“There’s always something in the background”

-A Critical Analysis of Problematic Lesbian Tropes in Lesbian Romance

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Abstract:

The focus of this thesis is on the critical analysis of the modern representation of lesbians in lesbian romance through the concept of commonly used tropes. The study examines three categories of problematic tropes, which are featured in the three novels that make up the primary material –*Carol* (1952)*, Tipping the Velvet* (1998)*,* and *Big Swiss* (2023)– by evaluating their narrative purpose in the novel. Does the problematic trope serve a purpose for a lesbian-positive message in the novel or is it simply there for shock value? With the support of a theoretical background consisting mainly of lesbian literary and film criticism, the thesis demonstrates how harmful beliefs about lesbians that are rooted in pathology and discrimination can persevere in repetitive images that we are exposed to in narratives. The three categories of tropes are as follows: power imbalance, punishment for lesbian desire, and infidelity. The novels possess their own renditions of each trope that were first analyzed in depth through close reading, followed by a comparative analysis of the findings to see if any positive or negative development in the use of tropes could be detected within the time span of the primary material from 1950s to 2020s. The findings indicate a negative development in the use of tropes with *Big Swiss* as the newest release showing the most lack in utilizing problematic tropes for an overall lesbian-positive narrative purpose. While more generalized conclusions cannot be drawn from the results, as this would require further research, the findings still demonstrate how important this kind of critical evaluation is in unveiling the harmful beliefs and stereotypes that get implicitly passed down through generations in the form of narratives.

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1. Introduction

Whether dead, insane, or tormented by punishment, lesbians have historically repeatedly failed to escape the literary tropes that project homophobic and discriminatory ideals of society upon them. Queer literature has had a tumultuous past and faced harsh censorship that has undoubtedly affected and shaped the genre in many ways, resulting in the adopting of gay literary tropes within the genre (Findlay, 2019, p. 4). This allowed authors to evade censorship while discussing taboo subjects by including certain patterns of narrative to mitigate controversiality of the subject. In the English context, the lesbian novel has countered the judgement toward homosexuality, according to Catharine R. Stimpson, by developing two repetitive patterns which she refers to as “the dying fall” and “the enabling escape” (1997, p. 178). The former refers to narratives of damnation, where lesbians belong to a psychologically weaker caste, and the latter to rebellion and the rejection of damnation, where this stigmatization is resisted. Stimpson argues that the narrative of damnation can not only reflect widely adopted social ideologies about homosexuality, but it can also lead to errors within discourse about homosexuality, resulting in false universalizing and univocalizing.

Fiction has had a significant role in the representation of gender and sexuality as well as identity construction within the Anglo-American scene, according to Julie Abraham, who considers it to be one of the primary arenas of representation (1996, p. xiii). What made literature stand out from other forms of media in the 20th century when it came to representation was the stricter censorship of theater and film as well as the accessibility of novels in comparison to scientific texts, which allowed the genre of the novel to develop into something significant for lesbianism and its representation. Many lesbian texts were not necessarily read or considered as lesbian (ibid.). Because of this, it is reasonable to conclude that this would have most likely instigated the lack of recognition that lesbians had, allowing them to avoid censorship and get lost in the sea of familial and platonic female relationships in literature. Another way of avoiding the ruthless touch of censorship was through the inclusion of certain literary tropes that often reflected societal perceptions and attitudes toward queer people. These tropes were commonly centered around punishment of varying degrees to show that queer love was not tolerated and engaging in such behavior was to be discouraged.

Representation can have an impact on how certain groups of people are perceived within society. It can help unpack negative or stereotypical assumptions about people and their lifestyles, values, and norms. Similarly, representation can also reinforce opinions and perceptions of others and even create new harmful or problematic ideas about certain groups. As argued by James O. Young (1999), while the depiction of fictional characters cannot necessarily offer truths about the object of representation, as it is fictional, it can still represent a certain type of object or a person. Abraham takes this idea of representation even further and claims that the narrative convention is a manner of repositing and sourcing ideologies, in this context, specifically about sexuality, gender, and identities (1996, p. xiv). Literature exposes readers to a vast variety of themes, concepts, people and personalities. It can help to understand other forms of existence that alternate from that of one's own. Literature is nowadays widely accessible in many parts of the world and often readily available to most people regardless of gender, race, status, or other personal factors, in the form of libraries and education, for example, which is why its influence in society is worth acknowledging and exploring.

The study of representation in literature can be approached from various perspectives depending on the aims of the research. Stereotypes are a useful angle to approach from, especially when analyzing more problematic and negative representations of certain groups due to the negative connotations that stereotypes usually carry. This study analyzes stereotypical lesbian tropes and their narrative purpose in literature with the intention of unraveling their possible relevance for the novels themselves. The thesis utilizes three lesbian romance novels from different time periods to analyze and compare the varying manifestations of the same three tropes that are featured in each of the novels. The primary material consists of Patricia Highsmith's *Carol* (1952), Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), and Jen Beagin's *Big Swiss* (2023). The tropes are divided into three general types which include power imbalance, punishment for lesbian desire, and infidelity. Discussion about the problematic nature of these tropes emerges from previous criticism and academic literature on lesbian representation. Through close-reading and comparative analysis, the thesis takes part in the discussion by expanding on previously made observations about problematic lesbian tropes and analyzing any possible changes within the genre from the 1950s to 2020s. The research evaluates whether problematic lesbian literary tropes serve any valid, lesbian-positive narrative purpose in the novel or whether they are mere repetitions of stereotypes ingrained in society. This thesis will show that despite the progress that has

taken place in lesbian representation in literature during the past few decades, some problematic features persist in the form of literary tropes.

Nearly two decades earlier, Judith Roof (1996) pondered in her book on sexuality and narrative the very same question that this thesis aims to find answers to: why is the story always the same? Roof expresses her frustrations on feeling unsatisfied with the lesbian narratives she has encountered and begins to ponder why there always seems to be something "alienating if not definitively wrong about it" (Roof, 1996, p. xxvi). She comes to the conclusion that if narrative can be used to explore oppression and cultural evaluation, it would make sense to change the narrative of the lesbian to better her place in culture. Narratives are seen as an "engagement with our concepts of culture" (Roof, 1996, p. xv). Thus, they reflect our ideologies and ways of living and existing in society. In her introduction, Roof explains impactfully the significance of narrative and the way the ideologies and identities coalesce within it:

> Narrative constantly reproduces the phantom of a whole, articulated system, where even the concept of a system is a product of narrative, where the idea that there are such things as parts and wholes is already an effect of a narrative organizing. As a pervasive sense of the necessary shape of events and their perception and as the process by which characters, causes, and effects combine into patterns recognized as sensical, narrative is the informing logic by which individuality, identity, and ideology merge into a cooperative and apparently unified version of the truths of existence (Roof, 1996, p. xv).

Narratives shape our "truths of existence". They are a playground for exploring ideologies, phenomena, concepts, and identities. Narratives and representation have a real impact on societal ideologies, and they form our perceptions of reality. While Roof's book is dated, the question she poses remains relevant to the present day. Why are we still telling the same stories?

There has certainly been improvement in the visibility and representation of lesbians in mainstream media as the community has gained more rights around the globe. Lesbian and gay characters and narratives have become relatively common in literature, film and television; however, lesbians are still finding their place in mainstream culture with varying quality of representation. Although there are many seemingly positive narratives available to lesbian audiences, many of them still carry remnants of harmful beliefs. The aim is not to create idealized or overly positive representations that come across

unrealistic and utopist, but instead to aim for representation that highlights lesbians as *human*. As Lynch declares:

> Like heterosexuals, some of us are sick, or mean, or criminal. I don't believe in pretending happy endings when they aren't appropriate. On the other hand, there's a world of people who think they have no stake in our future and who continue to perpetuate the negative stereotypes of gays that heterosexual fear has invented (Lynch, 1990, pp. 46–47).

There should be a strive for positive and well-informed lesbian representation, and there should be a sense of acknowledgement and education when it comes to the origins of problematic representation, tropes, and stereotypes. Including harmful stereotypes without understanding where they are derived from can unintentionally further solidify their presence in mainstream culture. Positive representation should not be forced when it is not called for, nor should problematic stereotypes be blindly included due to habit and established presence in society. The use of problematic representation has to be intentional and purposeful. As Lynch asserts: "I don't want the tormented complaints of our past abuse, unless they're turned around into hope and acceptance" (1990, p. 46). Lesbians should be represented as wholesome, well-rounded people deserving of love, happiness, and basic human rights without entirely ignoring the very realistic aspect of troubles and complexities of the human experience that we face regardless of gender or sexuality. Thus, the aim should be for balanced and nuanced lesbian representation where the sexual identity of the character does not dictate and define her life and where they "do not have to thrash around obsessed with sexuality" (Lynch, 1990, p. 46).

With this in mind, the thesis analyzes three lesbian novels of varying subgenres but each with a central theme of romance to evaluate how consistently and persistently the various problematic lesbian tropes are present in the following novels, and what purpose they serve. In other words, the analysis determines if the tropes add narrative value to the novels and offer, for example, a point of growth for the character, turning the narrative into one of acceptance and optimism for the lesbian characters, or whether the tropes are mere repetitions of old beliefs that have become standardized in mainstream culture.

Patricia Highsmith's *Carol*, originally published in 1952, offers a historically significant piece of literature as a fascinating starting point for research due to its revolutionary nature that emerges from resisting the literary conventions of its time. Highsmith intentionally grants the novel's lesbian couple a

happy ending instead of punishing them with death or insanity for the characters' sexual orientation, which was a common trope at the time. *Carol* is a romance novel in a very traditional sense. Nineteen-year-old Therese Belivet falls for an older customer, Carol Aird, at her department store job, sparking a passionate but rather innocent romance between the two in an unconventional environment that does not accept their love. *Carol* has elicited multifaceted academic discourse about lesbian representation in the form of happy endings for example by Charlotte Findlay (2019), as well as about maternal love by Isa Kotkavuori (2023).

Similar observations can be made in Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* published first in 1998 that creates an alternative historical existence for lesbians in literature through historical fiction, resisting lesbian erasure by giving space to the imagined lives of lesbians in the Victorian era. Waters challenges the conventions of gender and sexuality of both Victorian England as well as the late 1990s and early 2000s by depicting her protagonist as non-conforming to heteronormative and gender binary norms. The novel follows the tumultuous path of Nancy Astley, or Nan, as she explores her sexual and gender identity in the imagined lesbian scene of Victorian England, engaging in relationships of varying kinds as she slowly evolves from an innocent Whitstable oyster girl to a male impersonator prostitute on the streets, and finally to a mundane socialist in the role of a wife. *Velvet* has been discussed academically especially in the context of gender identity and sexuality by scholars such as Emilia Heimonen (2009) and Elsa Hernández (2021).

An alternative perspective is offered by Jen Beagin's *Big Swiss* (2023) where lesbians and lesbianism are presented as less central to the novel and its characters, offering a more mundane depiction of lesbian desire through a protagonist who falls in love with her employer's patient. Greta is in her mid-forties and lives a rather unstable and irresponsible life that is the result of childhood trauma. The object of her affection is a Swiss woman named Flavia who is two decades younger than Greta, married, and also severely traumatized by her past. The relationship is built on a lie as Greta pursues Flavia despite the confidentiality agreement she has signed with her employer, resulting in a morally questionable relationship. There is little to no research done on *Big Swiss* aside from brief mentions regarding the representation of women.

The novels have been selected based on their popularity. *Carol* and *Velvet* are both acclaimed cult classics with movie and television adaptations of the same names. Due to its recent release, *Big Swiss* does not have a similar status to the two other novels, however, a film adaptation has been rumored to be in the works for it and the novel has gained a significant amount of traction based on literature review site statistics such as Google Books and Goodreads. The scores for *Big Swiss* were higher than for other candidates of the same time period. Additionally, the novels have been selected according to the tropes included in them. Each one of them include the following: a power imbalance in the relationship, punishment for lesbian desire, and infidelity. The tropes are analyzed thoroughly through examples that emerge from the text to answer the research questions:

1. How are problematic lesbian tropes used in the novels and what purpose do they serve?
2. Can any negative or positive changes be detected in the use of the three identified trope categories over time?

Through close-reading against a theoretic background consisting of lesbian literary criticism as well as lesbian film and television criticism, this thesis demonstrates that despite the improvement that can be detected in the representation of lesbians over time, certain stereotypical tropes persist and continue to dominate the realm of lesbian literature.

2. Background

This section will begin with a brief introduction to lesbian literary criticism before moving on to lesbian representation. The emphasis will be on stereotypical and problematic depictions of lesbians, covering topics such as discrimination, pathology, as well as early lesbian literature and its impact on the genre and lesbian communities. This will be followed by defining the concept of a literary trope and theory on evaluating the use tropes in queer narratives, after which the three categories of tropes are introduced in depth in the following order: power imbalance, punishment for lesbian desire, and infidelity, to establish a sturdy foundation for the analysis.

2.1. Lesbian Literary Criticism

Lesbians have not only had to fight for their visibility in order to obtain human rights, but similar resilience has been required in the sphere of academics and art. Lesbian literary criticism has had a complicated and turbulent history with varying scholars uniting to try to make sense of a topic that has only gained the attention it deserves during the 20th century. As Gonda suggests in her overview of the

origins and development of lesbian literary criticism, it is closely linked to history and politics of the late 20th century, and it is heavily influenced by texts that are not about literature but are themselves both political and literary (2007, pp. 170–175). This becomes apparent through many of the well-established lesbian theorists, who are also simultaneously writers of poetry or fiction, such as Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. Gonda suggests that while lesbian literary criticism emerges largely from the second wave of feminism in the 1970s and defines itself against it through well-known thinkers such as Adrienne Rich, the roots of it reach far deeper into history (ibid.). Much like with many lesbian texts going overlooked by literary critics as lesbian in nature, the field of lesbian literary criticism seems to be facing similar struggles. This is due to the fact that the criticism's origins are rooted outside of the academy, and significant works that could have been published by universities were turned down and left for the feminist and lesbian presses (ibid.). Alongside erasure and censorship, lesbian literary criticism has grappled with the question of defining lesbian texts. Much of early lesbian criticism focused on defining what lesbianism meant in the context of literature, exploring the possibilities of what lesbian characters, images, texts and authors might look like. While the lesbian literary canon was already emerging in the 90s, featuring American, British, and French authors such as Highsmith, Woolf, and Bossard, the questions of defining the genre persisted, leaving critics to ponder what makes lesbian texts lesbian.

The question of the validity of lesbian texts has been argued by many, and it has raised a lot of discussion regarding the qualities that a novel can have. An infamous argument discussed by Gonda claims that novels cannot have a sexuality and that there can be "no such thing as a lesbian novel, because no little female books ran off with other little female books" (Harris, quoted in Gonda 2007, p. 175). This statement elicited a divide in reactions. Some agreed that novels indeed could not have a sexuality, whereas others felt that the claim was invalidating to their work and identity (Gonda, 2007, p. 175). The argument seems to purposely miss the idea of a lesbian novel and rely on technicalities in a way that most likely nobody would in the context of a heterosexual novel because the expectations and parameters for such a novel would be universally understood. The conundrum of defining the lesbian novel, character, or author is not one that is tied wholly to literature and literary conventions, but it is something that is also rooted in society and has a long history that still affects the lesbian community to this day. Because of this, it is important to tie the topic of lesbianism to its rightful context in order to conduct accurate and multifaceted research on it. The fight for visibility and validity

in the domain of literature and criticism is a part of a larger fight for visibility that reaches beyond academics into literature, film and television, and overall societal visibility, recognition, and justice. While this thesis does not attempt to figure out what exactly makes a novel lesbian, the context of that debate is significant to the genre of lesbian literature and literary critics and continues to define it through history.

2.2. Lesbian Representation and Common Stereotypical Portrayals

This section goes more into depth about the different ways in which lesbians have been represented in literature and other media. It will shed light on why certain representations and stereotypes are harmful and where they originate from. Like many other minorities, lesbians have been repeatedly misrepresented in society due to mis- and disinformation about the community. The long history of pathology and immorality continue to collectively haunt lesbians through common stereotypes and beliefs attached to the notion of sexual orientation. For decades, heterosexuality has been seen as superior and it has been set to be the norm in society (Cuesta, 2014, pp. 77–78). These ideas have been built on patriarchy and male chauvinist structures that define the standard for the norms that are rooted in the binary division of gender and heterosexual dominance. Everything that falls outside of the norm is considered to be deviant and abnormal, even pathological, and often subject to punishment. The hardships that lesbians face in society are linked to structural oppression and social exclusion that render the subject invisible, allowing the exercise of excessive power and denial of rights.

To further analyze the achievement of invisibility and structural oppression toward lesbians, it is essential to have an understanding of the underlying historical aspects that define and shape the beliefs that have been and still are associated with lesbians and lesbianism. Psychology and sexology have had a huge impact on the cultural beliefs surrounding homosexuality. This pathological perception of lesbians and homosexuals is rooted in the various ways in which the condition of homosexuality was treated (Inness, 1997, pp. 1–2). Many of these treatments, such as hysterectomies, lobotomies, and electroshock, were inhumane and painful, their severity linking to the perception of homosexuality as a pathological threat to society. In her book on the representation of lesbian life, Sherrie A. Inness explores this concept of menace in the context of lesbianism, seeking to analyze the effect of representation in popular media on the stereotypical perception of lesbians in American society. She claims that the dominant society has created the idea of the lesbian menace that is rooted in negative beliefs associated with lesbians. These beliefs include ideas about lesbians as "sinister, sexually

rapacious, vampire-like women whose only desire is to prey on innocent, unsuspecting heterosexuals" (Inness, 1997, p. 2). Many other scholars agree on the persistent nature of this kind of portrayal of lesbian characters. Maureen Brady claims that there is a history of portraying lesbians as "sick or pathetic or grotesque", suggesting that this kind of portrayal caused a need to counter these beliefs with overly idealized depictions of lesbianism (1990, p. 56). Adams seems to agree on Inness' notion of the lesbian menace, stating that lesbians were depicted as an immoral threat to what was considered as normal womanhood (Adams, 1990, p. 256). According to Adams, the effects of psychoanalysis caused the model for "sickness theory" that would inflict harm upon lesbians well into the future (1990, p. 256).

Due to the invisibility of lesbians as well as the negative portrayal of the community, lesbians are particularly sensitive to the effects of popular representation (Inness, 1997, p. 3). According to Inness, there is an unusual element of importance in the representation of lesbians due to their marginalized position in society that contrasts heavily with the dominant society and their connections to the marginalized and can thus "constitute the 'reality' of lesbianism to many people" (1997, p. 3). A great example of this is *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) by Radclyffe Hall that is a best-selling and the most well-known lesbian novel of the twentieth century (Inness, 1997, pp. 14–15). Reactions to the novel were rather severe, subjecting the text to censorship and even court cases and obscenity charges. While the novel's popularity has been presumed to be due to the lesbian readership, Inness encourages to consider the heterosexual audiences as well and suggests that understanding the heterosexual audiences can help in understanding the critical attitude of the homosexual audience toward the novel. Despite the intentions of the author and the considerably positive portrayal of lesbians for the time period, many lesbians and gay men feared that it would confirm stereotypical beliefs about homosexuals to heterosexual audiences. There were concerns especially regarding the portrayal of lesbians as mannish which has been a common belief since the 1880s and received particular attention in the 1920s. It is noteworthy to realize that *The Well* also depicted many other stereotypical features of lesbians and homosexuality on top of the mannish lesbian, such as persistent unhappiness and death which were rooted in the association lesbianism has with pathology and sexology. The information about lesbians was often medical and not easily available to the general public before the 1920s, which is why the shift in accessibility in the form of popular literature caused a significant change in knowledge about homosexuality (Inness, 1997, pp. 17–18). This change in accessibility is also an important notion when

it comes to fictional literature that has the potential of offering depictions of something unknown and unfamiliar to people amidst the confusing medical and scientific texts that are often overlooked by the general public.

In the 1900s, the lesbian was never depicted as happy, but instead as chronically unhappy and unable to escape this unhappiness (Inness, 1997, p. 24). The unhappiness was linked to the beliefs about lesbian perversion and their "monstrous craving for the unnatural" (Inness, 1997, p. 24). The lesbian was depicted as miserable due to her own pathology, the origins of which emerged from the scientific works of Sigmund Freud, Havelock Ellis, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing, as well as pseudomedical texts on homosexuality (ibid., pp. 24–31). *The Well* partly supports some of these ideas through the events of the narrative that depict the lesbian protagonist as pathologically unhappy. While there are many stereotypical features associated with Hall's depiction of lesbians, it is also worth acknowledging that the novel provided possibilities of visibility for lesbians. However, at the time, this visibility came with a disadvantage of heterosexuals using certain pieces of representation, such as the mannish lesbian, to further ostracize and persecute lesbians.

The complexities of representation are heavily present in this example of Radclyffe Hall's novel and the different types of audiences that consume the text. Both hetero- and homosexual audiences define how certain portrayals of lesbianism are received, demonstrating that while a text might be progressive in its nature and offer visibility and kinship to homosexual audiences, it might simultaneously cause harm through the reception of the heterosexual audiences and have a long-lasting impact on the marginalized. Interestingly enough, Inness notes in the context of *The Well* that the mannish lesbian remains as the most common lesbian stereotype in America (1997, p. 31). The significance of the societal reception of lesbian texts should not be overlooked exactly due to the biases rooted in society. Adams discusses the reception of Highsmith's *Carol* (1952), noting that considering the treatment *The Well* received, Highsmith's subversive and positive portrayal of lesbians should have attracted similar commotion, but instead the novel was ignored in favor of promoting images that enforced maladjustment and immorality (1990, p. 257–258). The lack of attention that Highsmith's positive image of lesbians received from the public suggests that a homophobic society tends to view lesbians as either pathological or render them invisible, reinforcing ideas about recognizing lesbians as the Other and associating them with beliefs of distorted humanity. Because of this, it is crucial to

acknowledge that negative representation has more influence and weight when placed into the context of societal beliefs and assumptions about lesbianism and should not be taken lightly.

2.3. Literary Tropes

The negative depiction of lesbians has become so common and persistent over time that it has formed into well-known archetypes and tropes that regurgitate the same old ideas rooted in pathology and immorality about lesbianism. These stereotypical portrayals can also be found outside of literature in film and television, demonstrating the ubiquity of the phenomenon. This also shows that it is rather a matter of characters and narrative than a specific feature of either literature or audiovisual media, which makes research from both fields of study applicable to one another. It might even expand the horizons for the background literature available, as it has done in this thesis. Especially unhappy endings have been typical for lesbian narratives. Adams argues that lesbians have typically functioned as a “spicy relish” in heterosexual narratives and have often been depicted as “doomed characters” that end up either, unhappy, heterosexual, or dead by the end of the novel (1990, p. 268). These broader lesbian tropes take form in an array of more specific stereotypical portrayals recognized within the field of lesbian criticism. Roof brings forward certain lesbian archetypes from popular narratives, such as the lesbian vampire, murderer, prostitute, failed man, immature sexual explorer, and feminist (1990, p. 113). All of these archetypes still live to this day in the form of narratives. For example, the morally condemned lesbian vampire that has been a common image since the days of Sheridan LeFanu’s *Carmilla* (1872) can be seen, for example, in Netflix’s (2022) show *First Kill* created by Victoria Schwab, and a similar literary release of *House of Hunger* (2022) by Alexis Henderson. The latter depicts a very typical dynamic of an older woman that is after the blood of younger women in order to stay youthful and healthy. It also includes the typical dead lesbian trope as well, where the couple are separated by death in the end. Similar suggestions for popular lesbian tropes emerge from Smith’s work on lesbian representation on television, few of which include: the evil lesbian, the sad, sick lesbian, the dead lesbian, the lesbian vampire, and the temporary lesbian (2020, pp. 20–27). In many ways, the fields of literature, television and film share similarities in their attitudes toward lesbians. The deviant nature of homosexuality was reinforced through censorship and restrictions in film, resulting in representation that supported the association with danger, pathology, and death in the form of tropes (ibid., pp. 20–29). As an addition to the previously mentioned, Smith presents ideas about the temporality and inauthenticity of lesbianism that is connected to the process of maturing and growing up, pertaining to the larger phenomenon of invalidating lesbian desire.

Another common feature in the portrayal of lesbians is the need to explain lesbianism through psychoanalysis and connection to traumatic childhood events, poor parental figures, or negative heterosexual experiences (Adams, 1990, p. 268). As mentioned in the previous section, homosexuality has been historically shaped by theories about sexuality by psychologists and sexologists, one of which has notoriously and continuously been linked to theories about homosexuality. Sigmund Freud's impact on ideologies and beliefs about the nature of homosexuals is undeniable. Freud's theories unsurprisingly focus on viewing homosexuality as an aberration to heterosexuality (Roof, 1996, p. xix). This imbalanced dynamic of heterosexuality as superior to homosexuality is reflected in many lesbian narratives and reinforces ideas about homosexuality as the Other. According to Roof, many narratives highlight the distinction between the two sexual orientations, placing heterosexuality above homosexuality and emphasizing that they can never be the same and that homosexuality can never be as genuine and natural as heterosexuality (1996, pp. 80–81). It becomes evident very quickly that regardless of the explanation for certain beliefs about homosexuality and lesbians, what unites these problematic tropes together is the underlying implications of immorality, deviancy from the heterosexual norm, and pathology that are associated with same-sex love.

The concept of a trope can be defined in many ways depending on the context, but in a literary context it often refers to narrative tropes that are used as rhetorical devices in storytelling. This thesis understands tropes similarly to Löf's definition of tropes as literary and rhetorical devices that are commonly recurring in art, including clichés and motifs (2016, p. 13). This definition also aligns with Merriam-Webster's dictionary definition of the word "trope" as: "a common theme or device (as in the arts)" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This includes both the specific, recurring depiction of characters, such as the lonely lesbian, for example, as well as certain settings or events within the narrative, for example, age gap or infidelity. Another distinct feature for tropes is their expectability and the audience's pre-existing familiarity with certain story-telling devices and conventions, which, according to Löf, functions as a tool for communication between the author and the audience (2016, p. 13). This means that implementing certain devices or tropes is intentional and they carry a message within the story that goes beyond the story and characters themselves. Due to the significant presence storytellers have within our society, they carry a responsibility in repeating tropes as cultural norms, thus affecting especially those lacking in first-hand experience with the lesbian community, leaving them to rely on depictions shown on television, for example (Löf, 2016, p 14). As Armbrustmacher puts it, because

many of these tropes are so deeply ingrained into queer narratives, disrupting the pattern requires recognizing that these tropes are not reflective of reality and naturally occurring but a constructed narrative for queer people (2025, p. 76).

As has become evident from this section of the thesis, there are several possibilities for researching common lesbian tropes. Especially lesbian side characters have received criticism for their poor representation and disposable nature, raising a question about whether this also applies to lesbian protagonists. Does lesbian literature as a genre depict lesbians in a more authentic light that perhaps resists these stereotypical tropes regurgitated by the arts? Many of the tropes mentioned above have already been researched quite thoroughly both in literature and in film, which is why this thesis has selected some less obvious examples of stereotypical portrayal that have not gained as much attention as, for example, the dead lesbian or the lesbian vampire tropes have. The tropes selected for this thesis form three categories: power imbalance, punishment for lesbian desire, and infidelity. The category of power imbalance refers mostly to an age gap between a couple, but it also includes the examination of the tropes of maternal love and the lesbian seducer. Punishment for desire looks into direct punishment for lesbian desire, also including the trope of the miserable, lonely lesbian. The last category of infidelity includes the trope of unfaithfulness, heterosexual superiority, as well as the temporality of lesbianism. All of these features can be found in each of the novels that make up the primary material of the thesis.

2.4. Narrative Value

The narrative value of these tropes will be evaluated through their relevance for the overall plotline of the novels. This evaluation process is based on previous research and the thinking of two scholars that have worked on the topic of harmful representation. A central ideology that has already been mentioned in the introduction of this thesis emerges from Lynch and her thoughts on authentic representation. It is crucial that representation maintains a level of realism to avoid overly positive and optimistic representation of lesbians. This, according to Lynch can be done through turning the narrative around into a story of hope and acceptance (1990, p. 46). Brooke Armbrustmacher argues a similar point in her article on the Bury Your Gays trope, highlighting the fact that when queer tragedy is followed by perseverance and survival it reflects the realistic struggles of queer people, instead of using unnecessary queer trauma for shock value (2025, p. 75). The key difference in depicting lesbians with traumatic storylines and depicting lesbians in a problematic manner is the final outcome and how

the trauma and tragedy are handled. Armbrustmacher and Lynch both highlight the importance of an optimistic ending, and furthermore, Armbrustmacher puts emphasis on survival and resilience. Additionally, she brings up a shift in perspective that beautifully encapsulates the very essence of this conundrum, presenting a tool that can be used to evaluate queer representation: "Positioning a queer protagonist as the processor of grief rather than the source of grief transforms the reading experience" (2025, p. 77). This thesis will explore the tropes through their narrative value based on this distinction as well as a more explicitly shaped question that Armbrustmacher suggests in her article for students reading queer literature in order to evaluate the necessity of character death:

> A question that could be asked to students is whether an author's choice seems necessary to achieve the novel's message, and what is superfluous or undermines the message, especially in the context of a marginalized character (Armbrustmacher, 2025, p. 76).

The analysis will aim to determine whether the author's choices regarding the use of tropes seem necessary in order to achieve a lesbian-positive message in the novel. In other words, I will evaluate the purpose that these tropes serve for either the plotline or character development. If no justified lesbian-positive narrative purpose can be detected, the tropes will be deemed unnecessary and renditions of problematic beliefs regarding lesbians. The tropes discussed in this thesis are based on their recurring nature and their storytelling value within the lesbian context. The tropes are also connected to stereotypical depictions and assumptions about lesbians, making them fall under the umbrella of problematic representation. The following section elaborates on the definitions and historical context of these tropes.

2.5. Power Imbalance: Age Gaps, Seducers, and Familial Love

Power imbalances are nothing out of the ordinary when it comes to relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual, but within the representation of homosexual relationships there are certain kinds of power imbalances that are rooted in the long history of oppression and discrimination against homosexuals. In this thesis, power imbalance refers mostly to the age gap trope, which is present in each of the three novels, but through further analysis, other types of dynamics are explored in order to explain exactly why the age gap trope can be harmful and what kinds of problematic repetitions of old beliefs it might reinforce.

Age gaps are not necessarily inherently problematic, but in a lesbian context it has been heavily associated especially with predatory and perverse behavior. Ideas about lesbians as predatory seducers

or psychologically thwarted in childhood emerge from the closer examination of this dynamic. Although these concepts are not exclusive to one another, the conversation around them overlaps due to the association of the age gap with familial relations such as maternal or sisterly love. Mizielińska and Sorainen assume this to be behind the taboo nature that surrounds discussions about age gaps alongside the idea of the age gap being a "form of potential deviation" in same-sex love (2023, p. 261). They note in their study on lesbian age gap relationships that the topic has very limited research done on it and point out how it contrasts with the abundance of age gap relationships in lesbian popular culture –such as the films *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931) and *Desert Hearts* (1985)– and their significance to the collective memory of lesbians (Mizielińska and Sorainen, 2023, pp. 259–260). The age gap trope can be found in other popular lesbian tropes such as the teacher/student dynamic which is also rooted in the idea of a power imbalance and similarly has a long history in lesbian literature and representation. Mizielińska and Sorainen presume that the age gap's tabooness is rooted in the fear of potential linking of queer communities to pedophilia.

With such persistent associations to pathology, there has been a strong drive to figure out and explain homosexuality. Because of this, there are many psychoanalytic theories that have attempted to tackle the conundrum of homosexuality in order to understand the supposed deviancy in human sexuality. In the 1950s, the need to explain the presence of homosexuality in an individual became a significant part of lesbian narratives. Adams even suggests that psychoanalysis became "the lesbian's chaperone" in pop culture and mainstream media (1990, p. 269). The explanation was often rooted in a traumatic youth, poor parental figures, or horrible heterosexual experiences (ibid., pp. 268–269). Adams suggests that works that did not explain the lesbian psychoanalytically were censored and remained invisible. This would only further emphasize and instill the image of deviancy associated with lesbianism. Various theories existed at the time, but especially Freud's psychoanalytic model gained popularity. According to Inness, Freud's theories about sexuality were perceived as more threatening to social order than those of his peers (1997, p. 26). His explanation was rooted in the Oedipal crisis that resulted in an arrested and aberrant sexuality (ibid., pp. 262–263). Freud believed that with lesbians the deviancy occurred at an autoerotic stage preceding the Oedipal stage which would result in the girl's prolonged and arrested attachment to her mother. The girl would:

> [...] become a 'man-hating' or 'man-fearing lesbian unless she can successfully translate her Oedipal penis envy into erotic attachment to her father and subsequently to an appropriate male (who can provide her with a penis substitute in the form of a child) (Inness, 1997, p. 263).

Additionally, in the stage of pubescent development, Freud suggested that the sexual activity of girls was sensitive to their mother's guardianship, the lack of which might result in a hostile attitude toward her own sex, leading to an incorrect object-choice in attraction (Inness, 1997, p. 26). The association with familial relations and childhood experiences is heavily present in Freud's theory and highlights deviancy from heterosexuality and the "natural" order and place of the binary genders. Against this historical background and context, certain manifestations of the age gap can still promote ideas about arrested development and the longing for maternal love in lesbian relationships depending on how the age gap relationship is depicted.

As mentioned before, the depiction of lesbian relationships through the lens of maternal love is a recurring feature of lesbian representation and has been discussed in the context of *Carol* by Kotkavuori (2023) and Findlay (2019), for example. The scholars express different opinions on the motherly love depicted in *Carol* through the same observations of linking stereotypical representation and Freudian psychology to the relationship between Therese and Carol, serving as a relevant example of how these tropes can be interpreted by different scholars. The topic of psychoanalysis has been thoroughly discussed in feminist film criticism, as Hollinger points out, and has divided lesbian critics to either embrace the psychology theory or reject it entirely (2012, p. 138). Those against applying psychoanalysis into lesbian criticism consider it to support ideas about lesbianism emerging from a masculinity complex and pre-Oedipal mother-daughter attachment. According to the critics, this infantilizes lesbian desire and makes it into a matter of "arrested development" (Hollinger, 2012, p. 138). Those in favor of psychoanalytics claim that it is a way to investigate lesbian representation and its psychic origins and dimensions.

Kotkavuori applies Hollinger's arguments to the lesbian representation in the film adaptation of *Carol* by claiming that the kind of ambiguity that emerges from the ambivalent portrayal of lesbians is a part of a larger phenomenon of lesbian erasure in society (Kotkavuori, 2023, p. 39). Similarly to the notions made by Abraham (1996) and Gonda (2007) about the ambiguity of lesbian texts, Hollinger states that it is also a matter of debate in the field of film studies (2012, p. 138). This suggests that the invalidation

and erasure of lesbian relationships exceed the limitations of literature and can be found in other areas that concern representation as well, thus establishing it as a common phenomenon even outside of literature. This notion of erasure is also a reason why the ambiguous portrayal emerging from the likening of lesbian relationships to familial or friendly ones is problematic.

Age gaps in lesbian relations have often also been associated with the concept of the lesbian seducer that is centered around the idea of an older, more experienced lesbian that seduces a younger, innocent woman (Mizielińska and Sorainen, 2023, p. 266). This belief is also rooted in sexology from the nineteenth century and has been featured in literature, namely in Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (ibid.). There is a predatory element involved that emerges from the villainization of lesbians in society. The image of the lesbian seducer is also reinforced by the strong association lesbians have with vampires. Smith even points out that the lesbian vampire can function as a "literal manifestation of the symbolic dangers of lesbianism" (2020, p. 24). This is connected to the notion of danger that lesbians carry. As mentioned before, lesbians have been viewed as a threat to normal womanhood. This belief is heavily linked to the perception of homosexuality as a sickness and a neurotic and immoral threat to heterosexuality (Adams, 1990, p. 256). The notion of experience is also relevant to the age gap and assumptions about the power dynamic that entails the age gap setting. Mizielińska and Sorainen suggest that the concept of the seducer works both ways and that age gap can function as a point of attraction for the couple, challenging simultaneously the heteronormative script (2023, p. 266). However, it is also important to note that the different levels of experiences carry with them a typical lesbian narrative that is rooted in the image of the lesbian seducer. A common trope associated with this dynamic is the lesbian that seduces an innocent heterosexual woman, leaves her in ruins, after which the straight woman kills herself (Kotkavuori, 2023, p. 43). Power imbalances can certainly be a point of attraction in a relationship, and when done correctly, this dynamic setting can bring nuance and difference into a narrative, but it can likewise also contain negative connotations about lesbians as sinister, pathological, and perverse seducers, and further implement these ideas into those unfamiliar with lesbian culture and lifestyle.

2.6. Punishment for Lesbian Desire: Lesbian Castration and Loneliness

This category of tropes centers around the idea of the miserable lesbian that is doomed to unhappiness due to her own pathology. Killing off queer characters became a common manner of punishment both in literature and on television for its shock factor that gained traction especially from straight audiences

(Armbrustmacher, 2025, p. 72). Frequently this trope of punishing gays occurs immediately after a kiss or a love confession, for example, to show that the correlation between the homosexual behavior and punishment is not lost on the audiences (Armbrustmacher, 2025, p. 72). The punishment aspect of the trope can manifest in various different ways from death to alienation. Kabir, for example, links ideas of punishment to humiliation and loss of agency through systematic disempowerment (1998, p. 46). Other possible manifestations, on top of death as the most extreme punishment, include losses in professional and social lives. Kabir also suggests the loss of a partner to a third party as an act of lesbian castration (p. 45). Castration denies the lesbian agency and thus she is punished for her lesbianism. This category also focuses on the lonely lesbian that has been ostracized from society, examining ideas about lesbianism as something that alienates the subject from the rest of the society due to her deviancy. This can look like losing ties with familial connections or losing friendships and partners, as well as overall struggling with a lacking support system. With this trope lesbians are punished for their identity or for practicing their lesbianism in any shape or form. Their actions are seen as a threat to heterosexuality and as an act of deviance, resulting in humiliation and/or loss. As previously mentioned, falling outside of the norm makes the lesbian subject to punishment which is reinforced in narratives through this kind of representation.

Kabir, who has researched this phenomenon in the sphere of film analysis, perceives the punishment of lesbians around the idea of castration and denial of agency. Kabir uses these ideas to demonstrate a pattern of events that ultimately punishes the lesbian for not taking responsibility for the "alienating effects of her actions" (1998, p. 46). The theory suggests that while the lesbian is losing control of her life, others around her achieve greatness. And when the lesbian relates to those around her who have suffered the same, this further reinforces the belief that the suffering is "invited and inevitable" (Kabir, 1998, p. 46). When the suffering of a lesbian is linked to her identity like this, it reinforces the stereotype that Kabir refers to as "the dyke as self-destructive proliferate" (Kabir, 1998, p. 40). Ideas about self-imposed suffering are particularly harmful because they place the blame on the individual and suggest that it is not their environment that is at fault, but it is the individual herself, further promoting deviancy.

One persistent form of punishment that emerges from lesbian stereotypes, and is also present in Kabir's ideas of punishment, is the lonely, depressed lesbian. Carroll argues that loneliness has become

attached to queerness and lesbians specifically and it has a long history in lesbianism (2013, p. 6). This can once more be traced back to the images of the miserable lesbian represented in Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. Hall created an image of the miserable lesbian that also threatens others' happiness, depicting lesbians as social outcasts, a stereotype that lesbians suffer from to this day due to how *The Well* was read (Carroll, 2013, pp. 2–7). Carroll claims that society has been led to believe that loneliness is something negative and depressing, referring to lack, misery, and queerness, for example. According to her:

> Lonely people, then, are social misfits trapped by their loneliness and in danger of entrapping others. In this way loneliness can only ever be understood as a dangerous setback to sociability (Carroll, 2013, p. 3).

Loneliness has been pathologized much like the queer subject, which has resulted in something that Carroll refers to as "queer bodies as the scapegoat for unhappiness and judged for their seeming narcissistic and unhappy tendencies" (2013, p. 5). Loneliness is attached to a slew of negative attributes that go against society's ideals, suggesting that lonely people are somehow lacking, similarly to how lesbians are often seen as less than beside the superior heterosexual. Western culture assimilates loneliness with pathology, suspicion, and apoliticism, pitting it against happiness much like other dichotomies that are highly present in society such as femininity/masculinity and straight/queer (ibid., pp. 8–10). Furthermore, especially if the only queer character in the novel possesses these qualities of loneliness and misery, it only further emphasizes the idea of isolation and loneliness (Armbrustmacher, 2025, p. 74). This will be relevant especially in the context of *Big Swiss*.

The effects of misogyny cannot be ignored when it comes to lesbians' position in society. The tolerance for sexual deviancy is higher toward gay men than lesbian women due to misogyny and gender control (Carroll, 2013, p. 241). Carroll poignantly demonstrates this through the analysis of news coverage on two similar type incidents involving queer youth, one that discusses the death of a gay boy and another of two lesbian girls. Her findings suggest that the death of the boy was seen as a tragedy and a loss, whereas the death of the two girls was seen as an "unhappy inevitable" (Carroll, 2013, p. 241). The difference is striking and clearly suggests that the issue of loneliness and unhappiness is uniquely associated with lesbianism. This paints the lesbian as a victim of her own identity and reinforces the innate unhappiness of lesbians (ibid., pp. 242–243). Carroll also ties these findings to ableism and the effects of depression on communication within society, suggesting that depression might result in a dismissal of an individual due to her lacking ability to communicate and

thus she is rendered an inhuman subject. In other words, the miserable state of the lesbians made them appear less human to society:

> More specifically, their lesbian loneliness alienated each becoming-lesbian girl to a status as not-quite-human, not acceptable, incapacitated and debilitating to others—in this way they were deemed less than human (Carroll, 2013, p. 243).

The trope of the miserable, lonely lesbian is thus not only harmful due to the stigma surrounding isolation and loneliness, but also the stigma surrounding mental health and depression. Loneliness goes against the prerequisites for happiness that are used to determine health and happiness in society through ideologies (ibid., p. 305). It is viewed as something detrimental, something taboo, and it affects especially those who fail to form what Carroll refers to as "proper visible social ties" that breach the notion of normative relationships in society (2013, pp. 305–306). The queer subject is rendered questionable through the stigmatized label of loneliness (ibid., p. 306). One pathology is linked to another and together it only further isolates homosexuals and upholds beliefs about pathology and inferiority for not fitting into the heteronormative mold.

2.7. Infidelity: Immorality and Heterosexual Superiority

The final category deals with unfaithfulness in the context of lesbian relationships. This does not refer only to relationships between women, but also to other heterosexual relationships that are involved in the narrative through either one of the lesbian partners. From this category also emerge the themes of heterosexual superiority and immorality. Infidelity is here understood according to Christian-Cruz's definition as either emotional or sexual involvement with a third party (2015, p. 34). This can mean that the unfaithfulness occurs when the lesbian ventures outside of her heterosexual relationship to seek a homosexual one or vice versa leaves a lesbian relationship in order to enter a heterosexual one, or even when the lesbian jeopardizes her lesbian relationship for another woman. Beyond infidelity, this category also focuses on the involvement of heterosexuality and its dynamic to homosexuality within the narrative.

Lesbians and homosexuals in general are commonly believed to be less concerned with monogamy and less judgmental about infidelity (Burch, 2007, pp. 230–235). This could at least partly be explained through the lack of official documenting of homosexual relationships through marriage, and Burch even assumes that there might be a rise in the valuing of monogamy as gay marriage becomes more widely accepted. While monogamy is presumed to be less valued in homosexual relationships, lesbians

value it more than gay men do due to its better accepted position in mainstream culture. This is most likely also linked to societal gender norms and misogyny that affect lesbians. Infidelity as a phenomenon in homosexuality is largely similar as in heterosexual relationships (Christian-Cruz, 2015, p. 36). However, there are certain barriers and challenges that lesbians have to face in society that should be taken into consideration (ibid.). This could mean homophobia or laws that prevent homosexual relations or marriage, for example. Christian-Cruz suggests that lesbians have to adopt different identities within their relationships depending on different social situations (ibid.). The conventions of a homosexual relationship are not the same as heterosexual ones and are often determined by the environment to which the relationship is confined. The challenges that the relationship faces can be affected by issues regarding geography, legislation, and homophobia in social circles.

Lesbians and infidelity are linked to morality. A common belief about lesbians is that they are promiscuous and hypersexual. Lesbians are depicted as unreliable and incapable of emotional intimacy (Parker et al, 2019, pp. 2–3). Here especially the tropes of promiscuity and unfaithfulness are common, as well as having multiple romantic relations at the same time. Similar beliefs can be found in bisexual representation where the unreliability is more emphasized due to the attraction toward both sexes (Löf, 2016, p. 11). Bisexuals are viewed as prone to infidelity and as lacking a sense of morality whereas the trope of psycho lesbians, as Löf refers to it, emphasizes especially the morally corrupt aspect of the nature of lesbians (Löf, 2016, pp. 12, 36). Needless to say, these beliefs and stereotypes are heavily linked to the negative light in which lesbians are represented, further promoting harmful ideas that portray lesbians as immoral, perverse, and pathological.

As has become evident in the previous sections of this thesis, lesbians have often been seen as Other and that belief is still heavily present in society. This idea of heterosexual superiority is reflected in many of the negative beliefs associated with homosexuality. Lesbians and gays are seen as less than, as lacking or degenerate both in terms of pathology and reproduction. Homosexuals are a threat to the strict heterosexual status quo because they threaten the heteronormative way of living. In the context of narrative, Roof suggests that homosexuality represents stasis and often offers a point of difference to heterosexuality in order to avoid the threat of sameness within narratives (1990, p. 74). Roof argues that the concept of reproduction is a central part of heterosexual narratives and that this is also reflected and even emphasized by homosexual narratives (Roof, 1990, p. xxvi). If the homosexual narrative falls

under the aegis of reproduction, the role of the homosexuals supports the heterosexuality of the narrative. This way the seemingly homosexual narrative can still support heterosexual structures and ideology. Consequently, when the structural part of the narrative is not aligned with either lesbian or gay, they become synecdoches of the perverse, reproducing the model of the heterosexual narrative and the constructs that support the idea of heterosexuality as the natural and homosexuality as the perverse.

Another significant concept to the dynamic of the sexualities in narrative is the idea of difference and sameness. According to Roof, sameness is a threat to narrative, and the dynamics of the sexualities render homosexuality to be a threatening point of sameness (1990, p. 74). Homosexuality and the sameness of it is a structural part of the narrative that ensures a more satisfying heterosexual ending after threatening the reproductive ideology of a straight narrative (ibid.). Homosexuality within the narrative is there to serve heterosexuality as a "fleeting suggestion" instead of actually focusing on a homosexual identity (Roof, 1990, pp. 80–81). This is also supported by the perception of homosexuality as non-linear and ingenuine in contrast to heterosexuality that is seen as something authentic and linear (ibid.). Similar beliefs about the insincerity of homosexuality can be found from Smith's list of common lesbian tropes in the narratives of film and television. This trope is often connected to maturity and young lesbians, emphasizing insincerity and temporality (Smith, 2020, pp. 28–29). Smith describes the pattern as such: "feminine sexuality is put into crisis and finally recuperated into the dominant patriarchal order" (2020, p. 29). Homosexuality is seen as a phase, a childish quirk instead of an integral part of one's identity, automatically allowing heterosexuality to be placed above it into a more mature and authentic position. Homosexuality is there to emphasize the position of heterosexuality, and it is a controlled threat within the narrative that serves the heterosexual ideology:

> [...] homosexuality is not an identity but is, rather, the effect of a circumstantial multiplicity of sameness. Homosexuality is the nexus where the clash of disorganized multiples and sequential oppositions makes visible narrative's conflicting and multiple dynamics. Structurally produced homosexuality is, thus, a suspiciously desire-ridden, uncertain, and very interesting turning point of unassuaged desire (Roof, 1990, p. 87).

The dynamic of the two sexualities is there to balance out the sameness and the difference. Roof claims that too much sameness and too much difference are both equally threatening to the narrative and both are required in order to discern difference (1990, p. 83). When there is too much sameness and no

difference can be detected in the narrative, it deters action and freezes the narrative. Lesbians and gays are associated with a sense of stasis and death that threatens both the heterosexual reproduction as well as cultural production in the form of a "story that goes nowhere" and it is reflected, for example, in the kinds of narratives that are given to lesbians in mainstream culture (Roof, 1990, p. 113). Some examples are the lesbian vampire, prostitute, murderer and any other figure that evades "normal" sexuality and reproduction (Roof, 1990, p. 113). Roof's theory will be useful especially in the context of *Big Swiss* where the temporary lesbian trope is heavily present.

Furthermore, regarding romances specifically, Jackie Stacey brings up an interesting point about the nature of lesbian romances in comparison to heterosexual ones in film. The appeal of romances is rooted in the obstacles that the couple has to overcome and the narrative resolution of the genre centers around either the fulfillment or the loss of being together (Stacey, 1995, pp. 71–72). These obstacles provide narrative tension and intense emotions for the audience. For lesbians and heterosexuals these obstacles are quite different, and Stacey claims that the array of obstacles often associated with lesbians is rather unappealing in comparison to heterosexual ones, ranging from the presence of heterosexual men, fear of discovery and homophobia, to murder, neurosis and suicide. According to Stacey, the most common obstacle in lesbian romance is a heterosexual man, and the second most common one is death. Often these obstacles for lesbians are deemed too great to overcome, reinforcing lesbian romance as negative. These depictions of lesbians as pathological, unnatural, and undesirable play a huge part in the definition of lesbians as a negative Other to heterosexuality. This is why the kinds of obstacles and tropes utilized in the lesbian narratives of this thesis matters, and why specifically the presence of heterosexuality and the relation of lesbianism to heterosexuality are crucial to take into consideration. Many of the obstacles depicted in lesbian narratives carry harmful ideologies that are presented in heterosexual culture, further solidifying the juxtaposition of heterosexuality as positive and homosexuality as negative.

Thus, the dynamic of the two sexual orientations represented in the narrative can reflect harmful societal beliefs about the superiority of heterosexuality. These structures are embedded into the narrative and can be subtly linked to character archetypes and elements in the narrative. In regard to this thesis, the structure of superiority and inferiority is important to acknowledge in the context of infidelity because four out of five instances in the primary material involve a heterosexual relationship. The sexualities are thus juxtaposed with one another, calling for an evaluation of the underlying

implications in the dynamic. Furthermore, the association of infidelity in lesbian relationships links to ideas about immorality and the temporality of lesbian relationships, providing grounds for further analysis.

3. Analysis

The analysis section of the paper is structured to advance chronologically, starting with the closer examination of the power imbalance trope that will be analyzed firstly in the context of *Carol*, then *Velvet*, and lastly *Big Swiss.* This same structure will repeat with the other two categories of punishment for lesbian desire, and then infidelity. The results of the analysis of each novel will be compared to one another to reveal possible changes and development in lesbian representation within the primary material.

3.1. Power Imbalance

The analysis will begin with the trope of power imbalance, evaluating age gaps depicted in each of the novels, and exploring if and how these dynamics reflect the problematic features associated with power imbalances. This will be followed by an evaluation of the tropes' purpose for the overall narrative of the novel. The analysis on *Carol* will focus on the mother-daughter dynamic of Carol and Therese, and subchapters on *Velvet* will explore the lesbian seducer in the context of Nan and Diana's toxic relationship. *Big Swiss* will also be discussed from the perspective of the lesbian seducer alongside a reversed age gap setting and the phenomenon of psychoanalyzing lesbians. The background material in this section consists mostly of literature by Kotkavuori (2023), Findlay (2019), Heimonen (2009), and Mizielińska and Sorainen (2023).

3.1.1. The Infantilization of Therese in *Carol*

The relationship between Therese and Carol includes a fundamental power imbalance due to the age gap between the women. Therese is nineteen and still figuring out what she wants in life, whereas Carol is around a decade older, married, a mother to a small girl, and has a certain sense of direction in life. This gap in their statuses is clearly present in the story and emphasized even further by the mother-daughter nature of their relationship. Therese is quite lonely and lost in life, working a department store job that she is not particularly fond of. She is friends with a man named Richard, whom she has known for years and who wants to marry her, but she does not feel entirely secure about her feelings toward him. Carol becomes someone for Therese to lean on amidst the lack of direction she feels within her life.

Carol is older and caring by nature, showing Therese the affection and care that she lacks. From the very beginning of their relationship, it becomes evident that Carol is not only very attentive to Therese's possible needs with questions like: "Have you had breakfast?" and "Are you tired?" (*Carol*, pp. 47, 51), she is also assertive and unafraid to order Therese around even if she protests:

> "I think a nap wouldn't hurt you," Carol said, turning down the flowered cotton bedspread and the top blanket.
> "Thanks, I'm not really—"
> "Slip your shoes off," Carol said softly, but in a tone that commanded obedience (*Carol*, p. 51).

Therese protests again slightly but eventually gives in and goes to sleep, but before she does, Carol asks for Therese's age. Carol seems somewhat pleased by Therese's answer and goes on to say: "You're a child" (*Carol*, p. 52), followed by an inquiry of what Therese would like to drink before bed:

> "What would you like, a drink?"
> Therese knew she meant water. She knew from the tenderness and concern in her voice, as if she were a child sick with fever. Then Therese said it: "I think I'd like some hot milk" (*Carol*, p. 52).

The act of tucking in Therese is quite infantilizing in nature in and of itself, but Carol explicitly stating that she views Therese as a child, after ordering her around like a mother would, further underscores it. This notion is then emphasized even further by the simile of a sick child and the symbolism of drinking warm milk before bed. Later on, in a similar example of Carol infantilizing Therese, Carol makes sure that Therese does not fall asleep in her bath as if the nineteen-year-old would need supervision while bathing. This type of behavior is further stressed by the way Carol views Therese, often either addressing her by the title of child: "Child, child, where do you wander – all by yourself?" or directly insinuating that Therese is not yet an adult: "When you forget about paying her back, then you'll be an adult" (*Carol*, pp. 68, 54). The fact that Carol expresses on several occasions that Therese is a child to her and emphasizes her youth repeatedly and explicitly, further solidifies the association with a maternal bond: "You're much too young to know your own mind. Or what you're talking about" (*Carol*, p. 135). Carol even suggests that she is not right for Therese because: "I indulge you and keep you from growing up" (*Carol*, p. 171). The novel ends up proving Carol right toward the end where the

couple meets again after spending some time apart: “And now – you’re all grown up – with grown-up hair and grown-up clothes” (*Carol*, p. 238).

These observations establish the roles of Therese and Carol as similar to those of a mother and a daughter. Carol cares for Therese, and Therese is there to be cared for. Kotkavuori has made similar remarks about the film adaptation of *Carol* and claims that in a scene where the couple gets caught by Carol’s husband Harge, Carol takes the role of a mother and remains levelheaded and in control of the situation, whereas Therese is the one that needs to be comforted and consoled (2023, p. 41). This same dynamic is reflected throughout the novel especially when the couple is in the presence of someone else. The mother-daughter dynamic emerges from the way Therese and Carol interact when a third party is present. Carol has a tendency to dictate how the scenes unfold, and Therese remains as a passive bystander that watches on. In chapter seven, where Therese meets Carol’s best friend and past lover Abby, Carol treats Therese in a dismissive manner and does not let her reply to a question that Abby directs at Therese. Abby even attempts to include Therese in the interaction for a second time through “bright, irrelevant, friendly glances” to no avail (*Carol*, p. 73). This similar type of behavior can also be detected in a scene in chapter twelve where Carol and Richard meet each other and the three of them go out to get to know each other better. Therese is impatient and quiet, sulking in silence as she waits for Carol and Richard to be finished with each other so that she can have Carol all to herself: “And Therese was suddenly impatient. Why did they sit here having a conference about it? Now they were talking about temperatures, and the state of Washington” (*Carol*, p. 125). Therese’s immature attitude toward the encounter is clearly reflected in the text as she makes herself a silent observer despite the fact that she is the common denominator between the two strangers and the sole reason they are meeting one another.

3.1.2. Therese’s Mommy Issues

Therese’s disillusionment with her mother and her childhood are heavily present in the novel. Before she even meets Carol, the longing for something maternal is present in Therese. Upon landing a temporary job at the department store, in the first chapter of the novel, she meets an older worker woman named Mrs. Robichek, who Therese describes as ugly and repulsive. Yet she agrees to go over to Mrs. Robichek’s apartment after work to please her. Mrs. Robichek is kind and motherly to Therese and implores her to try on a dress she has made and even makes a bed for Therese, similarly to the previously discussed scene with Carol. Except in this instance, Therese experiences a sense of danger

and discomfort. She feels trapped and wants to leave but she is unable to do so before Mrs. Robichek has fallen asleep. It is unclear why Therese feels the need to agree to visit Mrs. Robichek, but what is evident is her need to please others. She is perhaps interested romantically in Mrs. Robichek, although her disgust toward her suggests otherwise. However, there is a budding curiosity that Therese feels toward her, and another scene shows that the lens through which Therese views other women is mirrored against her mother: "The woman had a mouth and cheeks like her mother's" (*Carol*, p. 7). The lack of a wholesome mother figure shows up in mundane situations like these throughout the novel. Upon meeting Mrs. Robichek, Therese is drawn in by something about her and even feels disappointment when she does not receive the attention that she hopes for from Mrs. Robichek: "'Hello,' said Mrs. Robichek, so indifferently that Therese was crushed" (*Carol*, p. 8). Therese is fascinated by Robichek and perhaps drawn in by the grim life she leads.

Findlay suggests that this is a part of Therese looking for alternative futures and paths for herself in the older women around her (2019, p. 64). While this is a possibility that perhaps more so explains the reason Therese is repulsed by Mrs. Robichek, it ignores entirely the way she treats Therese. I suggest that she is drawn in by Mrs. Robichek's maternal and caring nature yet simultaneously repulsed by her due to her unconventional looks and poor lifestyle. She calls Therese a baby, tucks her in, and makes her try on clothing similarly to the nature of a mother. Similar, although more minute, observations emerge from a third female character named Sister Alicia, whom Therese reminisces about every now and then. When the character is introduced in the first chapter, Therese recalls her bosom and later on her loving sternness (*Carol*, p. 36), suggesting a pattern of Therese longing for an authority in her life and someone to care for her. Findlay argues that Sister Alicia used to be the one that fulfilled the position of a mother figure in Therese's life (2019, p. 64). This does not directly mean that Therese is looking for a mother figure in Sister Alicia or Mrs. Robichek but it does provide an interesting reference point when it comes to the relationship between her and Carol, since similarities can be detected. Lastly, toward the end of the novel when Therese has matured after her separation from Carol for a while, she meets another lesbian woman, both of them sharing interest in one another. The older woman mistakes Therese as a minor, to which Therese responds: "is that a crime?" (*Carol*, p. 246). There is a clear insinuation there that seems to suggest the novel's overall attitude toward age gaps, viewing it as something acceptable and a point of attraction for Therese.

The novel further highlights Therese's lack of a mother figure in association to her relationship with Carol through the recurring presence of Therese's tumultuous relationship with her mother. After Therese has been tucked in by Carol in chapter six, she starts to open up emotionally about her childhood, her dead father, and her relationship to her mother, expressing her disillusionment with her mother's behavior. This type of pattern of mentioning Therese's relationship to her mother in the context of her relationship to Carol gets brought up on a few occasions as if to explain their relationship, almost functioning as the lesbian's chaperone mentioned by Adams. As discussed before, at this time in literature and popular culture, lesbians were often explained through psychoanalysis, and especially negative childhood experiences and poor parental figures were commonly seen as the root cause of sexual deviancy (Adams, 1990, p. 268). This notion of psychoanalysis is even explicitly mentioned in the novel through Richard who claims that "there is always something in the background" to which Therese responds: "'Yes,' she said agreeably" (*Carol*, p. 81). This shows that the novel is explicitly aware of the kind of conversation that surrounded homosexuality in the 1950s.

3.1.3. Carol's Role as a Mother

Carol's role as a mother to her daughter Rindy is a significant part of the novel. Carol's sexual orientation puts her custody over her daughter at risk, and she eventually gives up her rights to her daughter by choosing her sexual identity and Therese over her own daughter. Carol's maternal role is present throughout the novel from the very first instance when Therese and Carol meet at the department store as she is buying a gift for her daughter. As their relationship evolves, Carol is forced to balance both Rindy and Therese in her life and the two of them often share parallels to one another. One concrete example of this is Carol buying matching shirts for Therese and Rindy in chapter eighteen. Kotkavuori suggests that this placement makes Therese and Rindy compete for the maternal love that Carol offers to the both of them and links it to the habit of psychoanalytically explaining lesbians in media (2023, p. 41). Carol's maternal role also becomes distinctly evident in the way she provides Therese advice, guiding her in relationships by telling her how to handle Richard and his family after their breakup, as well as teaching Therese to have empathy and kindness toward Mrs. Robichek despite Therese being put off by her. Additionally, as also mentioned by Kotkavuori in her analysis, Carol teaches Therese to put on makeup and perfume (2023, p. 40). These acts paired with the lack of a mother figure in Therese's life make the dynamic tread dangerously close to psychoanalysis and an erotic mother-daughter relationship.

Despite the fact that the novel seems to be sending mixed signals regarding the representation of lesbians, it is evident that when it comes to the power imbalance between the couple, the depiction of that dynamic is not exactly ideal representation. While the novel does not fully lean into the mother-daughter dynamic, it is certainly heavily present in the background and allows the opportunity for varied interpretations of the nature of their relationship. As Kotkavuori also states, the ambiguity and infantilization of their dynamic either allows the audience to ignore the presence of lesbian desire or makes it up to be something perverse and unnatural (2023, p. 41). Many of these ideas can also be reflected in Richard who expresses his distaste toward the couple during an argument with Therese: "Don't you think it's pretty silly? It's like a crush that schoolgirls get" (*Carol*, p. 130). His ideas also reflect thoughts about Carol's predatory behavior: "She shouldn't indulge you. She shouldn't play with you like this. It's not fair to you" (*Carol*, p. 130). Later on, he even goes as far as calling the relationship pathological and sordid, tootled and infantile, assuring Therese that she will eventually be disgusted with herself (*Carol*, p. 214). Richard's opinions can partly be viewed as truthful, depending on how the relationship is interpreted by the reader because the text indeed has traces of tropes that might come across as reminiscent of views that pertain to pathology. The mother-daughter dynamic is quite explicit and heavily present in *Carol*. As to be expected due to the age of the novel, the representation comes with stereotypes and common beliefs that reflect the era in question. The mother-daughter trope specifically does not add anything to the overall narrative, but on the contrary provides potential evidence and encouragement for the accusations of perversity that Richard makes toward the couple. Removing this aspect of their dynamic would most likely not affect the overall message of the novel, indicating that the use of the trope is unnecessary and serves no further purpose in the novel. It perhaps even goes partly against the positive attitude toward lesbianism the novel is aiming to formulate.

3.1.4. Nan and Diana's Toxic Relationship in *Velvet*

In *Velvet* Nan's second relationship contains a significant age gap and a very distinct power imbalance. Nan meets a woman named Diana Lethaby, who has been stalking Nan's life on the streets and eventually picks her up to take her home. Their relationship, as Heimonen also states, is a sexual one (2009, pp. 86–87). When Nan and Diana meet, Nan is twenty-two and Diana thirty-eight, but later on it is confirmed that there is a seventeen-year age gap between them. Nan even states that Diana seemed "terribly old" to her upon meeting her (*Velvet*, p. 251). Diana is assertive and haughty, possessing a very strong sense of predatory attitude to her, even stating to Nan: "You have exactly what I'm after"

(*Velvet*, p. 233). This comment emphasizes the trope of the lesbian seducer and brings forward undertones of an evil, cunning lesbian, especially in the context of what their relationship develops into. Nan even expresses that it made her “horribly uneasy to think that she had been observing me all those times” (*Velvet*, p. 237). Diana essentially makes Nan her personal whore and offers food, shelter, and a life of luxury to Nan in return. Their relationship has very strong dominant-submissive characteristics. Diana is controlling and does not let the relationship get emotional, keeping it strictly sexual. Heimonen argues that when the relationship gets emotional, Diana withdraws from Nan (2009, p. 89). Nan also expresses that she is afraid of Diana and more specifically afraid of what her sexual desires might be (*Velvet*, p. 238). Her fears do not turn out to be misplaced as Diana eventually turns explicitly and physically abusive toward Nan.

3.1.5. Traces of Motherly Love and Predatory Behavior

Nan and Diana’s relationship in *Velvet* is predatory by nature with references to a mother-daughter dynamic that emerges from the power imbalance setting that the relationship is founded on. Diana repeatedly refers to Nan as “child” to emphasize the power imbalance between them: “‘Poor child,’ she said. ‘And do you always grow sorry, when your business is complete?’” (*Velvet*, p. 244). Calling Nan a child especially in the context of a sexual encounter is rather disturbing and makes the age gap distasteful by assimilating it to familial relations or otherwise perverse dynamics. This occurs often when Diana is ordering Nan around: “Light me a cigarette, would you, child?” (*Velvet*, p. 275). Diana also does this with her maid Zena who is the same age as Nan to assert dominance, for example when she messes up: “‘No, child, I did not mean sewing bags…” (*Velvet*, p. 314). Diana also has a habit of punishing Nan for misbehaving. There is a very prominent tone of maternal assertiveness in her tone when Nan humiliates Diana in front of her lesbian friends: “‘She [Nan] will go upstairs,’ she said levelly, until she is sorry. Then she will apologize to the ladies she has upset. And then, I shall think of some punishment for her’” (*Velvet*, p. 316).

Diana treats Nan like she is a petulant child that has misbehaved instead of an adult, a peer, to her. After chastising her, she slaps Nan. The power imbalance in their relationship is also expressed in the way Diana forces Nan to perform for Diana’s lesbian friends who openly objectify and fetishize her for her boyish looks that are uncommon and rather atypical for Victorian society. Diana and her clan of lesbians are depicted as perverted and evil women who desire to witness the humiliation of both Nan and Zena. The predatory nature of Diana is even metaphorically emphasized when she dresses up as a

goddess with a bow and arrow for her fortieth birthday party and informs that the equipment is for "piercing young girls' hearts", suggesting that she has a preference for young girls (*Velvet*, p. 308).

Additionally, there are two occasions in the text where Diana and Nan's relationship is briefly but explicitly likened to familial relations, however on neither occasion is the idea encouraged or welcomed: "and the way they asked it showed that they thought me younger than I was. They might, I suppose, have taken Diana for my mother; for various reasons, the idea was not a nice one" (*Velvet*, p. 285). Nan is clearly not into the idea, nor is she exactly pleased to have Dickie –Diana's friend– mistaken for her aunt. The mother-daughter dynamic is not necessarily explicit in the text, but the undertones still lean heavily toward a maternal attitude on Diana's part due to the nicknames, the tone directed toward Nan, and the dominant air around Diana that further emphasizes the power imbalance between the couple. Here Hollinger's (2012) idea of the infantilization of lesbians as something that invalidates lesbian desire and renders it ambiguous does not apply the same way it does in *Carol* due to the explicitly sexual relationship between Nan and Diana. However, in this case the infantilization pertains to the perverse. The age gap does not come across as healthy and wholesome but carries a predatory element that later on turns abusive and degrading. Thus, the age gap is likened to both harmful ideas about an evil and sinister lesbian seducer, as well as maternal undertones that render the manifestation of the trope problematic when analyzed separate from the context of the overall narrative.

To compare these results with *Carol*, in *Velvet* there are remnants of the mother-daughter trope, but it is not welcomed by the protagonist, nor encouraged the same way as it is in *Carol*. It is viewed rather as a nuisance than a point of attraction or a perversion of the couple. It could even be viewed as a nod to the old stereotype, followed by its explicit rejection by the protagonist. Nan learns a lot from the dynamic she has with Diana and eventually gains enough self-respect to recognize that the way Diana treated her was not acceptable. This experience and relationship function as a crucial point of growth for Nan, eventually serving a key purpose for the narrative of the novel despite the heavy use of the power imbalance trope. Thus, this manifestation of the trope is not merely present for shock value but actually serves a purpose in the personal journey Nan goes through in the novel, offering an example of how a problematic trope can be used in favor of an optimistic narrative for lesbians.

3.1.6. The Lesbian Seducer in *Big Swiss*

The depiction of the age gap in *Big Swiss* leans more toward Mizielińska and Sorainen's view on lesbian age gaps where the differences in experience and age do not always go hand in hand (2023, p. 266). Despite the fact that Flavia –also known as Big Swiss by Greta– is seventeen years younger than Greta and inexperienced when it comes to her sexuality and sexual identity, toward the end of the novel, it turns out that Flavia possesses more maturity than Greta. The same childishness that can be found in Therese due to her youth does not exist in Flavia, as could be presumed due to her age, but can be found in Greta instead. Both women are deeply traumatized by their pasts but have dealt with the aftermath in completely opposite ways. Flavia has overcome the violent attack that she fell victim to, whereas Greta still dwells on the events that have taken place decades before and lets trauma define the course of her life, which is something Flavia criticizes her for as she demonstrates her maturity over Greta:

> "If everything can be explained by your trauma, then nothing is really your fault, right? You always have this convenient out. Your mother killed herself, and so that gives you permission to do whatever you want? To eavesdrop on my therapy sessions? To fuck me?"
> "You made the first pass," Greta reminded her.
> "Right, which I would never blame on trauma" (*Big Swiss*, p. 253).

Flavia is hurt by Greta's dishonesty and calls her out for her behavior. In the end, the encounter and brief affair with Flavia teaches Greta to move on from her trauma and gain a more serious grip on her life in her forties, subverting the common conception of the older person as the more mature one.

However, there is a certain predatory element in the novel due to the circumstances that bring the couple together. Greta has access to Flavia's most intimate and personal thoughts through the therapy sessions that she transcribes for a therapist who is employing her. While Flavia is the one to initiate contact with Greta, Greta still ends up pursuing Flavia despite knowing it is wrong. Flavia does show mutual interest, but it is Greta who takes their relationship even further and initiates the couple's first kiss on the lips in chapter eight. The foundation of their relationship is explicitly discussed in the novel by the couple, and Flavia openly lists the ways in which Greta has violated her privacy and used her access to personal information to connect with Flavia on a deeper level:

> Worse than using someone's confidential information to seduce them? To have this false identity, to lie about your own *name*, to act all-knowing, and then to continue *listening* even after we're sleeping together… (*Big Swiss*, p. 254, original emphases).

It is evident that what Greta has done is a severe violation of Flavia's privacy and deeply unethical. Their relationship is built on dishonesty and partly depicts Greta as a manipulative seducer, although it is important to note that Greta's role in the matter is not premeditated and she has no ill intent. In chapter seven, Greta even attempts to be as off-putting as possible around Flavia, but it ends up having an opposite effect on her and draws her closer. The problem is that Greta allows it all to happen due to her own interest in Flavia. Greta lies to Flavia about her name, her age, and her job, and purposely maintains the relationship and keeps it a secret from others because she knows she is in the wrong. A similar note about the situation is made by the therapist, Om: "You're not being emotionally honest, Greta. You were stealthy, you were secretive, and I'm pretty sure it's all connected to your mother's death" (*Big Swiss*, p. 306). In addition to calling Greta out for her behavior, the therapist also directly links her behavior to Greta's trauma. Greta's behavior paired with the fact that Flavia is married to her husband and does not intend to cheat on him before she meets Greta makes the situation even more questionable. This pattern of events is reminiscent of the lesbian seducer or psycho lesbian who preys on women and ruins their lives, mentioned by Löf, for example (2016, p. 12).

Despite the subversive aspect of the age gap, the power imbalance between the women is a very central theme in the novel. Flavia is put together and well-off with a husband, a luxurious home, and a medical degree. Her life is balanced despite her past trauma. Greta is the complete opposite. She lives in an old, dilapidated house with a roommate. She has no proper career, a few friends, and no proper direction in life. This contrast between their lives and their personalities escalates to be an issue as their relationship begins to splinter. They are also perceived very differently by the people around them. Flavia's unique and beautiful appearance demands attention from others and attracts others to her whereas Greta is often overlooked, especially in Flavia's company:

> Greta was usually ignored altogether – that is, until they noticed Big Swiss's wedding band and realized she was married, possibly to Greta, at which point Greta felt like a layer of bumpy rust on Big Swiss's side. To get at Big Swiss, they had to deal with Greta, and not only was she difficult to get rid of; she stained whatever she touched (*Big Swiss*, p. 227).

Greta is depicted as something that devalues Flavia, something repulsive and messy. The pair also contrast heavily in values and the way they view life. Greta behaves childishly, for example by creating an alias online to test Flavia's loyalty in chapter fifteen, she is overly and inappropriately possessive over Flavia, and her childhood trauma and mommy issues are heavily present in the novel. The dynamic shares many similarities with Carol and Therese's relationship despite the subversion of their ages with an even heavier emphasis on Greta's personal trauma.

The narrative gets very close to explaining Greta's character through psychoanalysis due to the theme of trauma that is present in the novel. On top of her mother's suicide, Greta has had a multitude of questionable sexual experiences in her youth such as a strange attachment to her uncle's wife Petra who was both maternal and sexual toward Greta. Petra would ask about fourteen-year-old Greta's sex life and masturbation in chapter three. Their odd relationship even garners some concerns about Greta being a sex slave to Petra (*Big Swiss*, p. 59). These types of events, both childhood trauma and poor relationship to a parental figure, fall under the Freudian theories of psychoanalysis. No such observations can be made about Flavia because her trauma occurred in adulthood, and her childhood is mostly left in the dark. Interestingly enough, Flavia's sexuality is also depicted as straight when she states: "I don't see myself ever identifying as a lesbian" (*Big Swiss*, p. 201). Whereas Greta's experience is the opposite and she goes from not being "all the way gay" to pondering if she could be fully gay during her relationship with Flavia (*Big Swiss*, p. 147). After their brief relationship, Greta remains on her own and Flavia with her husband. In this context, the depiction of Greta's trauma does lean toward psychoanalysis as well as the temporal nature of lesbianism mentioned by Smith (2020).

Their relationship is not likened to a mother-daughter dynamic as strongly as in the two previously discussed relationships, but there are two instances where Greta and Flavia's relationship is briefly referred to as familial. In the first instance, Flavia's husband Luke asks the couple to behave during a dinner where he is supposed to get to know Flavia's new "friend" better: "But please stop bickering like… sisters", to this Flavia responds: "'We're more like mother and a daughter,' Big Swiss said. 'In my view'" (*Big Swiss*, p. 220). The scene is full of tension and discreet aggression between Greta and Flavia. It is unclear what the intention behind Flavia's comment is, but it would make sense that her goal was to irritate Greta instead of actually expressing any opinions of such nature about their relationship. In the second instance, a man at a bar who is interested in Flavia asks if Greta is her

mother. Here any connections to maternal relations carry a sense of humor and irony, suggesting that they are purposely included perhaps as a way of mocking old tropes. However, in a scene where the couple have sex for the first time, Greta "…felt like she was seeing a photograph of Big Swiss at age seven or eight" (*Big Swiss*, p. 170), which is an odd remark to make but does not necessarily indicate anything.

In this category, the most present trope is the one of lesbian seducer. The novel establishes a rather problematic foundation for the lesbian couple, the trope serving as a key pillar of the entire novel, unlike the mother-daughter dynamic in *Carol* and the power imbalance trope in *Velvet*. In Big Swiss, the use of this trope is also what ends up being the downfall of the relationship between Greta and Flavia, painting a rather grim image of lesbian relationships. It can be argued that the trope does serve a purpose for the overall narrative, as it is what brings the couple together and later on separates them, however the narrative thus ends up depicting lesbianism as something negative, and the basis of Greta's affection as predatory and cunning. This becomes especially problematic due to the marketing of the novel as a lesbian romance. Thus, I conclude that the trope does not support an optimistic narrative resolution for lesbians.

3.2. Punishing Lesbians

The next five subsections will be focusing on the trope of punishment. Here the analysis will examine in which ways lesbians are punished in the narratives and whether it serves a purpose for the narrative or exists purely for shock value, repeating the same old narrative and beliefs associated with lesbianism. The theoretical background of this section utilizes mostly Kabir's (1998) theory of lesbian castration and Carroll's (2013) views on the miserable, lonely lesbian. This category of tropes deals specifically with the misfortune and the unavoidable fate of tragedy often attached to lesbian narratives. Especially the topics of loneliness and isolation will be explored here.

3.2.1. Extortion and Loss of Social Relations in *Carol*

In *Carol* the instances of punishment are rather evident and straightforward. Both of the women are punished in the matter, but the majority of that weight falls on Carol who ends up losing the custody of her daughter as a direct result of her practicing her sexual orientation. Carol is put into a position where she has to choose between her daughter and her sexual identity. She faces blackmail through the custody case that her husband opens against her amidst their divorce, sending a detective after her in an attempt to coerce Carol to return home as she and Therese travel through the country by car:

> The detective looked at her with a false and meaningless smile, not like a person at all, but like a machine wound up and set on a course. “I think you’ll go back to New York. I’m giving you sound advice. Your child is at stake. I suppose you know that, don’t you?”
> “My child is my property!” (*Carol*, p. 194).

The loss of Rindy is difficult for Carol to process, but she defies her husband Harge and the detective anyway. Although the effects of the coercion are visible in Carol’s behavior and silent tears despite her attempts at trying to hide it. The instance also affects Therese emotionally and she experiences a “shame and shock she had never known before” (*Carol*, p. 194). They are both humiliated in the matter and the bubble of innocent love around them is burst, altering Therese’s perception of their love:

> She had seen just now what she had only sensed before, that the whole world was ready to be their enemy, and suddenly what she and Carol had together seemed no longer love or anything happy but a monster between them, with each of them caught in a fist (*Carol*, p. 199).

The love between them is transformed into something to be ashamed of, something deserving of punishment. Suddenly a beautiful love letter that Therese has written for Carol turns out to be something incriminating that the couple can only hope will not be discovered by the detectives. Therese mostly experiences guilt and shame for playing a part in the case filed against Carol, but since the accusations are made toward Carol, she ends up suffering more in the matter. She is publicly humiliated in court and betrayed by her own maid Florence, for example, who sells Therese’s love letter to Harge and provides him with additional information that she has overheard while working as Carol’s maid (*Carol*, p. 211). The violation of the couple’s privacy exceeds the discovery of private letters and eavesdropping on recordings of Carol and Therese at their private hotel rooms. One of these recordings include Waterloo, where the couple has sex for the first time. The coercion through this tape specifically follows the characteristics of immediate punishment for lesbian desire typical of the Bury Your Gays trope. Due to all the evidence against Carol, she loses custody of Rindy and is presented with a plea to stop seeing Therese and others like her in order to get to visit her daughter (*Carol*, p. 219). Carol also ponders whether she will be under surveillance by the judges to ensure that she follows through.

Therese suffers in the matter in a slightly different manner. Not only does Therese lose Richard due to her sexuality, but she also loses connection to his family, leaving her with only a few more distant connections in her life. She is also verbally abused by Richard in chapter twenty-one and has to withstand his angry letters where he insults Carol and Therese's relationship. Additionally, Therese loses Carol for some time and starts to doubt Carol's intentions with her: "Did she owe Carol anything, Carol the person? Hadn't Carol been playing with her, as Richard had said?" (*Carol*, p. 230). Therese begins to resent Carol and no longer wants to see her, going from a lovestruck girl to a maturer version of herself. Furthermore, both lesbians are depicted as rather lonely overall in the novel. Neither Therese nor Carol seem to have many friends outside of their heterosexual partners. Therese, for example, does not have any established friendships aside from her weak connection with Mrs. Robichek and Richard's friend Danny. Similarly to Therese, Carol seems to only have Abby in addition to her immediate family. Alongside their loneliness, both of them are troubled in their own ways, making the depiction of their characters fall under the trope of the miserable, lonely lesbian.

The results of this analysis demonstrate Kabir's (1998) theory about the punishment of lesbians where the lesbians are humiliated, and their agency is denied through systematic disempowerment. Especially losses in social life are heavily present in the text as well as the destructive nature of lesbianism. The link between the characters' lesbian identity and the direct punishment of it suggests that their suffering is self-imposed and avoidable. Deviancy gets punished, promoting ideas about wrongness and pathology. Additionally, the trope of the lonely, miserable lesbian aligns with Carroll's (2013) observations about the link between lesbians and the social stigma of loneliness. However, loneliness is not something that gets brought up explicitly in the text and does not necessarily have a negative presence in the novel. Both the loneliness and the punishment can be viewed as something that the couple overcomes, something that functions as a depiction of authentic lesbian struggles. While the notion of punishment is impossible to overlook in *Carol*, it does serve a purpose for the narrative, strengthening the lesbian-positive message of the novel. Despite any attempts to tear the couple apart, they remain together by the end, telling a story of perseverance. The problematic representation and tropes in the novel are heavily present, but to revisit thoughts on narrative value by both Lynch (1990) and Armbrustmacher (2025), the story turns out to be one of hope and acceptance, a story of resilience reflective of authentic lesbian struggles. The punishment that the lesbian characters are subjected to is

not a redundant plot point to stir up drama, but a depiction of lesbian realities from the 1950s that is followed up by an optimistic future for the lesbians.

3.2.2. Systematic Disempowerment in *Velvet*

Kabir's (1998) notion on punishing lesbians through systematic disempowerment alongside his concept of lesbian castration are depicted even more accurately in *Velvet* through the hardships that Nan faces. Nan's first relationship follows Kabir's pattern of lesbian castration when Nan loses her girlfriend, Kitty, to a man in chapter seven, thus denying Nan agency and punishing her for her lesbian identity. Nan also suffers losses through systematic disempowerment that shows up especially in her social and professional lives. The humiliation that Nan experiences for her girlfriend choosing a man over her is followed by total isolation. She loses her job at the theater, access to her finances, and contact with her family. These events also pertain to the common pattern of a lesbian seducing a heterosexual woman and leaving her in ruins mentioned by Kotkavuori (2023). Nan is ostracized from her social circles through the humiliation and embarrassment that follow the events of Kitty cheating on her, leading her to fall yet into another stereotype of the lesbian prostitute.

Furthermore, as Kabir suggests, while the lesbian is losing control of her life, others around her thrive socially and professionally (1998, p. 46). This becomes evident in the way Kitty gets to keep the life of theater and luxury that she built with Nan alongside the social connections that were a byproduct of their careers, whereas Nan loses everything. Kabir's ideas about self-imposed punishment are reflected in the poor decisions that Nan makes, creating an illusion that suggests her suffering to be inevitable. And while Nan is on the streets as a sex worker, she finds kinship in other sexual deviants like herself, once more following the theory of Kabir that claims this kinship to further solidify ideas about the inevitability of her suffering. This pattern repeats during Nan's time under Diana's control when she finds kinship with Diana's maid, Zena, who receives similar treatment of humiliation and punishment from Diana, suggesting through this pattern of kinship that their suffering is invited and inevitable.

3.2.3. Nan's Vicious Cycle of Misery

Carroll's (2013) theory about the miserable, lonely lesbian applies to Nan. In chapter eight, she falls into severe depression after her separation from Kitty which is a direct result of her sexual identity. During Nan's time with Diana, she does not feel happy. As mentioned before, the relationship with Diana is mainly sexual and any romantic feelings are not tolerated. Nan is lonely and unhappy even

when under Diana's wing, supposedly doomed to misery despite having found lesbian social circles. Ever since Nan is "converted" into lesbianism her life falls apart. She loses her sister and best friend, Alice, after informing her about her feelings toward Kitty. Alice makes Nan feel ashamed for her behavior, creating a rift between Nan and her family by telling Nan: "You are only misled and that woman, your so-called friend is to blame for it" (*Velvet*, p. 134). Alice also tells Nan that she will not let their family know about Nan's feelings toward Kitty due to the inability to bear such shame (*Velvet*, p. 134). After this, Alice refuses to talk to Nan either in the form of letters or face-to-face to express her resentment towards her sister's identity and decisions. Among all the losses Nan suffers, she also loses the innocence and purity of her old identity at the oyster parlor, her home in Whitstable.

Lesbianism is emphasized as the root of Nan's misery through her own perception of the events as she resents heterosexuals for the freedom they have in society: "They embraced on the streets and strangers were glad! While all the time I lived pale as a worm, cast out from pleasure, from comfort and ease" (*Velvet*, p. 190). Despite gaining footing after her crippling depression, Nan herself remarks: "I could not say that I was happy. You must not think that I was ever happy now" (*Velvet*, p. 195). Additionally, shortly after this Nan begins to perform sexual acts on the streets in exchange for money. She does not feel good about the act and describes an encounter with a man that resembled Kitty's husband as such: "I had pleasured him for Kitty's sake, and the act had made me sicken" (*Velvet,* p. 200). Nan is clearly not comfortable with the situation, and her behavior could be considered as self-inflicted punishment for ending up in such a predicament. Traces of this behavior can also be detected in the relationship Nan has with Diana as Nan grows more comfortable with Diana and dares to test her limits with her. She acquires a smart mouth toward the end of their relationship which Diana does not appreciate, resulting in punishment.

Nan spends years of her life completely alone aside from any acquaintances that she creates through connections with her accommodations in the city. At her second accommodation, she manages to create a bond with an older lady, Mrs. Milne, and her daughter, Grace, who rent Nan a room in chapter nine, but this connection is lost when Nan meets Diana and casts her previous arrangements aside to pursue sexual pleasure and luxury. Once her relationship with Diana comes to a dramatic end in chapter fourteen, she is once more homeless and completely alone, punished for her disobedience and romantic and sexual feelings toward Zena that Diana does not tolerate in the slightest. Even within this arrangement, Nan's lesbian desire entails punishment despite the fact that Diana is a lesbian as well.

Nan describes her emotions toward Zena as such: "one conversation with Zena got her more turned on than a year fucking Diana" (*Velvet*, p. 305). Upon developing an authentic, romantic interest in Zena, Nan is punished by Diana for it after being caught in bed with Zena. Diana physically assaults her as she and her friends dress Nan up in a frock and a gown to humiliate her before throwing her and Zena out on the streets. Zena resents Nan for causing them both such misfortune and leaves her behind, leading Nan back to isolation and misery: "Diana and Zena between them had made an outcast of me" (*Velvet*, p. 337).

Nan's last chance at finding company and kinship after Zena too abandons Nan ends up being a random woman neighbor to her previous accommodation at Mrs. Milne's. This minor link ends up saving her from a tragic fate of isolation in chapter fifteen, and she eventually discovers her place in the city within a socialist community filled with people of varying backgrounds, genders, and sexualities, disrupting the repetitive pattern of misery and loneliness. The narrative of punishing Nan for her sexuality and gender identity is a pattern that repeats on multiple occasions and takes various different forms from outside judgment and ostracization to self-inflicted punishment. The results of analyzing *Velvet* in the category of punishment are similar to those of *Carol,* demonstrating a balance in authenticity and optimism. Despite the chaotic journey that Nan goes through until she discovers her place in the world, she does end up finding a lover and a family for herself alongside community and a more hopeful future for people of her kind, the tropes serving a purpose of creating hope and a sense of belonging for the lesbians in the narrative.

3.2.4. Greta's Misfortunes in *Big Swiss*

As a result of her unethical behavior of breaking a confidentiality agreement, Greta loses her job and the potential to be hired as a transcriber again at least in the area of Hudson, thus causing her to suffer a professional loss due to her attempt to pursue lesbian desire. Greta does not necessarily suffer any significant social losses due to her relationship with Flavia; however, she is depicted as a lonely social outcast, especially in comparison to Flavia. Much like in the relationship between Nan and Kitty, Greta's social life suffers from the attempt to hide her relationship, albeit the consequences are rather mild and mostly related to dishonesty. When applying Kabir's (1998) theory to the analysis of the novel, the process of lesbian castration emerges from the triangle drama between Greta, Flavia, and her husband Luke. Flavia reminds Greta that the two of them are not in a relationship: "'But you're not in a relationship', Big Swiss said carefully, as if this was news to Greta", initiating the process of castration

by slowly bringing Greta back to reality as the relationship begins to unravel and fall apart (*Big Swiss*, p. 190). Later on, while listening to yet another recording of Flavia's therapy sessions, Greta is disheartened to learn that Flavia is sexually still very involved with her husband despite the affair she is having with Greta:

> OM: Have you stopped having sex?
>
> FEW [Flavia]: NO, in fact, we're having more sex than we've ever had.
>
> "Pardon?" Greta said.
>
> OM: Has the sex changed? Or has your experience of it changed?
>
> FEW: It's a whole other flavor. Sometimes the orgasms are so intense, I lose my hearing for twenty minutes.
>
> "What?" Greta said. "What?" (*Big Swiss*, p. 197, brackets added).

Flavia's great revelation is then followed by a recount of events about Flavia's own affair with Greta, during which Flavia gives her honest opinion about Greta, criticizing her dilapidated home and aimless life: "FEW: Never married. No kids, no real career, no assets, no retirement, no plans or future goals. She just lives day-to-day like an animal. Sometimes she seems… lost" (*Big Swiss*, p. 202). This partly castrates Greta and denies her the agency of truly having Flavia to herself, but she does not yet lose Flavia for good. Flavia's remark about not identifying as a lesbian further emphasizes the castration and ostracization of Greta, putting her in a position where she is the more emotionally involved one, and an "authentic" lesbian, whereas for Flavia the affair seems to be temporary.

This realization is also humiliating to Greta when she learns that she is the "gay lover" and does not stand a chance against Flavia and Luke's marriage during a dinner they are all having together at Flavia and Luke's home:

> [...] Big Swiss nibbled off the fork – flirtatiously, it seemed to Greta. Sure enough, Big Swiss and Luke exchanged one or two private smiles.
>
> Where's my private smile? Greta Wondered. "You're supposed to flirt with the *other woman*," she imagined lecturing Big Swiss tomorrow, "not your boring husband." But then she remembered that she wasn't in fact the other woman. The other woman would be sleeping with Luke. Greta was the gay lover (*Big Swiss*, p. 211, original emphasis).

After some bickering at the table, Greta escapes into the bathroom where she and Flavia meet to talk. Flavia claims that she is frustrated with the topics Luke is bringing up, such as children and their future trip to Ecuador, and expresses her simultaneous desire toward Greta as well as her emotional distress over the situation. Flavia's attitude is contradictory as Greta confronts her about her behavior, Flavia once more asserts: "'We're not *dating*. Don't be disgusting,' Big Swiss said. 'I love you'" (*Big Swiss*, p. 222, original emphasis). The dinner filled with passive-aggressive tension leaves Greta feeling frustrated with jealousy and disappointment, the events making her realize that she has to grow up and confess her secret to her roommate Sabine. Thus, the distinction between the women's sexual identities and the different stances on the status of their relationship render Greta the lesbian subject of the novel who gets castrated. Greta's losses in the professional and social spheres, as well as her return to suicidal ideation, contrasted against Flavia's thriving career as a gynecologist and her maintaining her relationship with her husband further deepen the divide between the women, following Kabir's theory of disempowerment. The losses Greta suffers are a direct result of her pursuing her lesbian desire toward Flavia, suggesting that it is unconventional and something to be punished for. And while Flavia does not get punished in the same ways as Greta does, neither of the women go fully unpunished for their lesbian misconduct. Flavia is punished indirectly through Luke who falls victim to a violent knife-attack that paralyzes him forever. This accident is presumably due to Greta's involvement and aggravation of the attacker.

3.2.5. Greta's Loneliness and Misery as Comic Relief

Similarly to the psychoanalysis of lesbians in *Carol*, *Big Swiss* highlights Greta's childhood experiences and relationship to her mother in the novel. Problematic representation does not necessarily emerge from the age gap between the couple, but their overall imbalance, however subverted it might be. Greta is stereotypically portrayed as a lonely older lesbian with a rocky childhood and a complicated relationship with her mother who Greta believes to have killed herself by giving her mother the permission to commit suicide. Greta's misery is rooted in her childhood and trauma that consists of heavy losses and questionable sexual experiences. Greta does not have friends aside from her roommate Sabine and spends most of her time at home working remotely. As for sexual inappropriateness, Greta develops a brief crush on Sabine's teenage son and even dreams about touching him sexually (*Big Swiss*, p.43). She also recounts a time when she cheated on her husband of seven years with a woman whom she had had a relationship with as a teenager (*Big Swiss*, p. 152). This

description is very reflective of bisexual stereotypes regarding unfaithfulness and perversity. Greta is depicted as a train wreck that eventually also disrupts Flavia's happiness, pertaining to the common image of lesbians as a threat to normal womanhood and happiness as she comes between the heterosexual couple of the novel. Greta is repeatedly depicted as lonely and miserable: "It had been years since she'd made a friend, even a dog park friend" (*Big Swiss*, p. 143). Flavia's observations about Greta support the idea: "Otherwise, there's an air of doom about her. She seems profoundly lonely" (*Big Swiss*, p. 202). Greta's depression is also very present in Flavia's opinion on Greta's character:

> Her mother killed herself thirty years ago. Rebekah [Greta] has wanted to follow her ever since. [...] She told me she made suicide pacts with four other people "just to cover her bases". [...] She was kidding – I think. Honestly, I don't think she's ever had four friends (*Big Swiss*, p. 241, brackets added).

The depiction of Greta is rather extreme and taken far enough to be likened to a caricature for a humoristic effect, but despite that, it cannot be denied that the image of her is less than favorable. This is an issue brought up by Parker et al. in their study on lesbian representation on television. Observations regarding Greta's comic nature align with the findings of their study where gay and lesbian characters are portrayed as either a comic relief or in unflattering ways (Parker et al., 2019, p. 15). In Greta's case, both of these qualities coalesce, and the comic effect emerges from her unflattering and somewhat deranged portrayal. In addition to this, Om's own interpretation of Greta through Flavia's therapy sessions supports this pattern: "She certainly sounds like an addict. With mommy issues. [...] she seems slightly… unhinged" (*Big Swiss*, pp. 241–242). As becomes evident through these examples, a large part of Greta's character has been built on stereotypes.

The pathology associated with loneliness and the queer subject brought up by Carroll (2013), paired with Greta's suicidal tendencies, and psychoanalysis through her unfortunate childhood, as well as her immoral actions create a rather unpleasant depiction of lesbians where multiple tropes coalesce. Greta comes off as an older, dishonest seducer with a perfectly tumultuous past for psychoanalysis and a lacking social circle that ostracizes her from society. While Flavia's trauma does get discussed in the novel, it does not provide similar grounds for psychoanalysis as Greta's does, inviting the lesbian subject to be scrutinized, but not the heterosexual subject. According to Armbrustmacher's (2025) views on the representation of ostracization in queer characters, this would only put even more emphasis on Greta's misery due to her being the only queer character in the novel that owns her

sexuality. However, it is also important to note that Greta is the protagonist of the novel and thus the complexities of her character and personality are likely to be explored more thoroughly than Flavia's. Greta is openly criticized for her behavior and her lifestyle within the narrative, especially by Flavia and Om. The incident caused by Greta and Flavia's relationship is what eventually functions as a wake-up call for Greta, and she begins to turn her life around. Despite the fact that the couple does not end up together, at least on behalf of Greta, the ending is promisingly positive, suggesting that the fault is not in her sexual preferences but rather in her habit of living off of her traumatic past. With all this in mind, the depiction of lesbians does still lean heavily toward repeating old patterns. In comparison to *Carol* and *Velvet*, *Big Swiss* does not turn the tropes around into optimistic futures for lesbians. Instead, the tropes prove that the couple is better off separated. The punishment and misery that Greta and Flavia both face might serve a narrative purpose for the novel, however, due to the unfortunate use of these tropes as well as the lack of balancing the novel out with optimism and acceptance for lesbians, the narrative comes across as more problematic than accepting.

3.3. Infidelity and Heterosexual Superiority

The following subchapters will focus on infidelity, immorality, and stereotypes regarding lesbian sexuality as well as the dynamic of heterosexuality and homosexuality within the novels. Background literature by Kotkavuori (2023), Smith (2020) and Roof (1990) will be especially useful in this section. The aim is to explore whether there are underlying biases that lift heterosexuality above homosexuality and promote the latter as pathological or inferior. The tropes of lesbian temporality and inauthenticity are also addressed in this section.

3.3.1. Lesbianism as a Threat to Heterosexuality in *Carol*

In *Carol*, the presence of heterosexuality is prevalent throughout the novel and gets juxtaposed with homosexuality through both Carol and Therese's heterosexual involvements. Carol traditionally has a husband and a child, whereas Therese possesses potential for this gender normative arrangement through Richard, who intends to marry her. Therese might not be officially in a relationship with Richard, but she is undeniably affiliated with him and his family and has also been sexually involved with him on several occasions. The assumption about them is evident in the novel. Even Carol asks about Richard with the assumption that he and Therese are an item. Even if Therese is not entirely sure about her feelings toward Richard, he certainly has no such confusion about their relationship. While

technically Therese does not cheat on Richard, from his perspective it could certainly be viewed that way if he were to see the lesbian relationship as something equal to a heterosexual one. Carol, however, does technically cheat on Harge despite their estrangement from one another because their divorce has not been finalized and previously during their marriage she has a brief affair with her best friend Abby. Both of the women are going outside of the bounds of their heterosexual relationships to seek a homosexual one. Carol's situation in the second time around is more understandable because both sides of the marriage know that the relationship is over, but Therese does not explicitly disclose her disinterest in Richard as she falls in love with Carol. The novel does not quite depict either of the women as unfaithful to their heterosexual partners despite the underlying implications which is why the analysis will be focusing more on the dynamic of the two sexualities in the novel.

Overall, the novel offers a rather accurate depiction of how lesbianism was viewed in the 1950s, demonstrating in many ways how lesbians were treated by society. Highsmith's writing rebels against the idea of heteronormative superiority by showing that the lesbian couple perseveres despite any attempts to tear the women apart. While lesbians are given a future in the novel, it invites the reader to evaluate the dynamic of the two sexualities. As noted by Kotkavuori, Harge is willing to cooperate with Carol again once she submits to his wishes in the custody case, suggesting that lesbian desire is something that inflicts negative consequences upon the lesbian especially if it threatens heteronormativity (2023, p. 42). The idea that deviance from heteronormativity is enough cause for punishment still remains despite the perseverance of the couple. The presence of such harsh and direct punishment for lesbian desire automatically juxtaposes the sexualities, lifting heterosexuality above homosexuality and making it superior. The opinions of a homophobic society are clearly reflected in the narrative, especially through the heterosexual characters of the novel, Richard and Harge, who are the ones directly threatened by the women's homosexuality.

Richard's opinion on Therese expresses his distaste explicitly. As mentioned in an example used in the section on Therese's mommy issues, Richard believes that there is always something in the background when it comes to homosexuality. Therese does not deny this, possibly either showing that she is uneducated and inexperienced regarding her own identity or that she truly believes so herself. Richard is also quite confident that Therese's crush will not last and that she will eventually change her mind about Carol. His opinion of the crush is childish and temporary. As discussed in the context of the infantilization of lesbianism in *Carol*, Richard views the crush as a "schoolgirl" crush, suggesting that

Carol's intentions are insincere: "What's she doing, amusing herself with you? And then one day she'll get tired of you and kick you out. [...] You're in a daze!" (*Carol*, pp. 130–131). In this scene, he simultaneously expresses his disappointment over the idea of losing Therese, as well as his views on homosexuality:

> "It's worse than being lovesick, because it's so completely unreasonable." [...] "But you're going to get over it in about a week. I hope. My God!" [...] "To say – to say for a minute you practically want to say good-by to me because of some silly crush!" (*Carol*, p. 131).

His sentiment about Therese changing her mind gets repeated multiple times in the novel, reinforcing the belief that the crush is something insincere. He even asserts:

> I'll tell you one thing, I think your friend knows what she's doing. I think she's committing a crime against you. I've half a mind to report her to somebody, but the only trouble is you're not a child. You're just acting like one (*Carol*, pp. 131–132).

In addition to viewing Carol as a predator, he likens the lesbian relationship to childish behavior, suggesting that Therese is acting like a child for giving up her heterosexual relationship in favor of a homosexual one. Richard's opinions clearly depict heterosexuality as the mature and superior choice, one with pure morals and authenticity, whereas homosexuality is depicted as the immoral, temporary other. This is also emphasized even further in his final letter to Therese:

> [...] and now the uppermost emotion that I feel toward you is one that was present from the first – disgust. It is you hanging on to this woman to the exclusion of everyone else, this relationship which I am sure has become sordid and pathological by now, that disgusts me. I know that it will not last, as said from the first. [...] It is rootless and infantile, like living on a lotus blossom or some sickening candy instead of the bread and meat of life (*Carol*, p. 214).

Despite Richard's attempts at getting through to Therese, it has no effect on her and does not end up changing Therese's opinion about Carol, however, as mentioned before, she does grow briefly suspicious of Carol's intentions with her, and the couple does come very close to separation due to Carol's struggles in the custody battle of Rindy, suggesting that there could be some truth to Richard's message. In addition to this, there is a moment when the couple is apart where Therese leans into the possibility of heterosexuality with another man, expressing budding curiosity toward him:

> She felt shy with him, yet somehow close, a closeness charged with something she had never felt with Richard. Something suspenseful, that she enjoyed. A little salt, she

> thought. She looked at Dannie's hand on the table, at the strong muscle that bulged below the thumb. She remembered his hands on her shoulders that day in his room. The memory was a pleasant one (*Carol*, p. 232).

Dannie expresses his interest in Therese, but she rejects his advances because she is still too affected by what happened between her and Carol. Dannie is understanding of the situation and asks questions about Carol. He inquires about Therese's intentions regarding the future, if she is going to see Carol again or other women. When Therese's response to both questions is negative, Dannie states:

> "That's what matters. Or rather, that's what makes it not matter."
>
> "What do you mean?"
>
> "I mean you're so young, Therese. You'll change, you'll forget" (*Carol*, p. 233).

Once more, Therese's youth is emphasized in the novel, pertaining to the association of lesbianism with temporality and childishness. This moment is also when Therese realizes that "she had been under a spell that prevented her from seeing anything in the world but Carol" (*Carol*, p. 233). The notion of childishness that is stressed at this point in the novel gets alarmingly close to reinforcing these negative beliefs when Therese takes more distance from Carol and entertains the idea of a heterosexual relationship. However, after Therese's process of maturing, she still feels desire toward women, such as Ms. Carnell in chapter twenty-three. In the end, Therese and Carol find each other again and remain together despite any attempts to separate them, disproving the harmful ideas present in the novel.

The narrative of the novel even explicitly brings up the relationship of homosexuality and heterosexuality as Carol tells Therese in a letter how the court case was resolved. She hints at the perception of heterosexuality as superior due to reproduction, pondering whether heterosexuals "grade their pleasure in terms of whether their actions produce a child or not" (*Carol*, p. 221). Carol argues this to be futile and expresses to the courtroom her own opinion on the matter of homosexuality, claiming that:

> [...] the rapport between two men and two women can be absolute and perfect, as it can never be between man and woman, and perhaps some people want just this, as others want that more shifting and uncertain things that happens between men and women (*Carol*, p. 221).

This passage clearly demonstrates that the novel has an agenda that is in favor of homosexuality, rebelling against heteronormative society. Carol does not agree with the notion of her lesbianism

leading her to the "depths of human vice and degeneration" as the antagonists of the novel suggest, but counters this with the idea that "to live against one's grain, that is degeneration by definition" (*Carol*, p. 221).

The underlying ideals about homosexuality are heavily present in the novel through all of the characters, including Therese and Carol who respectively contemplate the relationship from their own perspectives that are influenced by the society around them. The novel demonstrates the imbalance of homosexuality and heterosexuality *in order to* criticize it and the misinformation that surrounds homosexuality in an attempt to provide a more authentic and empathetic perspective on lesbians. While *Carol* is subversive and effectively fights against injustice, the happy ending remains realistic for the time period, the lesbians failing to evade punishment for their sexual orientation. The tropes included in this category serve a very distinct and crucial narrative purpose for the novel, the elements of punishment going beyond shock value and shallow means of entertainment to create a sense of optimism for lesbians in the future.

3.3.2. Internalized Homophobia in *Velvet*

In Waters' *Velvet,* infidelity occurs twice within Nan's relationships throughout the novel. As previously mentioned, in the case of Kitty and Nan, Kitty cheats on Nan with her manager Walter, getting engaged to him while Nan is away visiting her family. Kitty trades her relationship with Nan for a heterosexual one in pursuit of advancing her career on the stage as well as ensuring that she will not be identified as a lesbian and thus condemned for it. In the second instance, Nan is the one who cheats on Diana with her maid Zena partly due to her own attraction towards Zena, partly to get on Diana's nerves, and lastly and perhaps primarily, to make herself feel better about the humiliation of being cheated on in her relationship with Kitty. Both instances have painful consequences for Nan and possess differing implications about sexuality and morality.

Kitty's choice to cast her homosexuality aside to ensure her professional and social security demonstrates that there is an imbalance in the way heterosexuality and homosexuality are viewed. By sticking to her own identity as a lesbian, Nan ends up losing her social circles and her career on stage, whereas by forcing heterosexuality, Kitty is rewarded with security and success. As argued by Heimonen, it is through Alice that Nan initially learns to hide her feelings toward Kitty by showing her that loving another woman will not be easily accepted by people (2009, p. 76). Not even those closest

to her. Nan's first love contains a heavy sense of shame and wrongness that emerges directly from Kitty's wishes to remain discreet about the relationship. Kitty's disdain toward lesbianism becomes very obvious from the way she addresses the topic with Nan after the latter spots a lesbian couple and feels kinship to them: "'Nan!' she said. 'They're not like us! They're not like us, at all. They're *toms.*' [...] 'They make a *career* – out of kissing girls. We're not like that!'" (*Velvet*, p. 131, original emphasis). The fact that Kitty, who is a participant in the relationship, has such a strong, negative opinion on toms or lesbians, to put it modernly, suggests that not only should homosexuals withstand the judgement of others, but also participate in it themselves. Kitty attempts to impose her internalized homophobia onto Nan through insisting on hiding the true nature of their relationship:

> When Kitty and I had first become sweethearts, I had made her a promise. 'I will be careful,' I had said – and I had said it very lightly, because I thought it would be easy. I had kept my promise: I never kissed her, touched her, said a loving thing, when there was anyone to glimpse or overhear us (*Velvet*, p. 127).

The promise made by Nan proves to be repressive and painful. She describes it as though she was "bound and fettered with iron bands, chained and muzzled and blinkered" (*Velvet*, p. 127). The juxtaposition of sexualities is stark and most certainly reflective of queer history where homosexuals have been condemned for their sexuality. Homosexuality is something to be hidden, something that is practiced, as Nan puts it, "in shadow and silence" (*Velvet*, p. 127). Heterosexuality is made out to be the default and homosexuality the deviant, suggestive of pathology or perverseness.

The initial setting that the novel creates is quite startling, but Kitty's ideals are quickly countered by Nan who expresses a different opinion about lesbianism within the matter. Instead of Nan being disgusted by the label of toms or lesbians upon learning a word for defining her identity, she embraces it: "'Toms?' I remember this moment very distinctly, for I had never heard the word before. Later I would think it marvellous that there had ever been a time I hadn't known it" (*Velvet*, p. 131). Nan also counters the horror which Kitty expresses toward toms by challenging her views with a completely opposite reaction to the term of toms and the idea of being like them: "'We're not like that!' 'Aren't we?' I said. 'Oh, if someone would only pay me for it, I'd be very glad to make a career out of kissing you'" (*Velvet*, p. 131). Rather than being put off by such a label, Nan finds it exciting and intriguing: "'Do you think there is someone who would pay me for that? I'd give up the stage in a flash'" (*Velvet*, p. 131). Nan offers a fresh perspective, countering the model of thought that Kitty has adopted from

society. Nan does not understand the need to hide her sexuality despite Kitty's note about having to give up their careers if people were to find out about them:

> 'But if we're ourselves, why do we have to hide it?' [...]
>
> 'You don't understand. You don't know what's wrong or right, or good …'
>
> 'I know that this ain't wrong, what we do. Only that the world says it' (*Velvet*, p. 131).

Nan makes a very important point in highlighting the fact that it is society who tells them that their love is wrong, countering the beliefs that have been embedded in society for centuries. This difference in opinions offers an important contrast in the narrative that sets Nan and Kitty on alternative paths, eventually subverting the oppressed state of homosexuality into a more positive image.

Kitty and Nan's relationship comes to an end because of this difference in opinions and values. Kitty values her career significantly more than Nan does, so much so that she is willing to give up Nan as her lover for the advancement of her career. Kitty achieves this by cheating on Nan with Walter, their agent, while Nan is away, resulting in the lesbian couple's messy separation. They part ways, Nan following the path of homosexuality and Kitty heterosexuality. Seemingly, this point of difference sends Nan on a tumultuous road of depression and maltreatment from society, all the while Kitty gets the life she has always dreamt of. Homosexuality is presented as inferior and heterosexuality superior, at least in terms of success within social and professional spheres. Kitty's unfaithfulness leaves an emotional scar on Nan that she suffers from until the very end of the novel when she finally finds love and a place in society, allowing her to let go of the pain and grudge that Kitty's behavior left her with. In the end of the novel, once Nan has found her happy ending, Kitty returns and asks Nan to come back to her after realizing that her life with Walter would not satisfy her:

> 'Come back to you? I said. 'With you still Walter's wife?'
>
> 'All that means nothing,' she said quickly. 'There's nothing – like that – between him and me now. If we were only a little careful…'
>
> 'Careful!' I said: the word had made me flinch. 'Careful! Careful! That's all I ever had from you. We were so careful, we might as well have been dead! (*Velvet*, p. 466).

Nan has no interest in hiding herself and her desire from anyone, finally having discovered a place where she could live in freedom. Homosexuality is no longer presented as the superior path in life. Instead, the juxtaposition of the alternating paths the two women chose is subverted and Kitty is

depicted as the one who suffers in the end by cheating herself in an attempt to blend in and confine to society's judgement about homosexuality.

Regarding character growth, Kitty's misconduct is a significant part of Nan's journey in maturing and finding herself. The narrative subverts this assumption about the juxtaposition of the two sexualities in the very end when the couple meet again five years later. Kitty begs Nan to give her another chance which Nan refuses, realizing that she does not wish to live in the shadows and hide her identity when she has recently discovered a community in which she does not have to be ashamed of herself. Similarly to the way *Carol* asserts its attitude toward heterosexual superiority, *Velvet* too flips the script around in the end to show that lesbians have a place in the world. Especially, in comparison to Kitty who cannot truly escape her identity and convince herself to forget about Nan in order to solely focus on her husband. Nan comes out on top, suggesting that staying truthful to one's identity is what yields happiness, not hiding it. The common trope of infidelity and heterosexual superiority in the narrative function as an aid in emphasizing this message, serving a purpose for the lesbian-positive message of the novel.

3.3.3. Diana and Nan: Immorality and Obsession

In the second instance, Nan is in an environment that is sexually very saturated and liberated. Diana boasts to her friends about Nan and allows her friends to openly objectify Nan for their own pleasure. This setting leans slightly toward ideas about polygamy, but this assumption gets quickly disproven when Nan engages in sexual behavior outside her relationship with Diana, albeit the defining factor here for Diana is likely more so about control instead of faithfulness toward monogamy. The setting of opposing sexualities is absent in the triangle dynamic of the second instance of infidelity; however, other matters emerge from a more in-depth analysis. Nan's infiltration into Diana's circle of lesbians exposes her to the very deep end of sexual expression and perversion. The relationship with Diana is overtly sexual in nature. The group of lesbians, in contrast to any depiction of heterosexuality in the novel, is presented as sex-obsessed and almost cult-like. Diana teaches Nan to use sex toys and exposes her to erotic pamphlets and novels that Nan describes as "gross enough [...] in their way" (*Velvet*, p. 266). Additionally, the other lesbians at the Cavendish Club that Diana is a part of openly objectify Nan for her masculine external presentation and share rather extreme stories about lesbianism:

> ‘But it speaks! she cried ‘All this’ – she gestured to my face, my costume – ‘and the creature even speaks’ [...] Here at the Cavendish we have been positively *panting* to see you and make you our particular friend’ (*Velvet*, p. 273, original emphasis).

Diana is depicted as the leader of the group who scours the streets for sexual pets to bring home for the club to gawk over. Diana enjoys exerting power over Nan and consistently flaunts her to the members of the club. They all collectively enjoy humiliating Zena and Nan and even go as far as making requests to Diana to see what they wish to see, the extent of this behavior coming to a peak upon Diana catching Zena and Nan in bed: “‘Use the strap on her, Diana!’ [...] ‘Can’t we see them fuck again? Diana, make them do it, for our pleasure!’” (*Velvet*, p. 324). The community of lesbians is portrayed as cruel, and their extreme sexual practices are excessively present. Heterosexuality is barely present in the novel, but this offers a stark contrast to any mundane and traditional depictions of heterosexuality included. The novel paints this group of lesbians as perverse and cruel women, overly obsessed with sex, pertaining to the tropes of the evil lesbian as well as the sex-obsessed lesbian. While the novel is most likely aiming to explore all the possible manifestations of lesbianism in the Victorian era, overall, the depiction of lesbianism is rather extreme to Nan as well who has never before encountered a community of lesbians before.

Upon seeing Diana’s negative reaction to catching Nan and Zena in the act, Nan feels satisfaction for being in the position of the unfaithful, linking it to the humiliation she felt for being cheated on by Kitty:

> Her voice was thick – with drunkenness, perhaps; but also, I think with shock. I looked again at the wide and spilling box, that she was so vain and jealous of, and felt a worm of satisfaction wriggle within me.
>
> And I remembered, too, another room, a room I thought that I had carefully forgotten – a room where it was I that stood speechless at the door, while my sweetheart shivered and blushed beside her lover. And the sight of Diana, in my old place, made me smile (*Velvet*, p. 323).

Nan’s actions do not come across as intentional and premeditated, yet she still demonstrates joy and feelings of success for hurting Diana at the expense of the pain Kitty put her through. Lesbianism is associated with immorality, and while this instance does not necessarily depict a rendition of the evil lesbian trope, it does lean into ideas about lesbian immorality. As claimed by Smith in her listing of lesbian tropes, the evil lesbian often promotes obsession, deviance, and cruelty, as well as immorality (2020, p. 21). Especially, obsession can be detected in Nan through her wish of avenging Kitty, cruelty

and immorality emerging from her experiencing pleasure for hurting Diana. However, it is significant to note that Diana and Nan's rocky and, at times, abusive relationship should not be overlooked as a mediator in Nan's motives for cheating.

The novel offers a vast range of lesbian representation, from closeted, and sex-obsessed, to mundane lesbian couples, showing various and multifaceted renditions of lesbians, the two former depictions pertaining to stereotypes and the final one offering a positive alternative to the old tropes. Even though some of the characters are less than favorable examples of lesbianism, the novel lets the audience understand that the main narrative does not support the ideas represented in the novel aside from the most positive version of lesbianism that ends up being the home and happiness Nan discovers. Overall, the infidelity depicted in the novel serves a purpose in Nan's character development and growth, supporting the ultimate message of the significance of authenticity and identity. The narrative does not pit the sexualities against each other, but rather presents them as equal or at the very least presents the possibility of achieving equality in the future through hope and acceptance as the novel closes with Nan in a loving relationship through which she acquires a new social circle and an immediate family that consists of Florence's brother and her ex lover's daughter. The narrative succeeds at showing that lesbians can have families and are thus not inferior to heterosexuality in terms of reproduction. At this point of the analysis, it becomes evident that both *Velvet* and *Carol* skillfully utilize problematic tropes to create an authentic and balanced image of lesbianism through a narrative reflective of both misfortune and optimism.

3.3.4. Temporality and Insincerity in *Big Swiss*

In *Big Swiss* the discussion surrounding sexuality is more explicit and meta than in the rest of the primary material as Greta ponders her own sexual orientation from time to time in the text. Her sexual identity remains unclear despite her attempts to figure out whether she's "all the way gay" or not due to her sexual past with both genders (*Big Swiss*, p. 147). Although, she does seem to resist men more than women and refer to her ten-year heterosexual relationship and engagement to her ex, Stacy, as "sleepwalking" or being in a "perpetual state of daydreaming" (*Big Swiss*, p. 62). Later on, Greta even considers going back to men, if she must (*Big Swiss*, p. 221). The juxtaposition of the sexualities arises directly from the relations between Greta, Flavia, and Luke, placing especially Flavia into an interesting position as she figures out her sexual orientation and feelings toward Greta amidst her marriage. Roof's (1990) theory on heterosexual narratives takes form in *Big Swiss*. Flavia is at a point

of too much difference in her relationship with Luke, as Roof would call it. There is a sense of stagnancy on Flavia's behalf due to her struggles in feeling connected to Luke and finding sexual satisfaction in their relationship. Greta offers a point of sameness that brings difference, an opportunity for Flavia to venture out and try something new before ultimately returning to her heterosexual relationship.

The narrative is reflective of Roof's (1990) argument, especially in the sense that Flavia's relationship with Greta ends up benefitting her and Luke's sex life, suggesting that lesbian desire ultimately is there to serve a heterosexual purpose:

> OM: So, it's mutually gratifying.
>
> FEW: For the first time, ever.
>
> [...]
>
> FEW: I'm present in a way I've never been before. We keep our eyes open. We take more time with each other. He even asks me to wrap my arms and legs around him (*Big Swiss*, p. 198).

Flavia supposes this change to be due to the fact that Luke is having an affair, but this deduction is never proven to be correct, and Om even suggests that Flavia is jumping to conclusions. Flavia's marriage is threatened by homosexuality, simultaneously disrupting the linear path of heterosexuality that Roof (1990) writes about. In the end, this disruption is rectified through the salvation of the marriage due to Greta and Flavia parting ways. The novel follows the pattern of "the dominant narrative of compulsory heterosexual recuperation" where lesbianism is made viable but only in the context of heterosexual recuperation (Smith, 2020, p. 28). The reason behind Flavia's therapy appointments is to figure out why she cannot find sexual release either during sex with Luke or by herself: "I've never had an orgasm in my life, even by myself" (*Big Swiss*, p. 9). Greta is not the one to fix this problem, but after Flavia sorts out her struggles on her own, she falls into a pattern of having sex with Greta on a regular basis. After her involvement with Greta, as becomes evident from the excerpt above, Flavia notices an improvement in her sex life simultaneously as Greta learns that Flavia is still physically involved with her husband. Their affair is not merely sexual, but also emotional on behalf of both, but the sexual aspect does get emphasized especially toward the end when the emotional side of the relationship begins to splinter. This also carries the danger of depicting lesbianism as sexualized performance (Smith, 2020, p. 29). These observations resonate with ideas about lesbian

temporality and insincerity. Their relationship comes across as sexual experimenting and identity searching instead of being a genuine romance which is problematic due to the marketing of the novel as a lesbian romantic comedy.

Furthermore, the insincerity of lesbianism is emphasized through Greta who directly tells Flavia that "it's probably a phase" and "you're straight […] you're confused" (*Big Swiss*, pp. 166–167). While Greta might not be entirely serious about her statements, they do get proven correct at the end of the novel when Flavia indeed does not see herself identifying as a lesbian, despite having a past of crushing on older women and later getting involved with Greta, and stays in her heterosexual marriage. The insincerity of their relationship is also reflected in Greta's side of the story through the notion of growing up and maturing. In her past relationship with a man named Stacy, Greta describes the experience as a "second childhood" where he cared for her (*Big Swiss*, p. 62). She was on a linear heterosexual path to a sensible adulthood with his aid. However, during this relationship Greta cheats on Stacy with an ex before returning back to him, the novel thus depicting two instances where lesbians threaten heterosexual relationships and remain as something insincere and temporary in comparison to heterosexuality. It is, of course, completely acceptable to have bisexual characters or otherwise sexually multifaceted characters, but issues arise when the representation is imbalanced. As Smith puts it: "Whilst a bisexual character might of course have a relationship with a man, it is the repeated pattern of heterosexual return that makes this problematic" (2020, p. 27). Simultaneously, it raises questions about the morality of lesbian practices. Why do they occur within heterosexual relationships and involve immoral action such as unfaithfulness and secrecy?

Lesbianism is also heavily connected to the idea of growing up on Greta's part. Throughout the novel, she is told to take responsibility and is criticized for her immaturity. Once things begin to go south during the infamous dinner with Luke, Greta tells herself to "grow up" and take responsibility over her actions (*Big Swiss*, p. 221). According to Smith, the trope of temporality and inauthenticity is often mobilized through young female characters and "the conflation of maturation and heterosexuality reproduces the heterosexual future as a 'central organising index of social membership'" (2020, pp. 28–29). While Greta is not young, she is viewed as an ostracized character as well as childish and immature. Smith argues that letting go of the possibility of romantic female relationships is often seen as a natural maturation process "necessary in order to maintain self-respect and stability" (2020, p. 29). Greta is not viewed as a respectable adult by almost anyone in the novel, especially not Flavia, and the

latter's involvement in a lesbian affair seems to be considered as devaluing. Greta's entire life is depicted as something that is of less value and insincere when compared to Flavia. Even when compared to Greta's roommate Sabine who is also not considered to be the most put-together person, Greta comes across as lacking due to her not having a family. Greta and her immaturity are a threat to the heterosexual couple that is doing their best to overcome their struggles in therapy. Not only does Greta threaten their marriage but she also is likely the cause of a violent attack toward Luke which directly harms him physically for life. Greta's obsessive and paranoid behavior with someone dangerous from Flavia's past is believed to have had an effect on Luke's victimization: "If Greta hadn't been in Keith's face the week before, maybe Keith wouldn't have been so vicious" (*Big Swiss*, p. 300). Greta and her behavior are thus shown as a very concrete and real threat for heterosexuals. The novel comes to a satisfying heterosexual ending where the lesbian threat is tamed by therapy as well as explained psychologically, the heterosexual couple remaining together.

While there are many factors at play in the novel regarding the juxtaposition of heterosexuality and homosexuality, the depiction of the lesbian subject, lesbian relationships, and lesbian desire are less than favorable. Lesbianism is portrayed as something temporary, irresponsible, and immature beside heterosexual couples like Flavia and Luke, and Greta and Stacy. Both heterosexual relationships in the novel have lasted for several years whereas any lesbian relationships included have been temporary and are linked to having affairs. Temporality and insincerity are explicitly brought up by Greta and demonstrated through psychoanalysis of her childhood as well as the trajectory of Flavia and Greta's affair. Unlike with *Carol* and *Velvet*, the ending of *Big Swiss* does not replace these problematic tropes with something more positive and turn the narrative into one of acceptance. The tropes remain as they are: renditions of problematic stereotypes. This discovery is rather disappointing for the time period of the 2020s as well as for the genre of lesbian romantic comedy.

3.4. Comparing the Results

As becomes evident from the observations made in the analysis section, each of the primary material novels pertains to old negative stereotypes about lesbians. However, in *Carol* and *Velvet*, the justification of these tropes through narrative value is more relevant than in *Big Swiss*. In *Carol*, the end of the novel distinctly expresses the overall tone and message of the story by giving lesbians a happy ending despite the obstacles the couple has to face. In *Velvet*, Nan's tumultuous journey teaches her that she deserves better and ultimately pushes her toward her happy ending. This similar pattern

does partly occur in *Big Swiss* as well, where the unraveling of the unethical relationship eventually steers Greta toward personal growth and improvement, however, the couple does not remain together and simultaneously raises some questions regarding authenticity and temporality. The problematic nature of the novel arises from the fact that the novel is marketed as a lesbian romantic comedy, rather than a woman's journey through overcoming personal trauma.

In the category of power imbalance, all three novels display elements of problematic representation to varying degrees. The mother-daughter dynamic is the most present one in *Carol* but also appears in *Velvet*, whereas the trope of a lesbian seducer is missing from *Carol*, present in *Velvet*, and heavily defines *Big Swiss*. In this first category, improvement can be partly seen, especially regarding mother-daughter relations with a decline in use between *Carol* and *Velvet*. In *Big Swiss*, which is the newest piece of primary material, there are barely any traces of mother-daughter relationships and any remarks made regarding it are made insincerely and within a humorous context. Thus, it can be concluded that within the mother-daughter trope regarding the primary material, there has been some positive improvement from the 1950s to the 2020s.

The trope of the lesbian seducer included in the category of power imbalance appears to have an opposite development in the data with *Carol* showing no signs of the lesbian seducer trope –Therese as the younger one being the one pursuing Carol more enthusiastically– but two very distinct cases of it appearing in *Velvet* and *Big Swiss*. In the two latter novels, the behavior does get called out explicitly by either the characters or the narrative, suggesting that there is an awareness of the negative nature of the trope. Out of *Velvet* and *Big Swiss*, interestingly enough, *Big Swiss* depicts a more severe and sinister case of the lesbian seducer due to the relationship being built on a lie, whereas with Nan and Diana, they are both more or less on the same page about the nature of the relationship from the beginning, allowing some room for Nan to predict Diana's intentions. In the case of Greta and Flavia, Flavia only learns afterwards that Greta has been lying to her from the start, making the deception more severe and impactful.

Across the primary material, every lesbian protagonist has to face some sort of punishment that is directly the result of her desire for women. In *Carol*, Carol's life is turned upside down because of both Therese and Carol's past lesbian relations with her best friend Abby, demonstrating how lesbian desire

is received by the world. Despite the heaviness of the couple's struggles the novel does provide them with a happy ending that lessens the message of lesbians being deserving of punishment. In the end, it is a story about perseverance and resilience that offers an optimistic future for lesbians both in literature and society. This similar narrative pattern is repeated in *Velvet*. Nan is repeatedly punished for her lesbianism in various ways such as isolation and humiliation, yet she perseveres and finds her freedom in the end, once more telling a story of hope and authenticity for the lesbians. *Big Swiss*, however, does not necessarily repeat this same optimistic narrative for lesbians. The ending can be considered a positive one from Greta’s perspective but from a lesbian perspective, the storyline is not very accepting or progressive especially when paired with the other categories of analysis in this thesis. Kabir’s (1998) theory reveals a consistent pattern within the narrative for lesbian punishment. While the lesbians of the primary material do get consistently punished for their desire toward women, in the end, they persevere and find happiness within their identities, thus showing that it is possible for lesbians despite the hardships they might face in society. Loneliness as a trope is blaringly consistent in all the novels. The lonely miserable lesbian appears either as a beginning setting for the narrative or as a result of lesbian desire. Despite the consistency of the trope in all of the primary material, each of the novels has a positive ending that counters the image of loneliness with one of hope and companionship. Even with Greta who seems to initially lose more than she gains, toward the end of the novel, her ending is depicted as optimistic and one full of growth.

While the trope of infidelity and heterosexual superiority are present in *Carol*, the overall tone of the novel does not lean into heterosexual superiority or lesbian immorality. Lesbians do not get associated with unfaithfulness, nor are they represented as inferior to heterosexuality. Rather, the narrative demonstrates the obstacles that lesbians face in society, ultimately offering a story of perseverance and survival. The novel has a very strong and explicit juxtaposition of the two sexualities, bringing forward societal issues regarding the matter, but it does not showcase heterosexuality as superior in the end despite any strong opinions from Richard and Harge, for example. Any insinuations of heterosexual superiority depicted in the novel are there to support the main objective of the narrative which is to paint homosexuality as something natural and equal to heterosexuality. Or perhaps, not only equal but in some ways superior through Carol’s statement regarding her personal opinion on homosexuality as something perfect and whole.

Velvet has a similar pattern of tropes serving a purpose for the overall narrative. Nan faces hardships of being cheated on and feeling unaccepted by society which are authentic struggles for lesbians. Cheating is not solely a lesbian issue, but an issue that all kinds of couples face across the globe whether they are homosexual or heterosexual. As brought up by Armbrustmacher, when these authentic struggles are followed by survival, they do not pertain to shock value and harmful stereotypes but tell a story of resilience (2025, p. 75). They are not unnecessary but add value to the narrative and make the end of the novel where Nan finds happiness in a community that accepts her as she is all the more satisfying. The more minor manifestations of stereotypical representation of lesbians such as Diana and her friends' hypersexuality or Nan's constant misfortune are not reinforced as something positive by the narrative. The events are represented as misfortunes that befall Nan who perseveres in spite of the obstacles she faces.

From a lesbian perspective *Big Swiss* fails to necessarily present a progressive depiction of a lesbian and a lesbian relationship. Greta's character leans toward the trope of an unfaithful and immoral lesbian or bisexual –depending on her unspecified orientation– on two separate occasions in the novel. Beyond this observation, Flavia falls under the trope as well, cheating on her husband despite his efforts at trying to salvage their sex life and relationship. Simultaneously, Flavia's experimental behavior, her unserious attitude toward her affair with Greta, and her return to a heterosexual relationship suggest ideas about lesbian temporality and insincerity. Infidelity does not serve a purpose for lesbians, nor does it tell a story of perseverance or survival, but more so seems to depict lesbianism as inauthentic and childish especially when paired with the message of Greta needing to grow up and mature due to her behavior. Heterosexuality as superior is not necessarily an overt message the novel is trying to promote, but it is present in the way the novel's heterosexual couple remains together despite Flavia's cheating, and the unfortunate knife-attack Luke suffers. Lesbianism is depicted as something experimental and temporary for Flavia. For Greta, the unethical relationship functions as a crux for growing up, maturing, and taking responsibility for her own actions. Greta's character as a lonely and traumatized individual involved with inappropriate sexual behavior and drugs does not bode well for lesbian representation especially when contrasted with Greta and Flavia's differing stances on their sexualities. Greta as the "more lesbian" of the two with rather unappealing characteristics and Flavia as the "more heterosexual" with admirable characteristics treads dangerously close to stereotypes and overused lesbian tropes instead of offering a nuanced and authentic portrayal of lesbianism.

Overall, the novels mostly utilize the tropes studied in this thesis as a way of building the narrative to a more optimistic and hopeful ending for lesbians with the exception of *Big Swiss* where the couple separates, the deviant lesbian is set straight, and the experimenting heterosexual woman suffers negative consequences. Due to the scope of this thesis, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to make any definitive conclusions, however, it is clear that within this primary material and the tropes in question, lesbian representation has not necessarily improved over the past seventy years. Out of the three novels, surprisingly *Big Swiss,* as the newest novel, had the most questionable use of tropes for the overall narrative value and purpose. According to the findings, *Velvet* showed the least amount of problematic representation due to its value for narrative purpose, functioning as a great example of how these stereotypical tropes can be turned around and used in favor of lesbians and lesbian representation in literature. Waters' writing shows an understanding for the importance of authenticity and identity, for belonging, and lesbian visibility. *Carol* depicts similar understanding and optimism for lesbians despite any problematic tropes. Furthermore, the historical setting of *Carol* as a novel from the 1950s is important to take into account due to the restrictions and censorship of the time that often required queer authors to include harmful representation in order for the novel to be published at all. Looking at the primary material overall, it can be concluded that there has been both positive and negative improvement in lesbian representation to varying degrees within the three categories. Unexpectedly, out of the three novels, the handling of tropes was the most problematic in *Big Swiss*, suggesting that within the primary material lesbian representation has indeed developed into a more negative direction, however, such conclusions call for further, wider scale research.

4. Conclusion

Lesbian literature and literary criticism have had a past full of contradiction and controversy but that does not mean it has to remain that way. Instead, by giving critics and researchers the space and voice that they deserve, I believe that it can continue to develop toward a more level and established future that can help in evaluating and analyzing lesbian relationships in literature and media, as well as create understanding around a subject that was once taboo and heavily censored. While fiction will always remain fiction, it would be naive to assume that it does not affect how the world is viewed and how society perceives people, ideologies, and concepts. Through closer analysis of commonly overlooked features, such as the tropes discussed in this thesis, remnants of problematic assumptions can be

revealed. Dismantling common patterns in representation can allow access to the very structures that still support dated ideas about lesbians and lesbian desire, bringing us to an educated and societally conscious perspective where the age gap, for example, is not just an age gap, but a rendition of harmful stereotypes about maternal love, the lesbian seducer, and predatory behavior. Because of this, it is important to critically evaluate even the less explicit features of representation that might go unnoticed on a conscious level but alternatively linger in the collective subconscious.

4.1. Limitations and Further Research

The most challenging aspect of this type of research is remaining objective throughout the process. With a vast range of opinions from scholars around the world, the analysis can be difficult to navigate in a way where subjective opinions do not interfere in the evaluation processes. Different results might have been produced depending on the background literature used in this thesis. Furthermore, it is impossible to discern intention and aim when it comes to literature. A great example of this is the arguments presented regarding maternal love in *Carol*. Maternal love might partly serve a purpose in Therese's journey of growing up as Findlay (2019) suggests, but that does not mean that the same effect could not have been achieved without Carol infantilizing Therese. It is important not to get caught up in the potential the novel's subtext carries instead of the text itself. Subjectivity poses a threat to the credibility of the findings of the study, however, the analysis can never be truly objective due to its qualitative nature, especially when analyzing a feature such as narrative value that cannot be determined solely through a fixed model.

Furthermore, the scope of this study is far too limited for generalized conclusions regarding the current state of lesbian literature and lesbian romance. According to the results, negative development has occurred in the use of lesbian literary tropes in lesbian romance within the primary materials of this thesis, potentially suggesting that it is a part of a larger phenomenon of rejection in society in recent years. However, drawing such conclusions would go against reason because both popular culture as well as academic research indicate that society is more accepting of lesbians now than it was in the 1950s or even early 2000s. Because of this fallacy, further research is not only necessary, but crucial. This could be achieved through simply conducting a similar study and collecting a larger data sample of lesbian romance novels from a certain time period to get a better sense of potential patterns of using tropes that it might unveil. To make it more manageable, it might be favorable to focus on a singular trope with a larger set of data at hand as well as draw stricter parameters for the analysis to mitigate

subjectivity. Alternatively, because this research was primarily conducted as a qualitative study, it would be an interesting and possibly fruitful expansion on the findings of this study to conduct a similar research project with a quantitative approach to get a more accurate idea of how frequently these tropes occur in lesbian literature. This could be achieved, for example, by analyzing the frequency of a trope/tropes in a sample of lesbian romance novels to see whether certain tropes were more popular during a specific time period.

4.2. Key Findings

This thesis analyzed three lesbian romance novels through three categories of problematic lesbian tropes that have repeatedly appeared in lesbian literature to evaluate their use and narrative purpose in the primary material. The three categories of tropes included power imbalance, punishment for lesbian desire, and infidelity. The analysis was first conducted individually through close-reading of the novels, after which the results were compared to one another to evaluate differences and development between the findings. The theoretical background behind the analysis consisted of information on the history of lesbian literature, queer history, and the use of narrative tropes both in literature as well as television and film. This process also included analyzing whether the tropes served a purpose for a lesbian-positive narrative in the novel. The process was based on previous criticism regarding the use of lesbian tropes for shock value or as repetitions of problematic stereotypes embedded into media. The aim of the research was to answer how problematic tropes are used in the primary material and what purpose do they serve, additionally identifying any possible development that might have happened in the use of tropes in lesbian romance over time.

While the results of this research cannot be generalized to claim to be representative of the overall state of lesbian representation in lesbian romance, some interesting remarks emerge. The key findings of this thesis conclude that especially in *Velvet*, the tropes serve a narrative purpose that strengthens the overall message of the narrative that provides an optimistic future for lesbians. Observations made regarding *Carol* were of similar nature with the exclusion of the mother-daughter dynamic that partly carried the potential of coming in the way of the narrative message by depicting lesbian romance as adjacent to maternal love and thus associated it with perverse lesbian stereotypes. This shows that authors of these two lesbian romances have an understanding of the lesbian experience and are able to describe authentic, albeit imagined, lesbian experiences. Regarding the third novel, *Big Swiss*, the analysis found the tropes depicted in the narrative to be repetitions of old stereotypes that did not serve

a narrative purpose for the alleged lesbian romantic comedy. Out of the three novels, *Big Swiss* had the most problematic use of narrative tropes in terms of lesbian-positive narrative value, and *Velvet* had the least problematic handling of the tropes for lesbian-positive narrative value, each of the tropes functioning as a point of development that served the protagonist in her journey to finding happiness and belonging.

As for the potential development within the timeline of the novels, the results vary within the three categories. In the first category of power imbalance there is a clear, gradual decline in the association of maternal love with lesbian age gap relationships. But on the contrary, within the same category, there is a gradual increase in the use of the lesbian seducer trope. In the second category of punishment for lesbian desire no changes can be detected regarding both punishment as well as the miserable lonely lesbian trope. The features of this category can be found in each of the novels to a varying degree with *Big Swiss* as the most prominent manifestation of the punishment for lesbian desire and the miserable lonely lesbian tropes. A similar pattern of development can be found in the final category of infidelity with the most extreme renditions of the tropes being found in *Big Swiss*. Overall, the development over time seems to have taken a negative turn from the late 90s and early 2000s, but such conclusions cannot be drawn based on this study. Despite any negative or positive development in the use of the tropes over the decades, it can be noted that the same patterns of representation still live to this day within lesbian romance with varying degrees of narrative purpose. The observations made about *Big Swiss* demonstrate that this kind of criticism is still needed in our society to unshackle lesbians from stereotypes that have been and still are associated with the community.

While this research is not viable for stand-alone conclusions regarding the societal status of lesbian literature, it does provide grounds for a fascinating and important discussion that can further create visibility and recognition for lesbians both in literature and media as well as on a societal level. This kind of analysis can open up discourse about the underlying ideologies that get discreetly passed down through generations in the form of narratives and hopefully draw more well-deserved attention to how minorities are depicted in popular media with the intention of improving diversity and equality.

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