal and State civil servants. Other relevant cases were that of government official Alger Hiss and State Department consultant and author Owen Lattimore[5], two of the first precedents of what would later become a long list of State and Federal workers who were investigated and often forced to resign with little to no evidence during the McCarthy years, by the House of Un-American Activities Committee (1945-1975) and the Tydings Committee (1950), also known as the Subcommittee on the Investigation of Loyalty of State Department Employee, respectively. This violation of the personal sphere in the name of the politics and national security would, in due time, become a common government practice implemented against those who were regarded as a potential risk to the U.S. government, thus contributing to the fear and hysteria that became, eventually, the high price to pay for the political, ideological, moral, and social stability that post-war United States was so eager to maintain.

At a time where a more conservative and right-wing part of the American society started to prepare for what they feared the Soviet Union and its European-born,

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[4] The case concerning Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, both of which had been accused of Soviet espionage by the federal government, was one of the first, and most debated trials during the prime of the McCarthy years, as well as one of the few ones which ended up with the conviction, followed by execution, of the two.

[5] Both Alger Hiss (1904-1996), and Owen Lattimore (1900-1989) are two of the most famous examples during the first years of McCarthyism of American citizens accused, judged, and imprisoned under suspicion of being spies for the Soviet Union without any solid evidence.

Communist wave, could become a force of ideology powerful enough to pose a threat to the eminently Capitalistic United States. After becoming Wisconsin's Senator in 1947, McCarthy was regarded as one of the most notable politicians in the United States at that time, if not of the entire 20th century, and the legend of his political persona is one that still resonates in the 21st century, especially given the turn U.S. politics have taken in the recent years under the watch of its 45th president Donald John Trump's. Even if history tells us that he was not the main, or only responsible for it, the inventive and demagogic aspect of McCarthy's political speeches led to the persecution, purge, firing and even imprisonment of many American citizens suspected of being allies to Communism, there was also a large number of individuals who have been effectively omitted from the central narrative of the McCarthy period but who, nevertheless, where equally vulnerable, if not more, to the notorious practices that have come to represent this period: gays and lesbians.

From Red to Lavender, and Lavender to Red: McCarthy's witch-hunting tactics and finding 'security risks':

Two different events that took place in 1950, became critical to the success and establishment of McCarthyism as a turning point in the history of U.S politics, as David K. Johnson describes in his book *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (2006), McCarthy's Wheeling West Virginia speech[6] where "[McCarthy] made the inflammatory claim that 205 card-carrying Communists were working for the State Department" (Johnson 1) and, as Johnson states,

[6] The Wheeling, West Virginia speech of 1950 appears mentioned in David K. Johnson's introduction to his book, as well as in other academic texts as a pivotal point in the history of McCarthyism. It can be read in its entirety at: "Enemies from Within": Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's Accusations of Disloyalty'. *History Matters: The U.S. Course Survey on the Web*, www.historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6456. Accessed 11th October 2019.

and the other event that has become forgotten, but is no less important than the first one, aimed to reverse McCarthy's words only to magnify them, and target other 'subversive' American citizens:

> Appearing before a congressional committee, Deputy Undersecretary John Peurifoy denied that the department employed any actual Communists. At the same time, however, he revealed that a number of persons considered to be security risks had been forced out, and that among these were ninety-one homosexuals. Rather than see the revelation as evidence of an effective security system, may be interpreted as proof that the State Department — perhaps the entire government — was infiltrated with sexual perverts. (Johnson 1)

Those sexual perverts that Peurifoy referred to with his response to McCarthy's claims, were known as ' the ninety-one' and, even if Peurifoy's claim was meant to prove that they were being investigated and fired, became a symbol of what could happen to any of the homosexuals that, from that moment on, were going to be subject once they were suspected of their homosexuality, or simply by knowing homosexuals, hanging out in the places and bars that were known to be frequented by homosexuals, and even dressed in a non-normative way.

Johnson argues throughout the book how McCarthyism as a political concept was actually a sum of factors, the majority of which were related, but not necessarily a result of Joseph McCarthy's accusations against Truman's administration of being Communist-friendly and, therefore, anti-American, than one single fixation that became worse over time. Rather, him revealing without hardly any evidence — as it was the Senator's customary practice — was an information that would settle in the average, American

citizen, that apart from the 'reds,' the U.S. security was under threat of being infiltrated by deranged, easy-to-blackmail, homosexuals, thus marking the beginning of the Lavender Scare[7]. Nonetheless, the truth about how gay and lesbians were considered as much, or even worse, of a security liaison than Communists — especially those who worked in the State or Federal Government — would have made less of an impact within the history of McCarthyism and Cold War politics in the U.S., as Johnson repeatedly claims in his text:

> Despite the concern, even hysteria, at the time, and the many people affected, historians of the McCarthy era have given stunningly little attention to the Lavender Scare. Political historians of McCarthyism, anti-communism, and the rise of the national security state emphasize the role of partisan politics and foreign policy, and minimize moral and cultural concerns. If they mention the Lavender Scare at all, they portray it as a minor by-product of the Red Scare, one so seemingly natural and inevitable that as to need no explanation. (Johnson 2)

With an increasing concern to come up with an exact number of subversive[8] U.S. citizens who were believed to endanger the image of the in the monolithic, idealised, model of the U.S. government worker, McCarthy, counselled by famous lawyer Roy M. Cohn, the lawyer who secured the Rosenberg's execution (Haynes and Harvey 150-159), and the support and resourced provided by head of FBI J. Edgar Hoover whom, together, took

[7] As Matthew A. McIntosh writes in his article *The Lavender Scare: Joseph McCarthy's Other Crusade,* 'Lavender Scare' is a term based on the euphemism 'lavender lads' to refer to homosexual men, and popularised by Senator Everett Dirksen, among others, in 1952. It has been later coined and popularised by author David K. Johnson, in his 2004 book *The Lavender Scare the Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, which is also one of the main texts that this thesis uses.

[8] The word 'subversive' is the specific term used by U.S.Government to refer to citizens but, specially federal and state workers who were considered 'security risks', including but not limited to homosexuals, Communist and Soviet sympathisers, as it appears mentioned repeatedly in Johnson's book.

up on the task of scavenging for the names on those numbers of Communist and homosexuals that had been claimed to be, “perhaps as dangerous as the actual Communists” (from “Perverts Called Government Peril” speech, April 19, 1950).

Later on, the list of liabilities or, as they would be later referred to, ‘security risks’ to the moral integrity and national security of the U.S. government, would be expanded to include other possible liabilities, such as the aforementioned Soviet sympathisers or members suspected of being members of the Communist Party, women who were pregnant out of wedlock, alcoholics and, in general, men and women suspected of being gay or lesbian. For all of them, Johnson provides detailed accounts in his book from examples of citizens who were investigated based on how much of a security (or in the case of suspected Communists, loyalty) risk each, finding how and why each of them could be subject to blackmail and, therefore, posed a threat from inside of the Government. Moreover, Johnson elaborates on what he believes was one of the reasons the ‘Communist problem’ was often mixed up with the ‘homosexual’ or ‘moral’ problem: the concepts ‘loyalty risk’ and ‘security risk.’

> Although many people at the time and many historians since assumed that a security risk was simply a lesser version of a Communist — someone with Communist sympathies but non outright party connections — in official circles the two categories were quite distinct. Persons guilty of espionage or connections to allegedly subversive organizations like the Communist Party were guilty of disloyalty. Persons who might divulge secret information, because they were either careless or coerced, were labelled security risks. When defining the difference between a loyalty risks and a security risk, government officials typically explained that ‘loyalty’ involved a current state of mind, a wilful desire to betray secrets,

> while 'security' involved behaviours or associations that might lead one inadvertently or unwillingly to betray secrets in the future. (Johnson 7-8)

At the same time, Johnson elaborates, the interchangeability of these two concepts, as well as the deliberate confusion as to which one posed a real threat in the eyes of McCarthyism, has made it difficult for historians, and history itself, to decipher who was accused of what during the McCarthy and Second Red Scare years:

> The problem of vague language has complicated the issue of chronicling the Lavender Scare. When not referred to directly as homosexuals or sex perverts, such persons were often called 'moral weaklings', 'sexual misfits', 'moral risks', 'misfits', 'undesirables', or persons with 'unusual morals.' But the most slippery and euphemistic term of all was 'security risks.' (Johnson 7)

That is to say that, in the eyes of the government, when McCarthyism started to target and investigate 'security risks' and 'loyalty risks' within the U.S. government, the main difference between a Communist or one who sympathised with Communism or the Soviet cause and a homosexual, was lied on the willingness and, therefore, predictability that the first one would have to betray the U.S. government. In the case of homosexual individuals, and especially those who worked in Federal or State offices, their 'risk' relied in their capacity of being subject to their sexuality to be discovered and, therefore, subject to blackmail. In other words, where the American society saw a flaw, or a deviance from the norm, the U.S. and federal government saw a threat to national security. But, unlike with the persecution of potentially Communist individuals, the implications, of a government filled with queers, was a liability that went beyond the political realm of the

McCarthyite state of mind, as it endangered the American society, and the individual, on a moral level.

> By looking beyond the McCarthy and behind the ambiguous term 'security risk', [Johnson's] study reveals that a Lavender Scare — a fear that homosexuals posed a threat to national security and needed to be systematically removed from the federal government — permeated the 1950s political culture. Originating as a partisan political weapon in the halls of Congress, it sparked a moral panic within mainstream American culture and became the basis for a federal government policy that lasted nearly twenty-five years and affected innumerable people's lives. (Johnson 9)

Truman's administration attempted to confront the defamation and public smearing on the numbers and cases of suspected Communist and homosexual citizens that were already taking place, with the creation of the Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Department (1949-1952), led by former North Carolina Senator Clyde R. Hoey. Also known as the Hoey Committee after his chair reluctantly took up on the task, the main job of this committee was, among other things, to supervise and secure the security and functioning of the Senate and State government themselves and, in order to placate the accusations that the McCarthy-Hoover-Cohn front had initiated, and conducted investigations, hearings investigation — albeit more discreetly and less smearing than his predecessors — and even produced a medical report[9] on the mental 'fitness' of homosexuals to work as civil servants. After his investigations between the years he was

[9] During Truman's administration, former senator Hoey and chair of the Expenditures in the Executive Department committee selected a board of medical advisors with Robert Felix (head of psychiatry at the National Institute of Mental Health) that procured a medical report in favour of homosexual workers in the U.S. government as they 'posed no more of a problem than 'promiscuous persons, gossips, thieves, alcoholics and horseplayers'" (Johnson 106).

head of the committee, he concluded that Hoey eventually declared that: "[H]homoexuals should be barred from all government jobs, no matter the position or the discretion they exercised, posed a danger: 'It opens the way to idle, ignorant, and malicious charges which are difficult to disprove'." [10] (Johnson 118)

After Peurifoy's revelation of the "ninety-one homosexuals" fired from the government, heightened by an also increasing concern with progressive, high-class, bureaucrats in government, together with the consolidation of the Lavender Scare as a government-approved practise with the investigations of the Hoey Committe[11], Eisenhower's administration finally took direct action by approving the notorious Executive Order 10450[12] in 1953, that "signaled a change in emphasis from issues of political loyalty to broader notions of general character and suitability" (Johnson 123). One of the most notable victims of this executive order was Frank Kameny, who after being fired from his job as an astronomer for the U.S. Army, who would later became co-founder of the Mattachine Society of Washington, and one of most well-known names in the history of gay rights in the U.S.:

> The order went on to delineate specific proscribed behaviours: 'Any criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct, habitual use of intoxicants to excess, drug addiction or sexual perversion.' Although the generic language of 'criminal' and 'immoral' conduct was drawn from pre-existing civil service policies […] the

[10] From 'Perverts in Government', *Washington Post*, December 18, 1950, quoted in Johnson.
[11] The Hoey Committee was one of the most well-known committees that were created during the first years of McCarthyism assigned by the U.S. Senate, and which targeted and investigated homosexual U.S. civil servants mainly.
[12] A transcription of the Executive Order 10450 can be found in the U.S. Federal Government National Archive: www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/10450.html

> inclusion of the more specific reference to 'sexual perversion' was unprecedented. (Johnson 123)

This resulted in Kameny, and hundreds of other civil servants on the year 1953, to cease their employment in the State and Federal government, as well as the Army in the U.S. By openly putting on the spotlight a list of government 'subversives,' or 'security risks'— namely Communists, alcoholics, drug users, 'sexual perverts,' and women whose behaviour, sexual, moral or marital, in one way or another, defied the norm — were considered especially vulnerable, morally compromised and, therefore, easily subjected to blackmail, thus putting a start to a new time in which accusations, judging, defamation and the persecution of homosexual men and women, including those outside of the U.S. government, would be a daily occurrence:

> By combining issues of loyalty and security, and granting final authority to agency heads, [E.O. 10450] effectively expanded the security authority originally given to the State Department and a few military agencies at the start of the Cold War to the entire federal government. Under the Eisenhower administration, national security would require not only political loyalty but also proper morality. (Johnson 123)

Of course, what became the rule in government became the norm in society. From the list above, it would be homosexuals gay and women — the latter of which would be subject to a double vulnerability from being both a woman and homosexual in an eminently heteropatriarchal societal plane — living and working in the administration nucleus at the U.S. government Washington D.C, who would become the easiest, and most vulnerable targets to McCarthyism. At the height of the Lavender Scare, in 1953, almost one civil servant was fired every day (Johnson 166). Less than a decade, by 1960,

the number of suspected homosexuals fired from State Department would increase considerably until reaching the dark amount of 1,000 people. The numbers of 'forced resignations' would go generally up during the first years that followed Eisenhower's order, as well as the witch-hunts, and down after the increasing awareness of the social demand by homosexual community, and their rights in the late 60s. Nonetheless, it would not be many years, as Johnson claims, until in the year 1975, after the zenith of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., "that the Civil Service Commission would take out the word 'immoral conduct' from the list of disqualifications from federal government employment, and "apply the same standards in evaluating sexual conduct, whether heterosexual or homosexual". (Johnson 210)

The main difference between the forced resignations of suspected Communist and homosexual civil servants, was that the later usually accompanied by consequences that went beyond their professional career. Apart from the difficulties they encountered when applying for other jobs, even before Eisenhower's Executive, because of McCarthy's defamatory, political propaganda of his speeches, as well as the general preoccupation over homosexual men and women and how they endangered the moral integrity and security of their government, those who were investigated would often deal with how forced outings also affected their reputation and private life as individuals, the extent of or resulting in involuntary 'coming outs:'

> To some people the Lavender Scare was a tactic in political struggle to turn back the New Deal. To others, it was a necessary measure to protect national security and counter what they saw as a nation in moral decline. But to gay and lesbian civil servants, it represented a real threat to their economic, social and psychological well-being. Though it affected millions of individuals across the country, both gay and straight […] the

> effects of the Lavender Scare were most acute in the gay and lesbian community of Washington, D.C. For nearly twenty-five years it was part of their daily experience. Theirs was a community under siege (Johnson 149).

Some of the ways in which homosexuals were subject to investigations when they had no evidence to incriminate their risk for the State and Federal agencies, was by raiding known homosexual bars, doing surveillance at some parks that were popular among gay men, and tracking one's relations in the search for any self-declared homosexuals. Interrogations would be initiated when rumour reached the department whenever unmarried workers were discovered living in the same quarters of someone of their same sex, or were known to have engaged in any activities, gathering, parties, talking and, in general, simply by interacting with known homosexual men and women, regardless of the nature of their acquaintance. Nevertheless, like Johnson explains in the chapter *Interrogations and Disappearances, Gay and Lesbian Subculture in 1950s Washington,* one of the main ways in which government would suspect someone's sexuality was by virtue of being tipped off by his or her co-workers, some of which even engaged in name-giving in order to protect themselves from being subject to any suspicions of their own homosexuality: "Since mere suspicion about one's sexuality might led to an investigation, gay and lesbian federal workers acted with discretion. Many self-censored their communications. 'All they had to do was have someone say they doubted your orientation'" (150).

Johnson provides in his book many testimonies of workers who, with the Metropolitan Police, the U.S. Park Police, the FBI, and the Civil Service Commission (Johnson 149) under their necks, made it to the list of hundreds of firings of homosexuals that took place every year and who, "wondered every time the phone rang if this was the

call that would lead to accusations of homosexual behaviour and gruelling interrogation about their sex life" (Johnson 149). One of those many examples used to illustrate the name-giving, and guilt-by association tactics that benefited the government when it came get information on their potentially homosexual employees, is that of Madeleine Tress, a civil servant from the State Commerce Department, who, like many others, was called on a personal interrogation on April 1958[13]:

> As the meeting began, the two male investigators noted Tress's 'feminine apparel' but also recorded what they regarded as a tell-tale defect two buttons were missing from the front of her dress. 'Miss Tress,' one investigator began 'your voluntary appearance here today has been requested in order to afford you an opportunity to answer questions concerning information which has been received by the U.S. Civil Service Commission.' Tress had been working for the Commerce department as a business economist for only a few months, and her employment, like that of all civil servants under the Eisenhower administration, was conditional on passing a security investigation. (Johnson 147)

With what felt like a fresh reminder of the techniques used by the Gestapo in World War II, at the end of this testimony it is revealed that Madeleine Tress was actually called into interrogation after one of his co-workers accused her as a way to protect himself for being accused, and was eventually forced to submit her resignation:

> He [Bob] had told the FBI she was 'unstable' in dress and thinking, 'bohemian' in lifestyle, and received calls from many single women.

[13] The full interview is not included in Johnson's book, but only fragments of it. The date, location and name of the interviewee appears referenced under Madeline Tress, November 11, 1998, San Francisco, CA.

> Although Tress suspected Bob was informing to differentiate himself from his brother, a union organizer accused of being a Communist, his comments differed a little from a host of others suggesting she was 'mannish,' 'a tomboy', or had 'personality problems'. (Johnson 149).

After the historical records, together with the dozens of cases and interviews gathered by Johnson, even without the testimony of those that never made it to Johnson's book, one can infer that the McCarthy years were a time where balancing a double life of being a homosexual and a State or Federal civil servant was impossible. Not because of the interference of the Soviet Union, Communism or a moral depravation that inclined any homosexual citizens to reveal any information, but because their homosexuality per se — without any evidence of one existing case of treason whatsoever — was the reason they never allowed to prove their loyalty and safety, nor guarantee it. But on the civil servant's side, being accused of their sexual orientation meant more than jeopardising their career, reputation, and private life since, "[l]osing one's career and being forced into another occupation was a common fate of gay men and lesbians" (Johnson 157).

How queer fiction survived McCarthyism: 'homosexual pulp fiction' or how literature responded to the Lavender Scare:

In contrast with the gradual, sexual rebellion and liberation of the 1920s, and the comparatively more reluctant experimentation of the 30s, in which concepts like 'bisexuality' and 'homosexuality' were slowly being recognised and explored (Faderman 63) within gay and lesbian subcultures, the aftermath of the Great Depression was crudely translated into the social and sexual regression that lead to the repression and conservatism that would be firmly imposed in the 1940s and 50s. A repression and

conservatism that was only legitimated by the zeitgeist of McCarthyism and Cold War in the American society.

After a scarce but promising end of 19th century and beginning of the early 20th century, the names of forerunners such as the E. M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence (*Women in Love*, 1920), Thomas Mann (*Death in Venice*, 1912), or French author André Gide at the dawn of the 20th century, put homosexual romantic friendships, and homosexual desire on the map. After the two World Wars, and especially WWII as it had meant a new chapter in women's new involvement in the industrial, government, and military spheres, enabling many to interact, homosexual desire to spur in unsuspected circumstances that would otherwise be unthinkable. As for the pioneers of lesbian fiction at the turn of the 20th century, works like *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) written by the British writer Radclyffe Hall, Virginia Woolf's famously subversive novel *Orlando* (1928), Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936), and other American writers like Gertrude Stein and Nathalie Barney — some of which had spent time or resided in Paris as ex-pats like many contemporary European and American artists and writers at that time — were the mainly producers of fiction that portrayed female, lesbian sexual, desire. The same did their counterparts, writers of gay fiction, as renown homosexual American writers like James Baldwin or Andre Gide, took advantage of the relative freedom the lesbian and gay community which had accommodated themselves into in the bohemian comfort of the French capital, thus becoming a safe haven for the homosexual literary community after having stood as one of the few places in Europe where homosexuality was not illegal at the time, nor was homosexual fiction censored.

For the void that historians, the media, and the American society left during the McCarthy and Cold War years of the prosecution of homosexuality, literature found its way by creating a space for queer identities to resurface and find solace, especially in the

case of a particular sub-genre that reached its height during the late 40s and 50s; homosexual or queer, pulp fiction. Gay and lesbian pulp fiction were, per definition, usually produced as rather cheaply made paperback volumes that frequently presented its readers, in both cases, with fictionalised narratives that involved protagonists that either showed a homosexual desire or were openly homosexual. They were often full of clichéd characters and plot developments, as well as a tragic ending for those characters that did not end up being redeemed of their dangerous sexuality. Nonetheless, even if they had some key similarities in terms of their allusion and often-arch typed portrayal of gay and lesbian relationships respectively, as well as their popularity among homosexual readers at a time of standardised and institutionalised, anti-homosexual practices, each of the sub-genres had a different origin, readership and, therefore, had a significantly impact on the history of the U.S. As Michael Bronski defines in his thorough historical examination of the gay facet of this sub-genre *Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age of Gay Male Pulps*:

> Gay pulp is not an exact term, and it is used somewhat loosely to refer to a variety of books that had very different origins and markets. By the 1950s the publishing industry of the United States had reached a new level of production. The printing and distribution of cheaply produced and cheaply priced paperback novels, which had begun in the late 1930s, steadily grew until it reached its full force in the early 1950s. Their eye-catching, provocative covers created and defined a new artistic and marketing genre; screaming damsels in distress represented a motif, as did risqué clothing for both women and men. (Bronski 2)

Easily obtained in places like libraries, drugstores, stations, and other places open to the public where one could buy cheap literature and magazines, one of the aspects which identified pulp fiction, both gay and lesbian, where the iconic, tell-tale, full-coloured covers, always attempting to evoke mystery, perversion, strangeness and forbiddingness of homoerotic desire. On the other hand, apart from the major difference in terms of the protagonist's gender of the two sub-genres of homosexual pulp, both of which are usually included within the umbrella term that englobes of 'LGBT' or 'queer literature', the relevance and interest gay and lesbian pulp have gained through the years, is much related to the popularity, censorship they occupied U.S. during the 50s and 60s. More specifically, it would take off from the years that the McCarthy period and its aftershocks lasted — an approximation that has already been discussed earlier in this chapter —, reaching the status and literary recognition Post-Stonewall queer fiction[14] has attained in the late 20th and 21st centuries.

In the case of gay pulp fiction, except for a few notable works like Vin Packer's[15] *Whisper His Sin* (1954) or Ben Travis' *The Strange One* (1959), it saw the dawn of its popularity in the 1960s, when less known authors began a massive publication of gay, paperback novels which, like some of the lesbian pulps, took a more pornographic and less literary turn with the slow dissolution of literary censorship on queer texts, until the 1970s. As Michael Bronski further explains, even if they started as contemporaries of McCarthyism and were, in a paradoxical way, a consequence of its strict morale

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[14] The concept of Post-Stonewall queer fiction is addressed by Michael Bronski in his book *Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age Of Gay Male Pulps* in order to refer to the gay and lesbian books of fiction published after the famous Stonewall riots and demonstrations of 1969 in New York city, which lead to the consolidation of the U.S. Gay Rights Movement.

[15] Vin Packer was one of the few pseudonyms used by author Marijane Meaker, famous for having written some of the canonical texts of gay and lesbian pulp fiction in the 50s and 60s, including the incredibly popular *Spring Fire* (1952) which is considered to be the originator of lesbian pulp fiction as a sub-genre.

regulations and prosecution of gay and lesbian citizens, there were some major differences between gay and lesbian pulp fiction:

> They are integral aspects of gay male culture and gay history that are as vital as — indeed, inseparable from — our fight for equality under the law and the freedom to live our lives the way we choose. They are records — albeit fictional and reflecting and refracting the tenor and biases of their times — of how gay men lived, thought, desired, loved, and survived. Even with the exaggerations, high-queen dramatics, silly (even naïve) eroticism, and sometimes even internalized homophobia, they give us a glimpse of what it meant to be a gay man in the tumultuous years before Stonewall. (Bronski 1-2)

Lesbian pulp, on the other hand, became something more concrete and time-specific; a genre that overtook the interests of the male, heterosexual literary scope and, unintentionally, opened one of the most relevant chapters in the history of lesbian fiction. Having reached the libraries of curious heterosexual male readers as well as to lesbian ones, their great popularity meant that the quality and style of the writing, as well as the stories portrayed in them, appealed mainly to the reader's desire for controverted and, even, forbidden eroticism in ways that gay pulp fiction in the 50s and 60s had managed to escape.

In other words, there was an element of prefabricated and predictable narrative structures and fixed character profiles that even if lowered the literary expectations and quality of these paperbacks, they still attracted a large number or readers that consumed them precisely because of those very same reasons. This phenomenon is explained by Lillian Faderman in her book *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, A History of Lesbian Life in 20th Century America* (2012), which puts forward an extensive historical account of lesbianism and lesbian literature through history, including lesbian pulp as a literary and

social phenomenon. From Ann Bannon's Beebo Brinker Chronicles saga — as one of the major references of lesbian pulp fiction in the 50s — to lesser known titles which shared the characteristics that differentiated this sub-genre from the rest of pulp fiction, Faderman breaks down each aspect (narrative, social, and readership-wise), that configured lesbian pulp fiction, that both resonated and offered a drafted manual on how to be a lesbian (albeit an heterosexually biased one) within the lesbian community in the U.S. in the 50s:

> The 1950s mandated that women learn to lead a double existence if they wanted to live as lesbians and yet maintain the advantages of middle-class American life such as pursuing higher education and the careers to which it led. (Faderman 145)
>
> Of course, the characters of the lesbian pulps almost always lived in shame and with the knowledge that, as the titles often suggested, they belonged in "twilight", "darkness", or "shadows". Self-hatred was requisite in these novels […] novels with lesbian subject matter and even fairly explicit sexual scenes could escape censorship if they had "redeeming social value," which meant that they could not 'legitimize the abnormal condition [of lesbianism] by showing lesbians as anything other than ultimately defeated. (Roberta Yusba in Faderman 147)

The potentiality of lesbian pulp took over any attempts to limit its readership to a male, heterosexual target, and to diminish it as a genre that, even if presumed to portray the life, relationship and sexuality of lesbian, female characters, even the most canonical books of lesbian pulp fiction were not without their own conflictive, and controversial undermining of homosexuality as a real option. Even with their dose of provocative

sexuality and conflicted endings in which a redeeming heterosexuality or a life of being a sexual and social deviant (or literary death) were the only available options.

> That pulp novels with lesbian subject should have been permitted to proliferate during this period is not as surprising as it may seem at first glance, since they were generally cautionary tales: 'moral' literature that warned females that lesbianism was sick or evil and that if a woman dared to love another woman she would end up lonely and suicidal. On the surface, at least, they seemed to confirm social prejudices about homosexuality. But despite that, many lesbians read those novels avidly. (146-7).

Diane Hamer goes further in her essay "I am a Woman: Ann Bannon and the Writing of Lesbian Identity in the 1950s," explaining the reasons behind a more recent interest in lesbian pulp fiction to new considerations about the context in which it was written, as well as its positive repercussions, rather than the quality of said fiction within the high art/low art frame of mind:

> They are not high-quality literature, timeless and enduring in their universality. The story-lines are often ludicrous and improbable and frequently internally inconsistent. However, 'popular' fiction (as opposed to high art) has, in recent years, become the subject of attention by feminists for what it can tell us about the norms and assumptions of the culture from which it is produced […] While such a parallel is questionable in terms of the generic conventions of romantic fiction […] it is on similar grounds, as cultural products, rather than for their literary merit, that Bannon's novels are most valuable. (Diane Hamer 50).

The trajectory of the gay male pulps, on the other, has been quite different to that of lesbian pulp. There was no burgeoning market for gay male novels in the 1950s because they apparently had little crossover appeal for a substantial heterosexual readership. The titillating nature of lesbian sexuality seemed to outweigh any potential threat it might present to the social order. Thus, while the lesbian pulp genre thrived on original works that sold well, gay-male-themed paperbacks were generally made up of reprints of previously published novels from established, respected houses. (Bronski 4)

This particular demand for paperback titles in both sub-genres among very different readerships lead to the recovery of some earlier novels which contained an element of homosexuality — the majority of which were from more renown, 'serious' authors who were not associated with this sub-genre — in order to be reissued again in a 'pulp fiction' format. Victim to this rebirth of homosexual novels in the pinnacle of gay and lesbian pulp were Patricia Highsmith's lesbian novel *The Price of Salt*, and Gore Vidal's gay novel *The City and The Pillar.* However, even if lesbian pulp became far more popular than gay pulp in the 50s due to the positive and wishful portrayal it painted, at times, of lesbian relationships and lifestyle, it took a more erotic turn in the 60s, swapping the almost truthful romantic element of lesbian relationships for more pornographic content as male writers with a different market target in mind.

The differences on the popularity of gay and lesbian pulp, lead to a paradoxical moment in the history of these two sub-genres, in which even if lesbian pulp sold the most paperbacks, it was partially due to its large heterosexual readership, and it did not quite have the literary acclaim gay pulp achieved, even if fewer gay pulp books were being published or reissued. Consequently, even if lesbian pulp fiction became a more popular literary phenomenon in the 50s and 60s, contemporary authors such as Gore Vidal, Lonnie Coleman, or John Horne Burnes "were accepted as important American writers, even

when they received attacks from homophobic critics. This recognition placed them in literary and cultural tradition denied to most women writers. The mantle of 'literary quality' also granted some protection against censorship" (Bronski 5).

One of the female writers who also made it to the list of critically-acclaimed pulp fiction writers — albeit publishing her one and only lesbian pulp novel under her one and only pseudonym, Claire Morgan — was Patricia Highsmith with her novel *The Price of Salt.* It would be the now famous short story and thriller writer, and the famous author and intellectual Gore Vidal, who would mark a turning point in the history of lesbian and gay fiction respectively, at a time when McCarthyism and pulp fiction were at their height. By writing for the lesbian protagonists of her book an ending that, even if not comparable to those of more traditional romance fiction, provided them with a positive outcome, and an almost hopeful future, Highsmith changed the course of lesbian pulp fiction, a contribution not so different to the one Vidal had also been responsible of, years before and in his own terms, to gay pulp fiction in the 40s.

CHAPTER 2: GORE VIDAL AND *THE CITY AND THE PILLAR*

Gore Vidal and the Beginning of a New Homosexual Novel

In the year 1948, the acclaimed American writer, essayist, intellectual and political figure to-be Gore Vidal published his third, and one of his most controversial works of fiction: *The City and the Pillar*. Eugene Luther Gore Vidal (1925-2012), was raised in a household to which politics were no stranger to him as he attempted to follow the steps of his grandfather, a former Senator who had been in office for 20 years, to the point that he eventually run for office with the U.S. Democratic Party twice in the span of twenty-two years. Nonetheless, while his career as a politician never really took off, he had parallelly built himself a solid reputation both as writer of non-fiction, plays, and novels (especially but not exclusively of historical fiction), as well as a multi-faceted artistic celebrity who would go from writing and contributing to classic Golden Age Hollywood screenplays, to playing in films himself.

Historically, Vidal's novel has been recognised as a landmark publication for U.S. gay literature in the 20th century for having signed up Vidal into a particular group of writers who had given their gay protagonists a more hopeful, if not always entirely positive, prospect for queer male identities in literature after the events of World War II. Much like Patricia Highsmith's protagonist in *The Price of Salt* — another literary episode in the history of the U.S. queer fiction in the 50s that will be examined in the following chapter —, Jim Willard belongs to a group of other queer characters that would gradually start appearing more and more often in 1950s fiction, to the point of paving the way of what would become known as the literary phenomenon of gay pulp fiction a few years later. But what truly makes Vidal's novel stand out and differentiate itself from the rest of his contemporaries — perhaps with the exception of Highsmith's novel — and

what made Vidal's novel stand out and would not be paralleled even after the rise in the popularity of gay pulp fiction in the 60s, lies in two key aspects: the open portrayal of the protagonist, Jim Willard, an overtly queer character, as well as the lack of an heterosexual redemption that traditionally accompanied any reveal of said homosexual identity, to that date. The general positive light in which homosexuality had been portrayed in scarce yet equally significant contributions to gay literature had seen no precedent in the English written world until the publication of the *The City and The Pillar* in 1948, right at a time McCarthyite politics and a government-supported hunt of anyone suspected of being a homosexual, were rapidly, and effectively becoming standard practise. That is not to say that there had been no close and positive attempts to what Gore Vidal had inadvertently achieved with his novel.

Other acclaimed American authors who ventured into giving their novels a gay male protagonist at that time include the playwright and actor Truman Capote (1924-1984) and his first novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948); the highly-praise but relatively unknown John Horne Burns (1916-1953); and the famous Civil Rights and Gay Liberation activist James Baldwin (1924-1987), to name a few. Horne Burns' infamous Italian-set war novel *The Gallery* (1947), published one year before *The City and The Pillar*, was highly-praised at the time in his faithful and multi-angled depiction of the Italy-based American soldiers during World War II under ally occupation (including homosexual encounters among them), as well as for its uncanny study of the psychological and moral aftershock of war; James Baldwin's *Giovani's Room* (1956), and his own semi-autographical novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) , both of which have contributed to the recognition of Baldwin as one of the major literary influences to the writing of racism and homosexuality in U.S. literature; or James Barr, pen name of writer and activist James W. Fugaté (1922-1995) who depicts the homosexual awakening

of a man closeted in an upcoming heterosexual after a sexual affair with a former officer in *Quatrefoil: A Modern Novel* (1950). The titles and author listed above, albeit not accounting for all examples of novels which dealt with queer male protagonists who saw light in the dawn of the McCarthy years, they all had in common a less troubled representation of homosexuality than in the works published before the two World Wars. Nonetheless, like many of their contemporary gay and lesbian novels, apart from dealing with the scars of post-war U.S. and Europe to an extent, most of them also shared the fatal and almost pre-destined way in which said homosexuality was unresolved, drastically put to an end, something that gay and lesbian pulp fiction would later on borrow and tailor to the needs of the publishing houses which sought to tantalize and satisfy an intrigued, yet largely heterosexual readership, unintentionally offering homosexual readers a potential, but tainted way of escaping the harsh truth of the their social reality.

These novels essentially had in common with *The City and The Pillar* their direct tackling and representation of male homosexual desire[16] in one way or another. But when it comes to narrowing down the characteristics that define the homosexual fiction of Baldwin, Vidal, Horne Burns, or James Barr/Fugaté during this period, there are also two major aspects that, deliberately or not, are also present in almost each of these novels, and which eventually become relevant to the protagonist's identification and evolution as a homosexual or queer man.

The first of these aspects which becomes a key theme in these works of gay fiction is the role World War II and its aftermath played in the protagonist's lives, usually riddling their experiences with undesired physiological and psychological scars, or a

[16] There are some cases in the novels mentioned above in which homosexual desire is represented, but bisexuality is not dismissed completely either. Instead of using the word 'queer' which would otherwise be more appropriate to describe some of the protagonists of these novels considering the latter, for the sake of differentiating between gay/lesbian fiction, the adjectives 'homosexual' or 'gay', and 'lesbian' will be the preference.

revelation of their homosexual desire while in service-related activities. The second major aspect is the portrayal of their protagonist's coming out as homosexuals, often coinciding with their coming of age of their lives. At the same time, this latter aspect has contributed to the first makings of the modern coming out/coming of age novel as we know it or, in other words, of the queer 'coming of age' at a time in which politics made it virtually impossible for there to be any safe, positive, and socially unscathed possibility of being homosexual at all. The latter became especially relevant, as it would eventually set a model for the publication of contemporary gay fiction and build the grounds of the modern gay novel as we know it.

Gore Vidal's take into the gay fiction genre: the publication of *The City and The Pillar*

Written and first published on the 10th of January of 1948 by E.P. Dutton, *The City and the Pillar*, not unlike other contemporary works of queer fiction published before or during the dawn of gay and lesbian pulp fiction, was revised and republished in 1965, and includes now in its latest editions a preface written by the author himself in 1994. Vidal's reason for re-editing his novel under the title *The City and The Pillar Revised*, is very much linked to the rise of gay fiction as part of the gay pulp fiction phenomenon that started in the early 50s, and skyrocketed in the 60s, resulting in many classics of gay fiction being re-edited and published as cheap paperbacks. Furthermore, as Vidal himself explains in his preface, the novel has undergone some editing and revisioning too and, since the endings of gay and lesbian have become the subject of controversy (be it for their tragically normative or surprisingly non-normative nature), the ending of *The City and the Pillar* has been no exception to it.

Starting in media-res, Vidal's novel takes off with Jim Willard, the main character, in a gay bar in New York, having fallen victim to the insistence of a woman's fruitless attempt at seducing him, as he reflects upon the ghastly encounter he has just had with his old best friend and which will not be revealed until the end of the novel. Right after that, readers are taken back to the events which have led Jim in this state, and to the young Virginia-born Jim Willard, a quiet-looking boy whose excellent skills as a tennis player and good-looks have granted him fair success in many aspects of his life, a life which appears to be planned in detail by his parents, and which lay a comfortable and traditional future for him. Nonetheless, after the two share an intimate sexual experience together during a camping trip before Bob enlists in the U.S. Merchant Marine, Jim will become determined to search for his friend with the only hope that they can one day reunite and become lovers.

To do so, Jim will go from enlisting himself as a cabin boy, to the glamour of the 1930s golden age of Hollywood working in Los Angeles as a tennis instructor and part-time lover of film star Ronald Shaw, to sharing a more bohemian lifestyle and three-sided romance in New Orleans and Yucatán with writer Paul Sullivan and his former lover María Verlaine, to enlisting in the U.S. Army as a soldier in the Colorado Airforce with the strike of WWII, until the protagonist finds himself established in New York's homosexual clique of gay bars, one-night stands artistry and high-life, and ready to meet Bob after many years. In his desperate attempt to recapture the moment of romantic blissfulness the two boys had shared before the two had parted ways, and after having visited his hometown and learned that Bob is now married to a woman, Jim insists on their reunion, hoping that after all those years of long-distanced pinning for his friend, he will reciprocate his feelings and consummate their love, all of which will be rejected by Bob as the protagonist makes an advance on him and, infuriated by his alarmed reaction

and accusation of being a queer, will result in Jim assaulting and sexually abusing his former friend, taking readers back to the moment where the novel starts, with Jim trying to drink himself to forget the distressing conclusion to his romanticised obsession with Bob, and the life he had envisioned of the two friends becoming lovers.

The distressing element of said scene is already mentioned by Vidal himself in the novel's Preface, where the author explains the changes made to the original ending:

> "There were those who found the original ending 'melodramatic.' When I reminded one critic that it is the nature of a romantic tragedy to end in death, I was told that so sordid a story about fags could never be considered tragic, unlike, let us say, a poignant tale of doomed love between a pair of mentally challenged teenage 'heteros' in old Verona." (5)

As Vidal explains in his 1994 Preface of the novel, in both the revised and non-revised versions, the meeting of Jim with Bob Ford after their last encounter on the lake cabin, leads Jim and Bob to a queer bar in New York, where the two of them have a few drinks before leaving to Bob's hotel where, after Jim's insistence, they share their bed. In this first edition, Jim makes a move on Bob, revealing his homosexuality but scaring Bob off so much, that he ends up enraged and reacting violently to Bob's rejection, so much so, that he ends up choking him to death and running away from the hotel, an ending much in line with the style and anti-homosexual cautionary purpose that publishing houses had for gay fiction in the 50s. Including the Preface mentioned above in which Vidal addresses, among other things, the changes he made on the 1948 version of *The City and the Pillar* as well as a commentary on his editor, the 1965 and 1995 revised and edited versions have a different ending. In this edited version, instead of choking Bob to death, Jim struggles trying to force Bob to coax and have sexual intercourse with him without much success, grappling violently and eventually raping Bob after his former best friend

shows no signs of being queer, nor having no interest in Jim in such a way. Right after that and taking off from the same pace Vidal left Jim in his first version, Jim goes into a 'fairy' bar with the intention of drinking himself into forgetting what he has just done.

Aware of the risks such a novel could have and the impact it had in the U.S., as well as on his reputation as a writer, at the time of its publication, Vidal further stated:

> I had just written a novel called *The City and the Pillar.* If I published it, I'd take a right turn and end up accursed in Thebes. Abandon it, and I'd turn left and end up in holy Delphi. Honour required that I take the high road to Thebes. I have read that I was too stupid at the time to know what I was doing but in such matters I have always had a certain alertness. I knew that my description of the two love affairs between two 'normal' all-American boys, of the sort that I had spent three years in the army with during the war, would challenge every superstition about sex in my native land [...] Until then, American novels of 'inversion' dealt with shrieking queens or lonely bookish boys who married unhappily and pined for Marines. I broke that mould. (Preface 3-4)

The English publisher, John Lemann writes in his memoir *The Whispering Gallery* "'There were several passages in *The City and the Pillar*, a sad, almost tragic book and a remarkable achievement in a difficult territory for so young a man, that seemed to my travellers and the printers to go too far in frankness. I had a friendly battle with Gore to tone down and cut these passages. Irony of the time and taste: they wouldn't cause an eyebrow to be lifted in the climate of the early sixties'" (Preface 4). Vidal's own response to the reactions his novel triggered among his contemporaries speak of his self-awareness regarding the two-sided effect a novel such as his had on the current status of queer novels in the U.S. those days, as well as his recently acquired reputation as a war novelist, when

he received the news of *The City and the Pillar* becoming a best seller in a matter of weeks: "What did my confrères think? I am afraid not much. The fag writers were terrified; the others were delighted that a competitor had also neatly erased himself." (4)

A case for the homosexual coming-of-age: *The City and the Pillar* as a coming-out-of-age novel of the 40-50s

Something these seminal novels mentioned above have in common is that they are both coming-out and coming-of-age narratives. In this sense, if many of the queer works of the 20th century have proven something, is that these two narrative constructions are usually presented as intertwined and inseparable. This is also the case of Jim Willard, the queer leading character of Vidal's novel, whose discovery and acceptance of himself as a gay man is gradually constructed as he grows older, and begins with his first sexual encounter with another man, his best friend Bob Ford. Jim and Bob's sexual encounter during their camping trip at a former slave cabin becomes a turning point for Jim, as the ghost of his affection for his best friend chase him wherever he goes throughout the span of years that the novel covers. Even during his first years of travelling, after he has left Virginia, when Jim still refuses to acknowledge nor call himself a 'gay man.'

Closely similar to the concept of 'formation novel,' the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* describes 'coming-of-age novel' as "[an] English term adopted as an approximate equivalent to the German *Bildungsroman*, although with an implied distinction in terms of time-span. Whereas a fully-developed English *Bildungsroman* or 'education novel' […] will follow the maturation of the protagonist from infancy or even from before that […] to early adulthood, a coming-of-age novel may be devoted entirely to the crises of late adolescence involving courtship, sexual initiation, separation from

parents, and choice of vocation or spouse ("Coming-of-age novel" 64). Vidal's novel belongs to the latter, as it narrates precisely how Jim Willard's journey from his first sexual encounter with a man, his best friend Bob Ford, and negation of his queerness, something the protagonist will struggle to define for most of the novel as he steps into adulthood, passing by many other sexual partners and destinations, right until his reunion with Bob seven years after.

The character of Bob Ford is introduced to the reader as a good-looking, charming, athletic young boy who seems to catch the eye of many of his and Jim's female classmates in their high school, a description that is not unlike that of Jim, except for Jim's more reserved personality and apparent little to no interest in women:

> As they moved through the crowd to the door to the locker room, a dozen girls greeted Bob, who responded with an easy grace. Tall, blue-eyed, with dark-red curling hair, he was known throughout the school as Lover Man, a phrase somewhat more innocent than it sounded. 'Love' meant little more than kissing. Most girls found irresistible, but boys did not much like him, possibly because girls did. Only Jim was his friend. (Vidal 17-8)

The portrayal of Bob as someone with a charming, and ladies' man-like personality, paints a striking contrast with the protagonists' evident awkwardness when interacting and dealing with the opposite sex. This is made especially evident whenever any of the seemingly heterosexual male characters of the book asks Jim about his romantic and sexual preferences, his sexual history, or about his apparent lack of interest in courting with or talking about women. An instance of this contrast can be seen in the following passage, where Bob complains to Jim about the lack of willingness of a girl from their school to have sex with him after last night's prom party:

’How was Sally?’

Bob growled. ‘Prick-teaser, like all the rest. Leads you on so you think, *now* I can lay her and then, just as you get all hot, *she* gets scared: Oh, what’re you doing to me? Oh, stop! You stop that now!’ Bob sighed with disgust. ‘I tell you it makes a man so horny he could lay a mule, if it would just stand still.’ Bob contemplated mules. Then: ‘Why didn’t you come to the dance last night? Lots of girls asked for you.’

‘I don’t know. Don’t like dancing, I guess. I don’t know.’

‘You’re too bashful.’ (26-7)

Jim’s avoidance and even uncomfortableness when discussing the female subject with regards of his heterosexual desire will be constantly manifested throughout the novel whenever the protagonist interacts with other men, especially those of his work environment around which he will be put in a position where the only alternatives are to keep his heterosexual façade, or reveal his queerness:

Well, I’ll show you ‘round these dives I know. They know me at all the waterfront places. And I’ll get you a girl. A real good one. What do you like?’

Jim was uncomfortable. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘Almost anything.’

‘Hell, you got to be particular or you’ll catch something awful. Me. I never caught anything… yet.’ He touched the wooden side of his bunk. ‘Get you a blonde, they’re best. Natural blondes, I mean. Swedes, that kind. You like blondes?’

‘Sure.’

Collins pushed himself up on his elbow and looked at Jim, suddenly alert. ‘Hey, I’ll bet you’re a virgin.’

> Jim flushed and couldn't think of anything to say; the pause was enough.
>
> […]
>
> 'I know just the girl for you. Name's Myra. Professional but nice, and clean. She don't drink or smoke and because she don't drink she takes care of herself. She won't give you no dose. I'll get you and Myra together.'
>
> 'I'd like to meet her,' said Jim, and the beer he had drunk made him excited at the idea. He dreamed occasionally of women, but most often dreamed of Bob, which disturbed him when he thought about it. (42-3)

The passages from the novel quoted above illustrate two important aspects that reveal and weave together the coming-of-age and coming-out structural nature of the novel; on the one hand, it draws the reader's attention for the first time to Jim's awareness of his own uncomfortableness when talking about his (lack of) heterosexual desire, something he believes he needs to hide and compensate for in order — unbeknownst yet to him — pass as a heterosexual man and not reveal his queerness. On the other hand, the last paragraph of said quote also foreshadows what will grow to become Jim's main motivation throughout the entire novel: his idealization of his sexual encounter with Bob as a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and his eventual fixation to reunite and give into his feelings for his best friend. The above is further proved as Jim still denies himself Collins' claims of being a queer while he, quite literally, runs away terrified from the date Collins has set up for him to have sex with a woman for the first time:

> He no longer cared whether or not he was different from other people. He hated this woman and her body.
>
> […]

> He was not what Collins had called him. He was certain of that. Yet why? At the moment when what should have happened was about to happen, the image of Bob had come between him and the girl, rendering the act obscene and impossible. What to do? He would not exorcise the ghost of Bob even if he could. Yet he realized that it would be a difficult matter to live in a world of men and women without participating in their ancient and necessary duet. Was he able to participate? Yes, he decided, under other circumstances. In any case, the word that Collins had shouted after him was hardly apt. It couldn't be. It was too monstrous (53)

In many ways, the young boys' sexual interaction during their little getaway before Bob heads to find a job in New York, becomes a catalyst for Jim's sexuality as much as for his self-discovery as a queer man, even if he only recognises it for a deep love for his friend at that moment. With Bob's departure, having barely finished high-school himself and without any ambition to achieve any personal or professional milestones. From that moment onwards, Jim's feelings for Bob will become the object of his obsession to him, and the hope that he will find his recently-enlisted U.S Merchant Marine friend out in the sea is all the push he needs to find a job in the high seas himself as a cruise cabin boy. It is during one of the ship's detours on shore in Seattle, that Jim eventually forces himself to go on a double date with Collins, one of his fellow crew members on the ship, which he takes as an opportunity to put his homosexual desire, and capability to feel that same desire for a woman to test, as he makes himself drunk to have sex with his date, knowing fully that it is what both his colleague and the two women they are meeting expect from him. Nonetheless, Jim's insistence to prove himself he can have sexual desire for a woman too, on that night, becomes the moment of his self-discovery as a queer man as his attempt is frustrated by his own inability to bring himself to meet

his own heterosexual expectations. Furthermore, as the novel advances through the seven years that separate his first sexual encounter from the final chapter of the novel, every single sexual or romantic encounter Jim has, he always compares with his first time with Bob:

> "He took it for granted that his travelling would not end until he found Bob. Then they would work out some sort of life together though precisely what that life would be he left deliberately vague […] Except for the golden image of Bob beside the river on that sunshine day, he was without history […] Everything forgotten except Collins and the two girls in their Seattle apartment. Only that night was vivid in his memory. (Vidal 55)

As Jim's journey into his early adulthood advances, the novel transports us to Los Angeles where, after finding a job as tennis instructor hotel and a series of lucky encounters, he is introduced to the glamourous and showbusiness world of Hollywood in the late 1930s. Through his acquaintance with the Hollywood actor in the rise Ronald Shaw who, after taking a liking to Jim invites him to live with him, we are presented with another turning point in the protagonist's journey into the discovery of his sexual identity; for the first time since he left Virginia, he has found a group of men with Shaw at the centre of it, who work also in the film industry. To Jim's shock, these men are not only openly queer but most of them are also described as behaving in a womanly manner:

> Jim Willard's erotic life took place almost entirely in dreams. Until that day with Bob beside the river, he had dreamed of women as often as of men, but there had seemed no set boundary between the two. But since that summer day, Bob was the constant dream-lover, and girls no longer intruded upon their perfect masculine idyll. He was aware that what he dreamed of was not what normal men

> dreamed of. But at the same time he made no connection between what he and Bob had done and what his new acquaintances did. (Vidal 64)

Aside from his need to pass as a heterosexual man, Jim Willard's difficulty to define his own sexual orientation comes from the fact that he is unable to identify with neither of the queer or heterosexual people that he meets on his on-going journey to come out of the closet. The conflict that arises between these two identities, namely the queer and the heterosexual one, is manifested on many occasions throughout the novel, especially on the first half, where Jim insists on passing as a heterosexual instead of coming into terms with the otherwise homosexual desire that he has.

Jim's fear of identifying as queer or gay[17] is revealed in many instances either through his own judgement, or through that of other people who interact with him, and whose opinion is, in general, inherently homophobic in the context of the highly heteronormative conservatism of the U.S. in the 1940s and 50s. Jim's perception of homosexuality, as well as that of his own queerness, is disrupted by the contemporary discourses of normative heterosexuality and homosexuality that the novel presents us with. The conflictive coexistence of these discourses, together with the little interaction with other queer people who might not identify with either of them, is translated into Jim's prejudiced and homophobic attitude towards other queer and homosexual men. It is not until he encounters other queer men with whom he can relate more, learns a new language to define himself, and finds new ways of coming into terms with his own queerness and homosexual desire, that Jim can finally find himself coming out of the closet. As Georges Deleuze and Félix Guattari put it, "[q]ueering is not based on recognition in a dialectic. No homosexual subject clamours for rights. Rather, the 'new'

[17] Used here to make a difference between homosexuality and queerness, according to quote at the beginning of this chapter.

homosexual affirms himself or herself by saying that no one is homosexual. Homosexuals are still being named as such by a majority in power but they are already elsewhere." (Deleuze in Verena Andermatt Conley 28)

The difficulty in narrowing down queer or homosexual identity amid a sea of sexual and gender binary oppositions also correlates with what academics such as Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick and Michael Warner have explained in their books *The Epistemology of the Closet* and *Fear of a Queer Planet* respectively, where both of them address how to define queerness and coming out of the closet truly symbolises:

> Identity as lesbian or gay is ambiguously given and chosen, in some ways ascribed and in other ways the product of the performative act of coming out — itself a political strategy without precedent or parallel. In these ways sexuality defines — for most modern societies —a political interest-constituency unlike even those of gender or race. Queer people are a kind of social group fundamentally unlike others, a status group only insofar as they are not a class. (Warner 15)

One of the key aspects which problematises defining queer identity, relies on the difficulty of escaping the tyranny of binary oppositions. As Kosofsky-Sedgwick expands on her book the consequent limitations of finding defining features of homosexuality and queerness whose meaning can stand on its own, rather than on the basis of cultural ideas historically juxtaposed, regarding gender and sexuality especially, and which has resulted in our contemporary perception of homosexuality as a whole:

> Furthermore, as I have been suggesting, the violently contradictory and volatile energies that every mornings newspaper proves to us are circulating even at this moment, in our society, around the issues of homo/heterosexual definition show over and over again how preposterous is anybody's urbane pretence at having a

> clear, simple story to tell about the outlines and meanings of what and who are homosexual and heterosexual. To be gay, or to be potentially classifiable as gay— that is to say, *to be sexed or gendered*— in this system is to come under the radically overlapping aegises of a universalizing discourse of acts or bonds and at the same time of a minoritizing discourse of kinds of persons. Because of the double binds implicit in the space overlapped by universalizing and minoritizing models, the stakes in matters of definitional control are extremely high. (54)

Consequently, the combination of the characteristics Kosofsky-Sedgwick lists above, results in Jim's inability to find romantic, but especially sexual interest in anyone that is not his 'soulmate', or 'twin' Bob, there is no other explanation about the nature of his homosexual, homoromantic or heteroromantic desire that matches his perception of homosexuality itself. Kosofsky-Sedgwick's words resonate with many of the problems that Jim Willard encounters when trying to define himself and his sexual desire according to the gender binaries that are more obvious to him, even if it is through the institutionalised and highly traditional bias of mainstream heteronormative culture in the 1940s-50s: man/woman, masculine/ feminine and, last but not least, straight/gay and its similar variants. Gradually, as the novel advances, we can see how some of these binaries which society has enforced on the queer community are blurred little by little, confirming the fact that, as Judith Butler suggests, there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to be looked at as two separate identities:

> If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders… The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender

> mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler 6)

Notwithstanding, even if the protagonist meets a community of gay men during the time he spends living under the comfort and privilege of Shaw's mansion, exposed to for the first time to a non-homophobic and queer-positive circle of gay men and artists whose 'effeminate' disposition he — not surprisingly — rejects thus refusing to identify as one of them. Moreover, even though Jim eventually moves in with Shaw after he takes a great interest in him, Jim is fully aware that he accepts Shaw's terms out of convenience, and not because he reciprocates the sexually or romantically interest that the actor does profess for him:

> He allowed himself to be seduced, impressed by Shaw's fame and physical beauty. The act was familiar except that this time he was passive, too shy to be the aggressor. With Bob he had taken the initiative, but then that was a different occasion and a more important time. (Vidal 65)

The silver lining that Jim finds among Shaw's Hollywood clique in terms of defining his sexual orientation — other than discovering a homosexual community which he does not identify with — is brought to him through his acquaintance with Paul Sullivan, a failed writer who despises Hollywood despite working in it. The protagonist sees in Paul someone who, like himself, is somehow an outcast in the world of men who desire men in that he is not as effeminate or tale-telling like the rest, as well as having a sense of hopelessness to him, both of which make Jim associate the writer with his friend Bob,

even if he is not attracted to him in the same way: "Yes, he was perfectly capable of love, at least with someone who could be his brother. And though Sullivan was hardly this longed-for twin at least he was wiser than Shaw and less demanding and Jim felt easy with him, if not candid, and even affectionate." (80)

Sullivan paints a favourable contrast with the other homosexual men he meets at this stage of his journey into learning his own queerness, even more so after Jim learns he has been married and slept with women, showing the protagonist that there are many ways to live as a queer or homosexual man. Thus, by inadvertently painting queerness in a brighter light, Sullivan gives him another push into mapping his romantic and sexual desire in order to pave his way out of the closet by confronting his own queerness beyond the imposition of prototypical models of homo and heterosexuality.

> And so it begins. Then you meet another boy and another, and as you grow older, if you have a dominant nature, you become a hunter. If you're passive, you become a wife. If you're noticeably effeminate, you may join a group of others like yourself and accept being marked and known. There are a dozen types and many different patterns but there is almost always the same beginning, not being like the others. (80)

Albeit a journey into the heart of Jim's queerness and homosexual desire, the novel also presents us with Jim's brief venture into heterosexuality with Sullivan's friend and former lover, María Verlaine, during their trip to Yucatán, as he becomes aware that "a flirtation was now inevitable" (94) as he "in turn was attracted to her but he was not sure in what way" (94), aided by Sullivan's intervention to meddle and disrupt his relationship with Jim.

As Jim keeps adding sexual experiences and acquaintances in his life, he grows more comfortable with his queerness, and becomes more confident in his sexuality; he is learning how to interact with other queer people, thus becoming aware of the need to protect and hide his queerness:

> There were many different homosexual worlds in New York, and each usually had some knowledge of the others. There was also the half-world where hetero- and homosexual mingled with a certain degree of frankness […] But in the highest society the homosexual wore a stylized mask in order to move gracefully, and often convincingly, among admiring women who were attracted to him because his understanding was as great as his demands were few (148-49).

> He had sexual fantasies involving Prudence, but they stopped when he was fifteen and became interested in Bob. From that time no one existed in the world except Bob […] He marvelled at how little he had understood then […] He still half-believed that should he ever have a woman he would be normal. There was not much to base this hope on but he believed it […] Yet Jim was positive that one day Bob would appear and they would continue what was begun that day beside the river. Until then, his life was in suspension, waiting (121-22).

Even after several same-sex relationships, Jim finds difficulty nonetheless in admitting he might be homosexual, queer or even bisexual, and thinks of his and Bob's moment at the cabin as one-time life experience that is not necessarily related to his homosexual desire, but to the special connection that he insists on using as a justification for his actions. Confusing as it might seem, his romantic idealization of Bob means that, as long as he sees their sexual encounter through his own perception of it, he will not be able to

separate his romantic feelings and his sexual desire. Determined to finally find closure or reconcile with his feelings for Bob, even after he gets word of his marriage during his visit to Virginia for the first time after his years of travelling, Jim finds himself surprised at the fact that his friend has moved onto life as a heterosexual man:

> Not once had it occurred to Jim that Bob could ever in any way be different from the way he had been that day beside the river. Yet he must have changed. […] Was it possible that he had waited years for a reunion with a man who cared only for women? No, he rejected the thought. Bob was obviously bisexual, if only because no one could have been so perfect a lover on that unique occasion and then change entirely. Jim reassured himself, and because he wanted to believe that nothing had changed, nothing had changed. (162)

Moreover, not satisfied with this information and still holding onto hope that Bob will reciprocate his love after all these years, responding violently to his rejection, the final scene of the novel puts a slight strain to Jim's progress. Nonetheless, during the time between the moment Jim's health forces him to abandon the Air Force without actually fighting in WWII and between visiting his family in Virginia after his father's death, he encounters many of the people which have played an important role in his journey into coming-of-age and coming out; his fellow cabin boy at the ship, Collins, Ronald Shaw and some of his Hollywood friends, Sullivan and Maria Verlaine, all of them having contributed in one way or another, into helping Jim face and try to accept his queerness. This becomes the exact moment where Jim's coming-out catharsis takes place, as he finally realises that, in order to find some peace of mind, he needs to take everything he has learned about himself and his sexuality to escape from the limitations of normative heterosexuality. Jim's journey is culminated with his reunion with Bob in New York, deciding they should meet in order to put himself at ease, bringing the narrative to close

full-circle. The novel sees to Jim and Bob's meeting in New York, where after spending the day together catching up with each other, they get drunk and go back to Bob's room at the hotel, building up to the distressing scene in which Jim tries to sexually assault and finally rapes his old friend[18], after which the novel finishes with Jim being ready to take all his self-knowledge and Bob's rejection with him, and start a new chapter on his life.

The quest for a male queer identity: Toxic Masculinity and *Heterosexism in The City and the Pillar*

In Jim Willard's story, the coming-out and coming-of-age narratives are both framed in an atmosphere of toxic masculinity and heterosexism. The decades of the 1940s and 50s were a period known for advertising and institutionalising American identity as a strict paradigm of patriotic, sexist, heteronormative, capitalist and conservative attitudes among every U.S. citizen. With McCarthyism and Cold War as two prime examples of how the society's mindset was strongly permeated by Government, the reinvention and redefinition of a model of American masculinity was one of the pillars of said ideological enterprise and *The City and the Pillar* bears witness to that.

This political climate of widespread nationalist paranoia makes special sense if we consider Mercè Cuenca's essay on the topic of masculinity, more specifically on deconstructing masculinity in Cold War period literature:

> The idealized men of the period, who were construed into cultural referents, belonged to clearly defined social categories: they were male, they were white, and they were heterosexual. Their biological sex, socially privileged race, and

[18] As clarified in the introduction, this ending corresponds to the revised and unexpurgated edition of the novel, the other version takes up the narration of the events from the sexual assault and makes Jim murder Bob instead of raping him.

> culturally orthodox desire marked them as privileged individuals within a deeply patriarchal and heterosexist social system. Mainstream men were expected to conform to the prevalent heteronormative ideology, based upon a strict binary system of sex and gender, which begged the alignment of maleness and masculinity, and were subsumed within a rigidly hierarchical racial economy where "Otherness" was defined in relation to whiteness. In addition, these model men were supposed to embody an ideal of masculinity which was mediated by the successful fulfillment of the roles of breadwinner, heterosexual husband, and father. (Cuenca 122)

The negotiation of a realistic male identity based upon stereotyped models of masculinity puts a strain in the building of alternative, outcast identities. From the first episodes of Jim's journey into self and sexual discovery, he is surrounded and exposed to a system of heteronormative patterns that prevent him from looking into the nature of his own homosocial desire and his potential queerness, struggling to escape the oppression of contemporary discourses of mainstream American identity. Furthermore, McCarthy's political ideas also rely on the concept of Otherness. Due to the Cold War fear of the Communist threat, McCarthy's policies amplify the idea of the enemy within the U.S. society, criminalising problematic individuals under the pretence of harbouring un-American values.

The reader knows relatively little about Jim's life before the cabin event with Bob other than he meets many of the requirements to be the perfect embodiment of traditional masculinity. Jim is aware that both him and Bob align with this model of, which is why he does not think either of them could be queer. Consequently, Jim develops a strong dislike and even homophobic view on those he calls out on pejoratively 'fairies' and 'queens,' and doesn't think himself able to enter in any romantic or sexual relationship

with a man until he meets Paul Sullivan. Jim's strong dislike of effeminate homosexuals is specially manifested when he becomes involved in the Hollywood-based community of gay actors and artists that he meets through Shaw:

> Too many of them behaved like women. Often after he had been among them, he would study himself in a mirror to see if there was any trace of the woman in his face or manner; and he was always pleased that there was not. Finally, he decided that he was unique. He was the only one who had done what he had done and felt the way he did. Even the elegant, long-haired youths[19] all agreed he was probably not one of them. Nevertheless, women expected him to make love to them, and when he didn't (he could never quite explain to himself *why* [20]he didn't) they felt that it was they who were lacking, not he […] Yet he wanted to know about them, if only out of morbid desire to discover how what had been so natural and complete for him could be so perfectly corrupted by these strange womanish creatures. (Vidal 64-5)

The passage quoted above shows the contradictions that afflict Jim's mind, clearly divided between the realisation of his own homosexual desire, and the shame he feels for homosexual and effeminate men. These are telling of the extent to which Jim has assimilated and become a victim of the oppression and homophobia of the heteronormative system. Vidal's protagonist justifies his first sexual encounter with Bob as something strictly platonic, out of the ordinary, not comparable to a mere sexual meeting between two heterosexual/homosexual men, but rather a meeting of lovers, soulmates or brothers. The lack of positive models of homosexuality and language to define himself, combined with the imposition of traditional and conservative models of

[19] "Elegant, long-haired youths" refers here to Ronald Shaw's circle of homosexual acquaintances in Hollywood.
[20] Original italics from the text.

masculinity, result in Jim's perception of queerness as something corrupted, deviant and avoidable through the lenses of toxic masculinity, and yet it remains something that he cannot alienate completely from himself: "But Jim was not at all certain that he knew what love was. He assumed that it must be something like what he felt for Bob, an emotion which, as he grew older, became even stronger, as though absence in some way preserved it pure. Also what he felt the virtue of being unstated, a secret all his own" (96).

When Jim is transferred to the Colorado Air Force of the army after leaving from Los Angeles, he is transported from the colourful and artistic flamboyance of Hollywood's openly homosexual community to the completely opposed conservatism, heterosexism and hyper-masculinity and of the U.S. Army. Ironically, it will be at this stage of the novel where Jim will walk out of his sexual shell in a community where it could not be more condoned, attracted to his fellow soldiers regardless of their admitted (or camouflaged) sexual orientation:

> Then one mentioned fairies[21]. As far as Jim knew there were none in the barracks, except possibly the soldier who had started the conversation.
>
> […]
>
> 'Just the other day this queer wants me to go with him. Me! Well, I told the bastard what I thought of him. I told him if he didn't get out of there quick I'd break his neck, that's what I told him, and boy, he got out of there fast!' The others nodded solemnly when they heard this story, and each told an identical story, although in some instances the outraged man had indeed slugged the fairy. Jim tried not to laugh. (116)

[21] 'Fairy' is used here in an offensive way to describe gay men, especially those considered more traditionally effeminate.

Later, it is revealed in the novel that the same corporal was actually queer, as Jim himself suspects, but rejects him over another of their fellow soldiers. Conversations such as the one quoted above were used as a technique to incriminate other queers and deviate any suspicions anyone could have of being a queer oneself, a technique which has much in common with the ways U.S. citizens suspected of being national protected themselves against the Lavender and Red Scare. This strategy has parallelisms with McCarthy's delating techniques, that created an atmosphere of paranoia prompting Americans to accuse — sometimes falsely — before being accused themselves.

It is also important to note how Jim's use of language also reflects the influence of discourses of toxic masculinity, such as the use he makes of words such as 'fairy,' 'queen' or 'strange womanish creatures' in a negative way to refer to other queer or homosexual men, as opposed to using nouns such as 'brother,' 'soulmate' or 'twin' when talking about Bob or other men to whom Jim is attracted to, for fear of using a language that could reveal his homosexuality:

> For the first time in months he wanted sex. He wanted the young corporal. Mentally, he raped him, made love to him. Worshiped him; they would be brothers and never parted.
>
> [...]
>
> Ken told him everything about himself and Jim listened intently, infatuated, unable to think of anything except how to get Ken to bed. Not since Bob had anyone so excited him. But with Bob there had been a sense of identity, of twins complementing one another; with Ken what he felt was absolute lust. He must have him (116-17).

The quote above also illustrates how Jim's restrained sexual desire is externalised as violence, as he cannot imagine the act of desiring another man without it not being intense, forced, unnatural and, therefore, violent, as he imagines he would approach the young corporal. This same intensity is also evoked in the last scene of the book where, instead of imaging, he eventually assaults Bob as he sleeps, overwhelmed by his need to see if his friend feels the same way about him. Hurt by Bob's unquestionable rejection and Bob and the loss of his idealization of him and their relationship, Jim is stricken by the wish to hurt him and, blinded by his hurt feelings anger towards his lost lover, he ends up raping him in an incredibly disturbing and anti-climactic moment.

After ashamedly running away from the hotel scene, he drinks his sorrows in a bar and, after rejecting the advances of a gay man, Jim drifts around the city to the river, bringing the novel to close full-circle after coming to the realising that, even if he will never be able to fit into the standards of normative heterosexuality nor those homosexuality either. As he faces the Hudson and is reminded of the river by the cabin where his queer awakening started, Jim determines he has finally made an identity for himself which will help him move on with his life as he knows it, even if it means he will never be completely satisfied with it, or with the only man he thought he had loved, removed from the picture and left in the past:

> He knew exactly where he was and who he was and there was nothing left to do but to continue, as though nothing had had happened but even as he made this vow, he recalled firelight and heard again the river's roar. No vision ended except in something vivid and new, and there was nothing new for him. The lover and brother was gone, replaced by a memory of bruised flesh, tangled sheets, violence
>
> […]

Fascinated, he watched the water shifting dark and cold against the stony island. Soon he would move on. (186)

***The City and the Pillar*, a defiant queer coming-out-of-the-closet narrative**

British journalist Bernard Levin [22] wrote in the London Times shortly after its publication in the United Kingdom in 1948 that *The City and the Pillar* was "The first serious American homosexual novel," a praising that can still be found in many covers of the book nowadays. Considering that the novel was hardly well-received by the American press regardless of becoming a best-selling success in little more than two weeks (Preface 4), and the elements discussed in this chapter, Levin's claim is nothing short of being true. At a time where heteronormativity was — and still is — the extended norm, Gore Vidal's literary proposal took not only a successful yet also very controversial step away from gay pulp and with the erasure and heterosexist portrayal of many contemporary novels with queer protagonists, but a step away from the cultural and social implications that such an openly queer character had too.

His novel defies the cultural and political limitations of McCarthyism, as well as those of gay pulp fiction — therefore clearly stepping out of this sub-genre. Firstly, it is never clear that Jim is homosexual, but it is safe to say that he is a queer individual, and that he does have romantic and sexual desire for people of his same sex. Secondly, there is no redeeming heterosexuality in the end and even the protagonist struggles with his own orientation the narrator never attempts to convince the readers that Bob is or was ever interested in Jim either in a romantic or sexual way, but it was actually Jim who deceived himself in thinking so.

[22] See Charters, Samuel and Anne for the source of Levin's reference.

This means that the novel lacks one of the main characteristics that its contemporary works of gay pulp fiction did; namely a lack of heterosexual redemption, where one of the male protagonists involved in a sexual affair always turns out to be heterosexual in the end, or simply heterosexuality is made to prevail above the rest by means of assassinating or punishing (socially or physically) the homosexual protagonist. Unlike most novels with a homosexual protagonist from the 1930s to the 1950s, Jim Willard becomes one of the first and the most complex characters in 20th century gay literature in the U.S. that comes out of the closet with the prospect of living out and about as a queer man.

Vidal's protagonist is nonetheless unprecedented in its complex and historically as well as literary-subverting portrayal of the struggle to come out of the closet. At a time where homosexuality was seen as nothing but secretive, like the love stories that appeared published in gay pulp fiction, and dangerous like those queer individuals who were prosecuted under the assumption of being a security risk to the American society; Gore Vidal's novel took a tentative yet courageous first step by writing the story of a young Jim Willard despite having to conform to many of the restraints of his and Vidal's time, offers a complex and hopeful, — but also faithful — portrayal of queerness, homosexual awakenings and coming out narratives, at a convulsive social and political time in the United States.

CHAPTER 3: PATRICIA HIGHSMITH AND *THE PRICE OF SALT*

Patricia Highsmith and a New Turn for Lesbian Fiction

A Texas-born New Yorker, Patricia Highsmith (1921-1995) became one of the most representative writers of thriller and crime fiction in the U.S. With twenty-two published novels — among which is the most acclaimed pentalogy, the so-famous "Ripliad" with the homonymous Tom Ripley as the main character — in addition to several essays on the topic of crime fiction writing, nine short story collections, and several comic book stories, she is nowadays still known as one of the most prolific writers of her time. Ever reserved about her private life, she was known to be far more vocal about her views on certain political aspects, as opposed to the secrecy she kept about her lesbianism, which extended to her only semi-autobiographical evidence there is of it, as well as to the authorship under which it was disguised. The notorious real-life story which brought Patricia Highsmith to write *The Price of Salt* has already become part of the literary myth that made possible for this one-of-a-kind novel, her only romantic and openly lesbian one[23], to be published.

Nowadays considered a seminal text of lesbian fiction, Highsmith included in an afterword to the book many years after its original publication a description of the specific event that ignited her into putting into fiction a more private side of her that would never again be invoked in any other of her novels; her lesbianism. A distinctive story of how she met a blonde woman in a fur coat and a pair of gloves during her youth days working in a department store in New York during the Christmas shopping rush of 1948, and about how the writer was left in such an overwhelming state after said encounter, that she was

[23] Despite *The Price of Salt* and *Small g: a Summer Idyll* being her only books depicting an openly homosexual relationship and an open acknowledgement of a character's queerness, it must be noted that many of her novels are known to contain homoerotic subtext.

triggered to put it into words as if possessed by it. The fit she was in resulted in an 8-page draft of the novel that would eventually fall into reader's hands in 1952 as *The Price of Salt,* by Claire Morgan. Many years later in the aforementioned afterword, Highsmith would reveal that the real reason she was in a writing and inspiration frenzy was the result of the vision-like meeting of the woman at the store's doll counter, in combination with a case of feverish chickenpox, and a dash of Highsmith's own famous romances. Nonetheless, her affair with the divorced Philadelphia socialite Virginia Kent Catherwood[24] a few years before the events that led her to write the novel, would also be recognised as one of the major influences on the novel's love story. And, the rest, as they say, is history.

The specifics of said literary-inspiring event appear in the afterword too, included for the first time in the year 1990 edition of the novel the same year Highsmith claimed authorship of the book publicly — and for the first time after having been associated with her then unknown nom-de-plume Claire Morgan for almost thirty years — from its publication as a hardcover in 1952. One year after its original release, *The Price of Salt* would achieve tremendous success in the U.S. with the releasing of its paperback edition[25], putting Highsmith's book in the spotlight right next to bestselling lesbian pulp authors such as Marijane Meeker, Ann Bannon, as well as next to titles of lesbian classics like Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. With her first and hit thriller novel *Strangers on a Train* recently published, one of the major concerns of Highsmith was that her publishers Harper & Bros refused to publish her novel, a clearly more deviant take on the literary career she was expected to make as a writer of crime fiction. Ironically, *The Price*

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[24] Several biographers of Highsmith, including Owen Wilson, have named Virginia Kent Catherwood and the woman she came across at Bloomingdale's as the main inspiration for Carol Aird, but that the novel's character was in fact an amalgamation of several women that the author had probably met near that time.
[25] Dawson's article features the first edition of *The Price of Salt*, published by Bantam as 25-cent paperback with the catchline "The novel of a love society forbids" on its traditional lesbian-pulp style cover.

of Salt, while it became extremely popular with its paperback release — and has remained one of the most well-cherished classics of lesbian fiction —has made itself a unique place in the novelist's bibliography for being her only lesbian novel, as well for being the only one of her books in which no murderous or life-threatening criminal act takes place.

Highsmith's Revolutionary Ending: *The Price of Salt* vs. *Carol* or the importance of Claire Morgan

The Price of Salt accompanies readers on a journey that its protagonist, nineteen-year old New Yorker and aspiring theatre stage designer Therese Belivet, undergoes from the moment she starts working at Frankenberg's as a sales person on the toy's counter, and meets the woman responsible for Therese's queer awakening. A woman whose name would replace the original title of the book after its re-publication under the name of Patricia Highsmith: *Carol*. Carol Aird, an unhappily married woman, and mother of one, will captivate the protagonist and become the object of her obsession throughout the novel, but she will also be the person who will help Therese embrace her queerness[26]. As the two women begin their acquaintance, Therese will become more and more fascinated by her, and starts realising the relationship she has with her boyfriend, Richard, feels more and more oppressive compared to the liberating freedom she enjoys with Carol. Even though Therese at first will not know what to make of her feelings for Carol, believing attraction between women to be something forbidden and unnatural that she does not identify with, she will eventually embrace her romantic attraction for her, embarking on

[26] Like in Chapter 2 of this thesis, 'queerness' and 'queer' are used specifically and throughout this chapter, as more generalising terms to refer to those female characters who are attracted to women, as opposed to 'lesbian' or 'bisexual, as it is never confirmed by the narrator what sexual orientation Therese, nor the other queer characters from the novel, identify with.

a psychological as well as physical journey with the older woman across the West of the United States on a road trip together, culminating in the rebirth and affirmation of herself.

Having determined to let go of her ties in New York and following after Carol, their trip will be brought to a sudden halt as the two are caught and recorded by a private investigator hired by Carol's husband, Harge Aird, with the purpose of helping him build a morality case against his wife and her lesbianism to gain custody of their daughter Rindy, forcing an imminent separation of the two lovers. Therese's coming out and coming of age concludes, much like that of Jim Willard, with her reunion with Carol, and the two women smiling at the hopeful joy of a new chance to have a future together as romantic partners. Thus, as the initial title of the novel suggests, in the end, Therese will have learned that, sometimes, a price needs to be paid to love freely and according to who you really are or, in other words, that the 'salt' of life, usually comes with certain sacrifices.

The novel's title resonates with the climate of oppression of the McCarthy period, warning readers of the specific 'price' they would have to pay if they decided to live as homosexuals, as opposed to the natural and heterosexual way of life. By means of subjugating any fictional portrayals of lesbianism and queerness to the gender and sexual literary but also social norms of the McCarthy period time, lesbian pulp paperbacks became a very specific product reflecting both queer oppression, as well as those oppressed by it, in U.S. society:

> [f]ollowed tight narrative guidelines and featured lurid covers and titillating subject matter. The heyday of pulps, in the 1950s and 1960s, coincided with larger changes in the publishing industry as a whole, and lesbian pulps especially led a double life. Although pulp novels about lesbians were sometimes written by men and marketed to them as well, they were discovered by lesbians, and they became

> some of the earliest mass-market texts in which lesbians could see representations of themselves. Although the pulps drew different readers, publishers and writers were quick to see the potential of pulps to expand readership and therefore customers, and many of these books were written by lesbians and about lesbians with lesbian readers in mind. (Foote 177-78)

In accordance with the previous quotation from Foote, lesbian pulp was and has been for a long time, considered "degraded fiction because it's genre fiction" (183), but still fiction, nonetheless. We could argue then, that *The Price of Salt* is in fact not an example of lesbian pulp fiction, as it was not marketed or written deliberately as such according to the conventions of this literary phenomenon, but rather that it used its momentum to gain recognition within the larger genre of lesbian pulp fiction, and shared its same devoted, queer audience. Nonetheless, the impact that the novel had at the current time of its publication is something that Highsmith herself has shared in retrospect in her afterword, being aware that the implications that a novelist like her writing a book that clearly depicted a lesbian romance, and with the closest thing to writing the first traditional "happy ending" in the entire subgenre of lesbian fiction from the U.S., would inevitably put her out in the public eye, and the consequences said decision might have on a writing career still in the making, and at a time when such openness would be frowned-upon. Highsmith herself admitted as much, once she claimed authorship of the book:

> If I were to write a novel about a lesbian relationship, would I then be labelled a lesbian-book writer? That was a possibility, even though I might never be inspired to write another such book in my life. So I decided to offer the book under another name. By 1951, I had written it. I could not push it into the background for 10

> months and write something else, simply because for commercial reasons it might have been wise to write another "suspense" book. (Afterword 4)

Much like the protagonists of *The Price of Salt*, the corpus of lesbian-themed pulp fiction that was currently in high demand was led by authors who fed readers with stories often written from a male heterosexual lenses and, thus, offering tales of forbidden same-sex lovers that often ended in suicide and insanity[27]; of young girls falling victims to lesbian corruptions; of homoerotic and experimental curiosities behind the walls of sororities; of the survival of female identities in the margins; of mysticism of love between females. The tropes just mentioned are a few examples of some of the most common outcomes for those lesbian characters that having rejected to embrace heterosexuality or turn back into the closet, were punished into a life of misery or death. Hence Highsmith's contribution to the lesbian community would become a new and hopeful alternative to the otherwise limited escapism of queer representation within the McCarthyite zeitgeist. Lesbian pulp novels were known to be written either by female writers using a pseudonym like Highsmith, Marijane Meaker, Ann Bannon and many other women did for one single purpose: to satisfy the needs of an imposed male readership, and to never violate the requirements of a censorship that aimed to show the existence of romantic relationships between women, whilst also warning off against them.

The novelist, as Claire Morgan, was aware of the challenges having a lesbian protagonist meant during the McCarthy period and Cold War years, and why her novel made a difference to those lesbians individuals who could find solace in her novel:

> The appeal of *The Price of Salt* was that it had a happy ending for its two main characters, or at least they were going to try to have a future together. Prior to this

[27] The novels *Spring Fire* (Marijane Meaker) and *Women's Barracks* (Tereska Torrès) end with their female protagonists' insanity and commitment of suicide respectively, as it was often the case in lesbian pulp.

> book, homosexuals male and female in American novels had had to pay for their deviation by cutting their wrists, drowning themselves in a swimming pool, or by switching to heterosexuality (so it was stated), or by collapsing – alone and miserable and shunned – into a depression equal to hell. (Afterword)

However, Highsmith's assessment of some of the most problematic aspects that the rise of lesbian pulp posed to lesbianism itself, as well as to the potential identification for the lesbian community as it will be explained later on this chapter — especially if seen from a post-1970s women and gay liberation movement perspective as contemporary readers —, falls short in its acknowledgement of the contribution her novel, inadvertently or not, made in favour of queer women who looked for ways to escape the hetero-patriarchal political and social oppression that the 1950s sexual and gender agenda so thoroughly advertised. Highsmith's reaffirmation of a lesbian relationship in a positive way defies McCarthyism's portray of queerness as weakness and deviation, that should be banned from society.

The Price of Salt and the Female Coming-out-of-age Narrative

In a similar fashion to Jim Willard's journey into coming of age and assimilating his queerness, with an omniscient narrator focalised on Therese, the novel takes as its starting point on the present day of the young girl whose only connection with her past are a few memories of a mother who sent her to Episcopalian boarding school and her admiration for her only mother-like figure, Sister Alicia. Other than how the Brooklyn-based girl has very recently taken up a temporary job as a salesperson at Frankenberg's department store, that she will soon travel to Europe with her boyfriend, Richard Semco, and that her ambition is to become a theatre stage designer, very little else is described of her character

aside from a general sense of being anxious, introspective, and ever uncertain and ambivalent about herself, struggling to truly express what she wants throughout the novel: "Her life was a series of zigzags. At nineteen, she was anxious" (Highsmith 3). As the narrative advances, Therese's restlessness seems to be connected to Richard and the plans for their future he keeps bringing up and imposing on her:

> And the hopelessness of herself, of ever being the person she wanted to be and of doing the things that person would do. Had all her life been nothing but a dream, and was *this* real? It was the terror of this hopelessness that made her want to shed the dress and flee before it was too late, before the chains fell around her and locked. (12; italics from original).

Going from quick but deep infatuation, to overwhelming obsession and eventual reciprocated affection, the protagonist's anxiety and sense of being an outsider in her own life will also gradually dissipate as she grows closer to Carol who, from their first encounter, will radically take over her thoughts, awakening something in Therese that will mark the true beginning of Therese's story. Carol's entrance into Therese's life will make the young protagonist realise that there are some aspects about herself that make her uneasy, and prompt her to hide in a shell away from the different and difficult layers of human relationships that she doesn't understand yet, or is too scared to. Her trip with Carol, which will become a turning point for her in her coming-of-age journey, one that will compel her to mature, embrace her queerness and, consequently, lose her innocence too. And the main person who will accompany on this journey of self-discovery and challenge these notions of herself will be the same woman with whom she will also fall in love with.

> You so prefer things reflected in a glass, don't you? You have your private conception of everything. Like that windmill. It's practically as good as being in Holland to you. I wonder if you'll even like seeing real mountains and real people.
>
> Therese felt as crushed as if Carol had accused her of lying. She felt Carol meant, too, that she had a private conception of her, and that Carol resented it. Real people? She thought suddenly of Mrs. Robichek. And she had fled her because she was hideous. (151-52)

As the quote above illustrates, Carol will single out on several occasions Therese's general restlessness and need to live up to her own impressions, almost afraid to become too engrossed or close with other people, and vice versa. This will be true for Mrs. Robichek among other people, a woman from Frankenberg's that the young girl runs away from at the beginning of the novel after the two become friendly, but whom Therese will grow close to be encouraged by Carol. But it will also be true for the protagonist's love interest as well, as Carol is always described through the eyes of her young lover's obsession with her, thus offering readers a more superficial and less complex view of her.

As Therese's attraction for the older woman becomes more and more apparent, parallelly, she will become more confident with herself and her identity, and even her vocation for becoming a set designer, as the result of Carol's influence and encouraging of Therese to follow her heart, and the young protagonist's eagerness to impress Carol. Therese's journey into coming out and coming of age, will change from an only metaphorical to a physical realm too, as the two women escape the confines of New York to embark on a road trip across the west of the United States together. It will be after their confrontation with the detective hired by Harge Aird, and after being left behind mid-trip by Carol, who had to fly off to New York in an attempt to prevent her husband from taking Rindy's custody from her, and the last pages of the novel in which Therese thinks

back to the most recent events since her and Carol went on the trip; going from her excitement and fascination with Carol, and her acceptance of their relationship as romantic and sexual, to the feeling of Carol's abandonment and betrayal eventually choosing to put an end to their trip in attempt to defend herself against Harge's accusations at the divorce proceedings and not lose custody of her daughter completely, over staying with Therese.

Therese's changes are implied to start out as physical, as she finds herself unable to live in New York and adopt back the identity and life she had before she went on the trip and before the loss of her innocence: "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 … All she could afford now was a new haircut" (Highsmith 234) It will not only be her who recognises her changes physically, as well as psychologically, but also by everyone else from her life in New York, marking the culminating realisation of her coming-of-age: "You look grown up all of a sudden," he said. "You changed your hair, didn't you?" "A little." "You don't look frightened any more. Or even so serious." "That pleases me." (Highsmith 231)

Furthermore, when Therese reunites with Carol after her return to New York, Carol acknowledges too the changes she observes in her former lover, as well as the fact that leaving her behind in the hopes of preventing Harge's detective from revealing the Dictaphones tapes and other material collected from their trip, inadvertently made the young Therese to grow up and mature, out of her resentment for Carol:

> "How can I hate you, Carol?"
>
> "I suppose you could. You did for a while, didn't you?" Carol said, as if she told her a fact.

> "Hate you? No." Not quite, she might have said. But she knew that Carol's eyes were reading it in her face.
>
> "And now--you're all grown up--with grown-up hair and grown-up clothes."…
>
> "You know, you look very fine," Carol said. "You've come out all of a sudden. Is that what comes of getting away from me?"
>
> "No," Therese said quickly. She frowned down at the tea she didn't want. Carol's phrase "come out" had made her think of being born, and it embarrassed her. (Highsmith 238)

As the passage above illustrates, even though Therese's loss of innocence and resentment after Carol's abandonment has made her change and *come out*, she still feels affection for Carol, partly because she now understands better why Carol had to go, and what is the price of their salt; what they both have to pay, in order to be each other. Namely the hardship the two women have had to face, fighting against all odds, against the societal and legislative laws of normative gender and sexuality paradigms, and respective female and (or) mother roles they are expected to fulfil. Like Jim Will, Therese Belivet embraces and welcomes the changes in herself and recently acquired maturity, becoming the compass to get her through New York with the momentum of a prospect for a new work and life. It is precisely the imposition of said sexual and gender impositions that Therese Belivet, but also Carol Aird, will struggle against in their respective journeys, that effectively embody the novel's cultural testimony and response to McCarthyism, and its oppression of the queer community among many others.

***The Price of Salt,* and Coming Out of Compulsory Heterosexuality**

Even though Highsmith's book successfully procures two other main female queer or lesbian characters, Carol Aird and Abby Gerhart, it is through the coming out of the youngest of the three women that the novel will effectively show some of the difficulties that lesbian and female queer characters encountered in their attempt to escape the discrimination and marginalising of normative discourses and compulsory heterosexuality during the McCarthy period. Supported by some of the main writings on gender and queer theory by academics like Adrienne Rich and Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick, this section will focus on the main character, Therese Belivet, to explain how the novel endeavours to escape from the pull of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, but also that of prototypes of lesbian identity in the form of oppositions of gender and sexuality binaries, more successfully that other contemporary works of lesbian fiction did.

Throughout the novel, the narrator gives little account of Therese's history of romantic dalliances with men, all of which are described as entirely displeasing to her. More meaningful perhaps than Therese lets in, is the bond she had with Sister Alicia, the only female figure Therese ever felt a connection with during her youth. But the memory of the protagonist's devotion for Sister Alicia will soon enough be replaced by her attraction to Carol as soon as they will have met, already hinting readers as to the impact the older woman will have on her life: "She did not mention Sister Alicia who she adored and thought of so often, with her pale-blue eyes and her ugly nose and her loving sternness. Because since yesterday morning Sister Alicia had been thrust far away, far below the woman who sat opposite her." (Highsmith 36) Other than the suggested infatuation with the religious woman, she is not mentioned to have had any romantic nor sexual attachment with anyone other than her boyfriend, Richard Semco, and as something uncomfortable and even painful. Furthermore, she is also aware that she stands

on a point in her relationship with Richard in which she knows that she does not truly want to travel around Europe with him, nor accept his marriage offer, yet not rejecting him completely because she finds him, among other things, the most bearable man she has ever met:

> She was cold, and felt rather miserable in general. It was the half dangling, half cemented relationship with Richard, she knew. They saw more and more of each other, without actually growing closer. She still wasn't in love with him, not after ten months, and maybe she never could be, though the fact remained that she liked him better than any one person she had ever known, certainly any man. Sometimes she thought she was in love with him,…
>
> [b]ut the feeling bore no resemblance to what she had read about love. Love was supposed to be a kind of blissful insanity. (Highsmith 21-22)

Her seeming lack of romantic as well as sexual interest will paint a striking contrast with Therese's immediate fascination with Carol. It will be precisely this latent and obsessive desire and admiration upon meeting the older woman, unlike anything she had ever felt for anyone else. This feelings will trigger the protagonist's confused realisation of her desire for Carol, even as she will have not yet admitted her interest in women, nor will she see herself as someone who could be a lesbian, according to her restricted perception and information of what being a lesbian woman is like. Thus, to fulfil her romantic expectations, Therese has to break through McCarthyism's invisible wall of heteronormative repression. In *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, Adrienne Rich defines the concept of compulsory heterosexuality, and how heteropatriarchal social structures interfere with lesbian existence:

> Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy, an act of resistance… The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain. (Rich 649)

As Rich's quote elaborates the imposition of heterosexuality as normative has done its best to erase, misname or disguise every marginal identity that has not fallen into said spectrum of dominant sexual, gender and political normativity for centuries. As Rich continues, lesbian existence has been one of the major victims of this erasure, as it has often been perceived as the ultimate resistance to these gender and power structures, and any testimony of said existence virtually eliminated or used to its own purposes:

> But when we turn the lens of vision and consider the degree to which, and the methods whereby, heterosexual "preference" has actually been imposed on women, not only can we understand differently the meaning of individual lives and work, but we can begin to recognize a central fact of women's history: that women have always resisted male tyranny […] we begin to observe behavior, both in history and in individual biography, that has hitherto been invisible or misnamed; behavior which often constitutes, given the limits of the counterforce exerted in a given time and place, radical rebellion. And we can connect these rebellions and the necessity for them with the physical passion of woman for woman which is central to lesbian existence: the erotic sensuality which has been, precisely, the most violently erased fact of female experience. (152-53)

Instead of introducing us to a self-assured queer character, Therese experiences a journey of sexual discovery and one that even if met with the opposition of male characters — as the embodiment of the heterosexist, male-dominated forces of McCarthyism — will go from initial confusion and disbelief of the young set designer, to admitting her interest and love for Carol, and eventual acceptance of her attraction to women. Despite the difficulty of accepting her queerness and its consequences of living according to it will inevitably carry, Highsmith's protagonist will grow from the ignorance of herself and her sexual orientation, embodying a new queer female identity. A new identity that defies the heteropatriarchal male gaze solidified during the McCarthy years.

Therese's first step towards this journey into embracing her new queer identity will be triggered by her meeting of Carol, and followed by an examination of herself and her feelings towards Richard, as much as those she is feeling towards the older woman, also by means of interrogating her and whether it is possible for someone like her to fall in love with a woman without necessarily being lesbian or queer. Therese will seek information from others, like Richard, in an attempt to her feels and the person she thinks she might have become — presumably, an heterosexual person who has fallen in love with a woman all of the sudden and involuntarily —, into words, and whether she will remain one forever, or if her attraction is exclusive to Carol.

> 'Hear of it? You mean people like that [a gay or lesbian relationship]? Of course.' Richard was standing straight now, winding the string in with figure-eight movements of the stick.
>
> Therese said carefully, because he was listening, 'I don't mean people like that. I mean two people who fall in love suddenly with each other, out of the blue. Say two men or two girls.' (Highsmith 81)

Therese's questions seem to voice her preoccupation at becoming a lesbian, without actually saying the words out loud, as she does not associate her attraction to Carol with being attracted to women in general. This will also be connected to some of the issues regarding problematic lesbian representation and lesbianism due to society's enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality and the consolidation of butch/femme stereotypes as means of lesbian self-recognition, not only in the McCarthy period but in literature in general up until the late 20th century. It will be this difficulty to identify as a lesbian that will problematise her acknowledgement of her identity as a queer woman, but which will also be overcome in Highsmith's novel.

In light of her increasing feelings for Carol, Therese will confess her attraction for the older woman in attempt to break all romantic ties with Richard who, in utter disbelief of the news, will confront and accuse her of being someone different than what Richard and everyone else thought she was, supposedly, a heterosexual woman:

> "God!" Therese said. She felt like saying it a dozen times. It summed up everything, her imprisonment now, here, yet. "You don't understand." But he did, and that was why he was angry. But did he understand that she would have felt the same way if Carol had never touched her?... Then the realization that so much had happened after that meeting made her feel incredibly lucky. Suddenly 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--"I think I understand you better than you understand me. You don't really want to see me again, either, because you said yourself I'm not the same person." (Highsmith 132).

Furthermore, Therese reveals as part of an epiphany of sorts that, the key to her having found herself relies not in her meeting of Carol or her being attracted to the older woman per se, but that even she hadn't met her, she would still feel imprisoned in her

relationship with Richard, even if she does not specify if it would be because of him, or because she would have never loved and be attracted to him in the same way that she now knows she can with a woman. This realisation is further emphasized as she also claims that "it was so easy for a man and a woman to find each other… but for her to have found Carol" (132) also pointing out that, aside from their mutual attraction, it is not easy for queer women like them to find other women who are also attracted to women, and who can reciprocate their feelings at a time when it is not only heavily stigmatized but openly, and legally frowned upon and oppressed on a government and institutional level too.

Much in line with the spirit of McCarthyism, Richard participates in the oppression, and insists in pursuing Therese with these accusations, even as the two women are way long into their trip, as a means to persuade her of coming back to him, but also vocalising some most well-spread myths and assumptions about queer women that often appeared in lesbian pulp, with the purpose of convincing his former girlfriend that she is making a terrible mistake by running off with Carol. However, all attempts on Richard's side to get Therese back, as well as any doubts the protagonist had about her sexual orientation and what her love for Carol make of her, will dissipate once and for all as the two women embark on their road trip and make love in Waterloo: "And she did not have to ask if this were right, no one had to tell her, because this could not have been more right or perfect. She held Carol tighter against her, and felt Carol's mouth on her own smiling mouth" (162-63).

With this crucial moment of confirmation, now more positive than ever, Therese acknowledges that her desire and love for Carol and, therefore perhaps for other women, not only feels right but it *is* also right and natural for her. By meeting and falling in love with Carol, she realises how much her life before meeting her felt like being imprisoned.

By means of reassuring the rightness of her feelings, Therese will be also making a political statement against imposing McCarthyite ideas.

Nor 'butch' nor 'femme': *The Price of Salt* and Escaping Binary Oppositions of Lesbian Identity

Even though Highsmith's novel never acknowledges its protagonist as a lesbian woman per se[28], some of the difficulties that Therese encounters when she finds herself struggling to determine her sexual orientation mirror the commonly-spread and often misconceived clichés and imagery of lesbian identities, as a hidden subculture of sorts and which, like many other people who were outside of it, she does not understand yet. Lesbian identity, even more so than homosexuality, has always been pushed to the margins, be it by society's pressing for heteronormativity and sexism, or even lines of critical thinking, lesbianism has often ended up being ignored, and lesbian women deemed mythical, if not impossible creatures.

One of the most popularised representations of said views was the well-known prototype of the butch/femme identities in lesbian subculture, both terms having started to be used in the 1940s, but becoming cemented into the 1950s culture thanks to the establishment of lesbian-only bars, and the rise of lesbian pulp fiction, among other things, the latter especially becoming a guideline of sorts for queer and potentially lesbian women to look up to. In *I Am a Woman' Ann Bannon and the Writing of Lesbian Identity in the 1950s*, Diane Hamer materializes the need to escape from the constraints that these sexual and gender binaries (man/woman, lesbian/heterosexual, masculine/feminine, and

[28] As mentioned earlier, that is not to say that she is not, indeed, a queer character but rather that the author never mentions the word 'lesbian' in relation to Therese nor Carol, at any point in the novel.

butch/femme) and the role they played in dominated the 1950s, by means of analysing one of the most famous works of lesbian pulp published years after Highsmith's lesbian story; Ann Bannon's *Beebo Brinker Chronicles*. Despite providing for a space in society to explore lesbian possibilities, Bannon's saga is used as an example of how despite their popularity, most lesbian pulp books ended up problematizing or gendering some of the main aspects used to define lesbian identity by inscribing them into the lesbian/butch labels:

> Thus lesbian relationships have historically been interpreted through a heterosexual frame of reference, a framework that feminists have correctly regarded as oppressive to women… Lesbian 'butch and femme' sexuality is regarded as problematic for lesbians because it appears to condone these scientific accounts that have both pathologised lesbianism, and equated it with heterosexuality. This is because of the equation that can readily be made between butch and femme roles and the gender categories of masculinity and femininity respectively. (Hamer 48-49)

Bannon, Meaker, and all the other contemporary writers of lesbian pulp, had in common their offering of a new and positive means of escapism and representation for lesbian women but, inadvertently, they also portrayed lesbian characters relying in some of the most generalised and clichéd views that originated in the heterosexist discourses of that time, and which certainly did not speak for all of lesbian women. This is something that Highsmith gracefully avoided in her novel, granting both readers and her protagonist a view on Therese's sexuality that is liberating on its lack of imposition of butch or femme identities on its characters, enforced by gendered and sexualised manifestations of queerness. Before Highsmith's novel, as it has already been established, there were no classic novels or pulp novels with a lesbian or queer protagonist that depicted a romantic

relationship between females that did not conclude on a tragic or violent note, nor that one of the characters was not forced back into heterosexuality, but also that these characters kept perpetuating said binaries. Furthermore, Highsmith's novel introduces us to three queer female characters, Therese, Carol and Abby, that are not described in a way that is overtly stereotypical and, as readers, it is difficult to assign them with some of the most traditional stereotyped conceptions of lesbian identity.

Focussing on young nineteen-year-old Therese Belivet in the brisk of reaching adulthood, Highsmith's protagonist will also question her sexual orientation too after meeting Carol. The novelist achieves the well-reputed uniqueness of her novel by presenting readers with several occasions in which we can see Therese struggling to identity as a queer woman on the basis that she does not know how lesbian or queer women are supposed to feel, love or live, as readers are left with the impression that she does not know any queer people, and she thinks of herself as a flawed and unfulfilled version of whom she should be:

> And just as she had not understood a month ago the phenomenon of sudden happiness, she did not understand her state now, which seemed an aftermath. It was more often painful than pleasant, and consequently she was afraid she had some grave and unique flaw. She was as afraid sometimes as if she were walking about with a broken spine. If she ever had an impulse to tell Carol, the words dissolved before she began, in fear and in her usual mistrust of her own reactions, the anxiety that her reactions were like no one else's, and that therefore not even Carol could understand them. (Highsmith 184-85)

Early on the novel, Therese's first thoughts upon making her acquaintance with Carol already pinpoint at her quick and increasing obsession with her, inscribing the beginning of desire and romantic feelings. Despite Therese's lack of language to describe

what she feels or to identify herself as a queer woman, there is a strong and undeniable awareness of her growing attraction to the older woman:

> She remembered reading — even Richard once saying — that love usually dies after two years of marriage [...] She tried to imagine Carol's face, the smell of her perfume, becoming meaningless. But in the first place could she say she was in love with Carol? She had come to a question she could not answer. (62-3)

As the fragment above these lines notes, even if the protagonist's questions about her sexual orientation will not be completely answered until much later in the novel, — coinciding with the trip she and the older woman embark on and which will mark the episode that will culminate her coming-of-age as well as her coming-out events — the question of the nature of her feelings for Carol, and whether it would be possible for it to be 'love' never leaves her mind already at an early point in the acquaintance between the two women:

> It would be almost like love, what she felt for Carol, except that Carol was a woman. It was not quite insanity, but it was certainly blissful. A silly word, but how could she possibly be happier than she was now, and had been since Thursday? (41)

This initial lack of vocabulary to refer to her feelings for Carol and, therefore, inability to define herself and her sexual orientation is also heightened by how the novel portrays the contemporary limitations for lesbian and queer women of its time to find themselves represented during the McCarthy period. These imposed, heteronormative and phallocentric divisions of queer identity, is something that would eventually become more and more relevant to queer studies. One of the main contributors to the field of queer studies in the 20th century, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, has addressed said problematisations

too in her extensive writings from a post-structural and epistemological analysis approach, of queer identities, and the social implications of coming-out in the 20th and 21st century. In it, she endeavours to historicise some of the issues regarding queer theory that remain unresolved, such as the need to rely on the butch/femme dichotomy, but also some of the main binary oppositions regarding sex, gender, and identity in general, that have contributed to the creation of the aforementioned archetypical division of lesbian and female queer identities:

> I think that a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning in twentieth-century Western culture are consequentially and quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition, notably but not exclusively male, from around the turn of the century. Among those sites are, as I have indicated, the pairings secrecy/disclosure and private/public. Along with and sometimes through these epistemologically charged pairings, condensed in the figures of "the closet" and "coming out," this very specific crisis of definition has then ineffaceably marked other pairings as basic to modern cultural organization as masculine/feminine, majority/minority innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, new/old, growth/decadence, urbane/provincial, health/illness, same/different, cognition/paranoia, art/kitsch, sincerity/ sentimentality, and voluntarity/addiction. So permeative has the suffusing stain of homo/heterosexual crisis been that to discuss any of these indices in any context, in the absence of an antihomophobic analysis, must perhaps be to perpetuate unknowingly compulsions implicit in each. (Sedgwick 72-73)

Despite not identifying with lesbian or queer women yet and before her coming-out-of-age, Therese nonetheless shows some recognition and awareness of the existence of lesbian women. She is not ignorant to the existence of lesbian bars or lesbianism, to that

matter, as she unconsciously or not, draws parallels between what she knows about women who desire women, and herself and Carol:

> Therese still felt the effects of what she had drunk, the tingling of the champagne that drew her painfully close to Carol. If she simply asked, she thought, Carol would let her sleep tonight in the same bed with her. She wanted more than that, to kiss her, to feel their bodies next to each other's. Therese thought of the two girls she had seen in the Palermo bar. They did that, she knew, and more. (Highsmith 159-60)

In the end, Therese's coming-out as things fall into place between her and Carol as she eventually embraces her queerness by abandoning Richard and embarking on her trip with Carol, but it is relevant to note how, once again, Highsmith inscribes a different type of queer representation that does not necessarily depend on butch/femme divisions and, therefore, is not limited by the narrative structures that the majority of lesbian pulp fiction was dominated by. The latter statement is mirrored by the writings of Sedgwick, which address the difficulty of redefining queer identities against the limitations in their representation:

> It seems that the topos of "homosexuality as we know it today,"…"homosexuality as we conceive of it today," has provided a rhetorically necessary fulcrum point for the denaturalizing work on the past done by many historians. But an unfortunate side effect of this move has been implicitly to under write the notion that "homosexuality as we conceive of it today" itself comprises a coherent definitional field rather than a space of overlapping, contradictory, and conflictual definitional forces. Unfortunately, this presents more than a problem of oversimplification. To the degree that power relations involving modern

homo/heterosexual definition have been structured by the very tacitness of the double-binding force fields of conflicting definition (Sedgwick 45).

Being aware of the still problematic creation of a 'lesbian identity' that would not be constituted itself on the basis of opposing binary identities created by an heterosexist gaze, Hamer considers this conflict in the same essay discussed previously in this section; the social and cultural impact that lesbian pulp had in the 50s and 60s among the lesbian community becomes especially relevant for the definition of a lesbian and female queer identities, not so much in their specific portrayal of lesbianism — as it would often fall victim to the already dominant phallocentric and heteronormative discourses based on gender clichés that permeated the historical moment where they were written — but in that they allowed a space in literature to define lesbian identities per se for the first time, "not merely reflect the reality of being a lesbian as [they] knew it in the 1950s, but also helped to produce one" (Hamer 51).

It is in light of Hamer's statement that *The Price of Salt* becomes a rare and notable achievement in its creation of a new lesbian identity in spite of the dominating and opposing trends in lesbian representation at the time. Through the character of Therese, Highsmith gave voice to a new, realistic, more complex and even subversive representation of queer and lesbian women as compared to the more femme and butch prototypes that the lesbian pulp canon popularised and, consequentially helping said prototypical representations to become normative. Highsmith's representation of queer and female identities and, therefore, her novel, would be for many decades outmatched in its unique hopefulness, offering a positive alternative for those female readers who had systematically relied on lesbian pulp fiction out of necessity and comfort at a time where it was virtually inconceivable to live as a queer woman out and about and, most

importantly, without receiving any penance for it in the form of government-enforced ostracism.

CONCLUSION

This project has tried to breach the connection between the subgenres of lesbian and gay pulp fiction, and the cultural and social implications they respectively had for the lesbian community throughout the U.S. Furthermore, it has also attempted to analyse all the above was intrinsically influenced by the on-going McCarthyite climate of repression that persisted until the late 1950s, as well as the main discourses in sex, gender and politics that conformed it.

This atmosphere of cultural and social paranoia surrounding anything and anyone associated with subversive ideas or identities that threatened American values permeated many aspects in the cultural world too, especially those that represented socialist and communist ideologies, as well as sexual orientation and gender subversions. This can be easily found in many aspects of the cultural and literary production and censorship during those years; to the very creation of the House of Un-American Activities Committee and consequent witch-hunt of suspected communist and liberal artists, from the invention of Claire Morgan as a pen name, like many others did, to protect the identity of female authors of lesbian pulp, to the near impossibility of finding any works of gay and lesbian fiction with a traditionally 'happy' ending.

By comparing Gore Vidal's *The City and The Pillar,* and Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*, it has been possible to gain a general perspective of the difficult relationship queer works in fiction had, in general, coexisting in the 1940-50s with McCarthyite ideas, and how paradoxically, despite being a period known for its government-enforced censorship on queerness, it also became one where its written representation was most prolific. This thesis has also brought up one of the issues that has become increasingly discussed recently: how pulp fiction enabled queer representation at a time in which it was openly prosecuted, despite being heavily influenced by the

McCarthyite and heteronormative, male gaze of that time. This project has aimed not to oppose this statement, but rather to reinforce the value of this representation, and show that those who attempted to go against it were on fact not left unscathed.

Gore Vidal's *The City and The Pillar*, and Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* have been reaffirmed as two novels that did not belong to gay and lesbian pulp respectively, but which have historically been associated with them due to the positive cultural impact that they had on gay and lesbian circles at the time of their publication. Bearing this in mind, it has also been shown that these two novels have also been quite unique in their portrayal of homosexuality and managed to escape some of the literary restrictions and often heterosexist treatment of pulp, in a dissident, subversive and defiant literary response to McCarthyism. In this regard, Highsmith's novel has proved to achieve this more successfully than Vidal's by producing a lesbian romance without any tragic events whatsoever which was not only unprecedented, but is nowadays still considered to bee one of the most important works of lesbian fiction.

As a final and more separate note, these conclusions also raise the quintessential question of how critical the influence of an agitated political period as controversial as McCarthyism was, can be in the literary and artistic production which surrounds it. Considering that some of the aspects that made McCarthy's ideology and his politics gain its infamous reputation have not completely disappeared but, on the contrary, seem now more relevant than ever. With still the increasing rise in the popularity of figures like Donald Trump and so called "Trumpism" ideology — mentored by McCarthy's equally controversial lawyer and friend Roy Cohn in the past[29] — in contemporary U.S. politics, now seems more than ever relevant to discuss and question how far right-wing populism

[29] See Remnick and Tye's articles for more information about the connections between Joseph McCarthy and Donald Trump.

and its ever-lasting impact on society can go and, most importantly, how far it will take us.

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