

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?
Marriage and Subversive Displays of Gender in the American
Woman's Novel, 1946-1955

by

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What's Love Got to do With It?

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This thesis will examine nonnormative depictions of the feminine gender within the literary work of American female authors circa 1946-1955. I will specifically investigate the fictionalization of an institution that has historically created and supported gender roles—marriage within the framework of an idealized family structure. I will determine how the formal role of marriage, as written by women of varying demographics, subverts cultural norms within this era. This examination will be supplemented through a thorough understanding of contextual elements impacting how women navigate their experiences between 1946 and 1955. This research will work in convergence with an understanding of feminist criticism and queer theory to explore two contemporary novels that feature subversive female characters—Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding* and Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*. Ultimately, I intend to deconstruct the figures of the Wife and Mother in the fictionalization of marriage as a means of revealing instances of subversive gender performance in the era preceding the rise of second-wave feminismⁱ.

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Part I: Contextualizing the Roles of Wife and Mother in Post-War Middle America



Figure 1: A Mother and a Daughter set the table for dinner in *A Date with Your Family* (1950).

As a means of breaking down the concept of marriage, I will examine its literary role in two associated parts: wifeliness and motherhood. Wifeliness can be defined as a set of performative acts as a homemaker in a subservient position to a patriarchal head of the household. Motherhood will be defined through the presence of—or expectation to have—a child or children, evidence of a biological bond with those children, and depictions of maternal sacrifice. These definitions will be expanded as contextualizing research further frames contemporary expectations of the Wife and Mother. Let's begin by considering these roles in Edward G. Simmel's 1950 short film *A Date with Your Family*. This short film was created as a social engineering project by Encyclopedia

Britannica Films as a means of educating youth about how they should behave within the home (see Fig. 1). The film follows a family—consisting of a Mother, a Father, and their three children—as they prepare for dinner. The men and the women seem to fulfill common character archetypes as the male figures operate as breadwinners and the female figures as domestic homemakers, a division of labor most commonly available to middle-class families that could subsist on one income. Their whiteness is also significant, as it further ties this family to common visual depictions of the family at home, establishing the perfect family as being white and middle class. The video opens with the sister and the older brother returning from school. While the brother is allowed time alone to complete his academic work, the Daughter immediately stakes claim to the domestic space as she sets the dining room table. This may speak to a common phenomenon in the 1950s in which women were not necessarily expected to attend university. Even when a woman was able to attend and complete her collegiate career, it was often not achieved for her own personal or professional gain. Indeed, education was often used as a tool to form a woman into a good companion for her educated Husband, an informed practitioner of domestic science, and an educator for her sons.

The Mother, too, is introduced as she is positioned within a domestic center—the living room. This positioning of women within this space is significant. A consumer study report performed in 1966 revealed that “working-class women saw their primary role as house workers, whereas middle-class women defined themselves more as wives” (Levy 144). While this clear class divide is worth considering, it is equally important to recognize that women in both the working and middle class understood themselves through their function within the household (Rainwater and Coleman 600-601). Indeed,

the report revealed that working-class women often named a kitchen appliance as their most valued possession while middle-class women named ornamental objects such as living room furnishings. Of course, women are not naturally inclined to these spaces. Instead, women in this period are in conversation with and internalizing cultural norms that are reinforced through a variety of media, including educational films such as *A Date with Your Family*. Thus, the kitchen and the living room appear to represent the idealized domain of the mid-century American woman.

These cultural pressures are similarly present in *A Date with Your Family* through the film's emphasis on the female aesthetic. Before dinner, both women have changed into their evening dresses as the narrator informs us that "The women of this family seem to feel that they owe it to the men in the family to look relaxed, rested, and attractive," (1:20-1:22). In this film, the women's appearances become a mark of respect to the male heads of the house. Their physical beauty becomes a task that is expected of them by the father and the brothers. Further connecting the women to the domestic sphere, the narrator suggests that "even the [dining room] table takes on a special air" similar to the Mother and Daughter (1:27-1:30). Just as they have taken the time to become aesthetically pleasing to the men, so too has the table undergone a superficial transformation. In comparing the women to the gathering point of the domestic realm, the women become objectified and incorporated into the décor of the houseⁱⁱ. While the women decorate both themselves as well as the domestic space, the men hold very few active roles in the preparation of dinner. Although the two Sons are tasked with helping each other get washed up for dinner, the men's primary role within

the domestic space seems to be the act of being served by the women, once again positioning them within the authoritative realm.

It is significant that *A Date with Your Family* was created as a social engineering project as this suggests the extent to which certain demographics within the American framework were promoting a particular image of the American nuclear family. As I will investigate, this picture of the family was constructed within a particular class, race, and sexual identity, creating an exclusionary image of the perfect family. This image can be seen in the television shows, movies, and advertisements of the era. Of course, the perfect suburban nuclear family demonstrated in this video does not exist. Instead, it is an exclusionary and idealized stereotype of the family that pervades the American cultural narrative in the post-WWII periodⁱⁱⁱ.

The image of the family visible in *A Date with Your Family* has a shorter history than one might assume. To fully understand how this stereotyped family was constructed, it is essential to have a working understanding of the United States' shifting cultural structure beginning in the Industrial Period. Prior to this, the United States operated as an agrarian society with a higher rate of family isolation within rural settings. This isolation in convergence with other influences created an emphasis on the family economy, in which women and children were expected to assist the patriarchal household head as the family produced revenue. Indeed, women were still burdened with the primary role of child-rearing. However, the Mother-child bond was deemphasized in this period, as the act of child-rearing was also performed by older siblings, relatives, and members of the local community. With this additional support,

the women in this family were able to expand their work into monetary realms, assisting in the care of both livestock and the crops amongst other remunerative tasks.

As the First and Second Industrial Revolutions—occurring from about 1760 to 1820, and then from about 1870 to 1914 respectively— shifted the cultural and economic fabric of the United States, so too did the family unit undergo a rapid restructuring. The mechanization of previously laborious tasks shifted work into urban factories and away from rural homesteads^{iv}. This emphasis on factory work led to the massive growth of centralized urban cities. Similarly, the Second Industrial Revolution saw the creation of a larger and increasingly professional middle class and the subsequent rise of a consumer-based culture (Covey 145). As work shifted away from the home, it became more and more difficult for Wives to continue their domestic tasks while contributing to the family economy. Even when this was a possibility, a Wife's secondary income became increasingly unnecessary as wages for male workers improved. Instead, the idea of the women's sphere within the domestic space took precedence. Christopher Lasch suggests that the construction and elevation of the women's sphere ultimately supported the interests of the developing industrial culture as it positioned the home as a "haven in a heartless world" for working men (Lasch 230). Indeed, this ideology—the influence of which is demonstrated in the role of the women in *A Date with Your Family*— legitimized the unpaid labor performed by wives who occupied this domestic space with varying levels of complacency.

Of course, there are exceptions to the general trend of women within the domestic space. In 1950, roughly 32% of American women were active in the workforce. This statistic may be imperfect, however, as it cannot account for women

working jobs that might pay under the table and thus could not be considered in official records of employment. Working women were overwhelmingly operating within the lower class and, within the realm of officially documented work, were largely limited to gendered professional realms such as the clerical or textile fields. Wartime further troubled the domestic space, as both the first and Second World War assisted a rise of women within the professional world. As American men were deployed overseas in the armed forces, women filled vacant positions within the workforce. Between 1941 and 1944, the number of women in the workforce rose from 10.8 million to 18 million (Miller 42). However, Marc Miller details the limitations women faced in these periods of war: “movement was generally horizontal, not vertical, and any threat women posed to the male monopoly on supervisory jobs was temporary.” (Miller 55). Between June and September of 1945, one out of every four women working in factories lost her job. The rate of female unemployment continued to rise as the Second World War reached its conclusion. Closing factories, lower wages, and limited positions forced many women out of the workforce. Other women had seen employment as a temporary pursuit as they waited for their Husbands to return from war. Still, other women left work as the baby boom began, claiming roles as Mothers instead. These women’s return to the roles of Wife and Mother demonstrates a shift back to the domestic space.

The period between 1946 and 1955 is particularly significant as it suggests a certain sense of idleness between the end of the Second World War and before the height of major socio-political movements—such as the Women’s Liberation Movement and the Civil Rights movement—that defined the 1960s^v. As a reaction to the trauma created by the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War, the

post-war period was defined through the pursuit of a peaceful order and an emphasis on the creation of an undisturbed domestic space. The domestic space was further prioritized through the emphasis on mass-production and a shift towards suburbanization. It is important to note that suburbanization was not new in the United States, as people had been moving away from urban centers as a means of escaping crime, pollution and other problems since the colonial era (Tobin 1). However, the extent to which decentralization occurred in the post-war period was unprecedented. Between 1950 and 1955, the population of decentralized cities grew seven times faster than the population of urban centers (Tobin 1).

The mass-production of suburban environments coupled with GI Bill benefits—coming in the form of low-interest mortgages, generous unemployment insurance, and education grants for veterans—positioned suburban life as an essential luxury for many in the 1950s. The rise of the automobile industry allowed families to commute to urban spaces for work, further supporting the domestic space as an isolated haven within a suburban environment, far away from the centers of industry and finance. Indeed, the U.S. government played a large role in this decentralization, as it offered subsidies for suburban development, federal spending on highway projects and deductions for home mortgage payments and property taxes (Tobin 1). The U.S. government was financially supportive of decentralization for a number of reasons, ranging from the navigation of a burgeoning housing crisis as well as defense against the Cold War. The Great Depression of the 1930s slowed the production of housing while the war effort of the 1940s demanded a monopoly over many resources and materials needed for housing construction. The supply of housing was further stressed

by the mass influx of people pursuing industry jobs in urban centers. During the war, cities provided temporary housing but were unable to offer long-term living options. As the war ended, federal and local government focused primarily on developing the areas outside of urban centers in part to remedy this lack of housing.

Similarly, the Cold War—beginning in 1947— also facilitated the rise of decentralization in mid-century America. As nuclear threat became significantly more present, the U.S. government began to perform studies in which they determined potential physical and psychological effects of an airstrike on the American people (Tobin 5)^{vi}. While the bodily concerns were of course significant, government officials also determined that panic following an airstrike would likely be a considerable problem. Indeed, mass hysteria in urban centers could make evacuation impossible. Tobin writes: “Urbanization and industrialization had long been considered modern advantages of the western world, but the concentration of people in urban industrial areas was now considered a handicap under the threat of atomic attack” (Tobin 6). Thus, a solution was proposed in the form of pre-attack population dispersal. The rise of the suburbs, then, can be seen as the result of both economic and federal influence.

Indeed, the Cold War also facilitated the idea of the family unit as the cornerstone of a strong and united American society. With this, the role of Wife and Mother in the framework of the nuclear family became a crucial tool in waging the Cold War, as the Wife-Mother was tasked with maintaining a strong domestic unit. This image of the Wife-Mother existed within the domestic space of the suburban community. Further, it is essential to consider again the elevated birth rate—resulting in what is commonly known as the “baby boomer” generation—that characterized the

post-war period. This higher birth rate reinforced women within the limited roles of Wife and the historically connected role of Mother. Further, the post-war period saw a lower average age at marriage and a stable divorce rate—marriages were beginning earlier and lasting longer. Thus, the duty of the woman resides clearly within the domestic and suburbanized space as she performed the role of both Wife and Mother.

However, the suburban domestic space and the nuclear family were exclusionary elements of American life in this time period. The idea of the nuclear family that so famously defined the era was almost exclusively depicted as white and heteronormative. The arrival of minority communities in urban spaces and the subsequent dispersal of white families into suburban environments is commonly referred to as “white flight”. The exclusion of families of color from the idealistic suburban space was further enforced through de facto segregation in hiring practices and the presence of redlining in the real-estate market. Considering these elements, it is not surprising that the white population had the highest rate of suburbanization between 1955 and 1960 while rates of suburbanization in black populations remained low (Boustan 418). Similarly, while the GI Bills made these homes more and more accessible to the working class, suburbanization remained predominantly present in middle- and upper-class households. Accordingly, the nuclear family operates within a position of wealth. Finally, the constructed image of the nuclear family always depicts a heterosexual coupling, restricting or obscuring queer expression within its framework. Thus, the image of the nuclear family in the post-war period became homogenized. The construction of the nuclear family as a homogenized space suggests that the ideal model of marriage can be classified as white, middle to upper class, and heterosexual.

This fictionalized understanding of the nuclear family can be seen in many examples of contemporary visual media. Television shows such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver*, both of which began their run in the 1950s, are remembered as iconic examples of contemporary American family values^{vii}.

Similarly, the image of the Wife and Mother is commonly employed in periodical publications and their accompanying advertisements. *Good Housekeeping*, a women's interest magazine that has been in publication since 1885 under the Hearst Corporation, provides an essential understanding of the cultural narrative being constructed.

Advertisements and imagery within popular magazines constructed a desirable image of

femininity as a means of selling a product.



Figure 2: A Husband and a Wife depicted in an advertisement for Minute Tapioca.

Consider Figure 2, an ad for Minute Tapioca from the February 1950 edition of *Good Housekeeping*. The advertisement demands to know— “How much should a Husband be pampered?” (Fig. 2). In asking this question, there is the implicit expectation that a Husband receives servitude from his Wife. In fact, a Wife should “spoil him a little— he deserves it!” (Fig. 2). Yet, there is no suggestion that these acts of servitude should be returned by the Husband. Just as in *A Date with Your Family*, there is a minimally concealed hierarchical positioning of the Wife-figure beneath the figure of the Husband, thus placing her within the realm of the subjugated. This idea of subjugation within the household is further supported through the supplementary

photograph at the top of the advertisement. The background consists of domestic indicators such as a fireplace and a lounge chair, both of which are associated with the living room in middle-class American culture. This can be seen in the media listed above, as the middle-class suburban families in shows such as *Leave it to Beaver* are commonly situated or gathered within the home's domestic center, most commonly the living room. Within this room in the advertisement, the man is stretched out and thus physically dominating the space. The woman—pushed to the exterior of the frame—is positioned below him and sitting at his feet. These elements of the image converge to construct a sense of masculine dominance.

However, readings of advertisements that portray heterosexual couplings become complicated by the potential presence of underlying subversion within narratives of masculine dominance. While Fig. 2 is certainly constructed along the lines of patriarchal tropes, elements of feminine defiance can be identified. Consider the position in which the man is seated. While it is true that he is seated above the Wife, it is also significant to note that he is reclined. Although this position can be associated with leisure—a historically privileged thing—the woman's countering upright position suggests the possibility of masculine surrender in such an image. Further, the woman holds a vulnerable part of the man's body, his foot in her hands, again suggesting a sense of control or authority she might have over him. To examine the potential for subversion in traditional heterosexual narratives is not to say that the normative image of the heterosexual marriage that we have constructed thus far is obsolete. Instead, the dichotomy of the image in Fig. 2 reveals the extent to which constructed heteronormativity is being constantly undone. As we move through this essay, it is

essential to understand that even in idealized narratives of the marriage and family, subversion can often be present. Indeed, the fictional nature of the idealized heterosexual coupling always allows room for subliminal defiance within its framework^{viii}. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will continue to reconstruct the normative family structure that is more consciously created by such cultural artifacts.



Figure 3: A young girl plays pretend in an advertisement for Famous Van Camp Sea Foods.

Indeed, this creation of a normative narrative is also demonstrated in visual depictions of the Mother-Daughter dyad. The idea of intergenerational transmission in the role of the Wife and Mother is demonstrated in an advertisement from the January 1946 copy of *Good Housekeeping* (Fig. 3) in which the Famous Van Camp Seafood

Company is promoting cans of tuna. The ad is directed to a female audience and, more specifically, an audience that serves as the female head of a household. This is clear through its context within the publication and through its focus on a Daughter, thus implicating a Mother-figure even though she is not pictured in the advertisement. The largest text within the image reads, “JUNIOR HOSTESS!” (Fig. 3). Due to its size and positioning within the ad, an audience’s eye is immediately drawn to it. In this, it becomes clear that the ad is framing the position of hostess—a responsibility of the Wife in the nuclear family— as an ideal and enviable role. Our eye is then drawn to the young girl positioned directly underneath this text, connecting the textual with the visual. Superimposing the role of hostess onto the image of a Daughter suggests a certain inevitability if adopting the roles of Wife and Mother. The text below the girl’s image reads “Many a tiny tot mimics her Mother by serving her best-loved dolly tuna sandwiches,” (Fig. 3). Thus, the ad exploits and capitalizes on the generational transmission of gendered stereotypes.

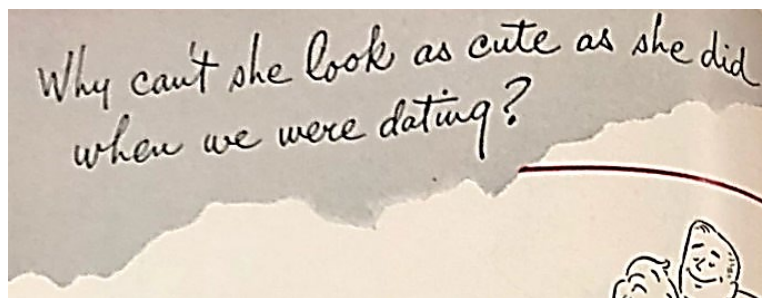


Figure 4: An article from the March 1955 edition of *Good Housekeeping*.

Deviations from the learned expectations for the roles of Wife and Mother are often noticed and critiqued in popular culture. Consider Figure 4, an excerpt from the March 1955 edition of *Good Housekeeping*. This is taken from an article entitled “I love my wife, but...” in which author Ruth Boyle answered common questions Husbands

were asking about their wives after years of marriage. In the image depicted, a Husband asks, “Why can’t she look as cute as she did when we were dating?” (Boyle 130). The man does not understand why the woman no longer presents herself in a particular way. He is unfamiliar with—or perhaps even disturbed by— this different expression of femininity, and in this it becomes clear that his Wife’s deviation from traditional aesthetic presentation is problematic. Indeed, Boyle’s response to this question further demonstrates the extent to which compliance with feminine norms for the sake of the Husband is expected^{ix}. The author addresses the reader—which is assumed to be a woman—and suggests that she “Set an alarm or egg timer for 10 to 15 minutes before his arrival, and surprise him tonight and every night with the same... girl he fell in love with” (Boyle 130). In this, Boyle suggests that the woman takes ten or fifteen minutes to perform the aesthetic rituals that her Husband has been groomed to expect. One might assume that these rituals might include a quick cleansing, the application of makeup, and perhaps even the changing of an outfit into something more traditionally feminine. Each of these actions suggest a certain sense of performance in becoming the ideal Wife. Both makeup and womanly clothing are marked with the constructed idea of the feminine gender, and the Wife must perform these gendered rituals to restore balance in her marriage and household. Further, this article reveals the longevity of gendered expectations and subsequent performances, as the Husband resents how his Wife has presented herself as she has aged. The woman in question is not freed from this performance as she becomes more mature—instead, she is chastised for what both the Husband and the author perceive to be laziness. This idea of gender performance—analyzed by Judith Butler—will be further explored later in this essay.

Part II: Theorizing Gendered Expectations

To expand on this idea and position it within a theoretical framework, this paper will rely heavily on the work of feminist theorists Judith Butler and Sarah Ahmed. In Butler's seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), she unpacks the idea of gender, suggesting that the categories of male and female are constructed through repetitive performances. Butler outlines this idea by suggesting that an individual becomes a Woman or a Man by repeating stylized actions that impersonate a socially constructed ideal. Indeed, gender becomes realized through the "repetition of acts . . . which are internally discontinuous... [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (*Gender Trouble* 45). These gender structures are imposed through an overarching production of marked bodies that are neither consciously recognized nor intentionally enforced. The individual that practices gendered actions are unaware of their participation in such a routine. Similarly, there is no singular entity that circulates these stereotyped norms. Instead, Butler writes: "it is not necessarily constructed by an 'I' or a 'we' who stands before that construction in any spatial or temporal sense of 'before'... [gender] emerges only within the matrix of gender relations themselves" (*Bodies that Matter* 23). Indeed, an othered sense of gendered difference is formed at the beginning of societal construction and is proliferated through the social current.

These performances can be seen quite literally as instructions in texts such as *A Date with Your Family*. As previously discussed, this educational film attempts to

socially engineer the family structure through the propagation of gendered social roles. However, these normalized performances of gender can also be recognized in more subliminal forms. Certainly, the *Good Housekeeping* ads examined earlier do not explicitly tell an audience that this is how one must act, yet they proliferate an idealized and consumable image of the ideal woman. More specifically, each of these texts present an idealized performance of the Wife and Mother. The women depicted in Figure 2 can be seen performing an act of domestic servitude for the hierarchically-positioned male authority who in turn performs a masculine role imbued with patriarchal entitlement. Figure 4 demonstrates how these performances must be repeated throughout an entire lifetime and illuminates the extent to which divergence from these rituals come to be seen as deviant behavior that should be corrected. Finally, it is important to revisit Figure 3 within this theoretical framework as this advertisement demonstrates how performance is transmitted along generational lines. As determined, this ad for Famous Van Camp Seafood presents the role of the Wife as enviable and inevitable for her Daughter. The performance of the hostess—which is intrinsically associated with the body marked as female—is mimicked by the Daughter as she replicates the rituals that her Mother partakes in. Thus, the performance of the female gender is in part disseminated from Mother to Daughter.

Indeed, if gender is a performed construction, the expectation of heterosexuality must be similarly deconstructed. Butler suggests that “Heterosexual genders form themselves through the renunciation of the possibility of homosexuality, as a foreclosure which produces a field of heterosexual objects at the same time as it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love.”(*Psychic Life of*

Power 21). Thus, as normative gender is performed, the construction of the female-male dyad simultaneously creates heterosexuality as it rejects homosexuality. Indeed, heterosexuality and homosexuality reify one another in their construction. However, it is significant to consider that the creation of homosexuality demands the exclusion—or as Butler suggests, foreclosure—of the queer. Normative heterosexuality within the cultural structure—including the family unit—actively works to create a hegemonic standard for identity as moments of queerness destabilize normative identity.

Sarah Ahmed's work "Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology" (2006) expands on Butler's theory of performativity. In this, she suggests that sexual orientation is formed through repeated and habitual actions. Similar to the construction of the feminine or masculine, heterosexual is positioned as something one becomes through a laborious path negotiated via the performance of cultural institutions such as the creation of a nuclear family. One can only "become straight... [by turning] towards the objects given to us by heterosexual culture... [and by turning] away from objects that take us off this line," (Ahmed 556). According to Ahmed, then, the act of becoming is negotiated in the physical realm. As one physically realigns their gaze toward heterosexual love objects and away from queer attraction, the individual negotiates a heterosexual identity. Indeed, the performance of gender—which is so closely intertwined, if not inseparable, from the performance of heterosexuality—also often exists within physical space. Acts marked as heterosexual or gendered are executed quite literally through the body. Ahmed also argues that the path between birth and death is marked by gendered indicators such as heterosexual marriage. This is to say that the line on which a body travels reinforces normative sexual identity and gender

roles. Divergence from this path results in moments of queer disorientation, in which the individual's path must be reoriented back toward the heterosexual norm. Similar to Butler's idea of gender performance, the construction of heterosexuality seems organic. However, the constant work involved in becoming heterosexual is hidden by the normative cultural structure in which it is negotiated.

Ahmed further supports this idea by discussing the pressure put on a child to continue the familial lineage, constructing the heterosexual family structure as inevitable. There is a "presumption that [a] child must inherit the life of the parent that requires the child to follow the heterosexual line" (Ahmed 557). Thus, the intergenerational transmission of gender roles extends once again to the family structure. The expectations of a child to become a man or a woman within a heterosexual structure is in direct conversation with the construction of the family structure. Further, we can extend Ahmed's argument into issues of race in the formation of an idealized gender or family structure. If one is taught to orient themselves towards whiteness and away from blackness, this focusing of the self is culturally informed to further support institutionalized rhetoric surrounding an othered community. The stereotyped roles of the Wife and Mother as feminine, heterosexual, and white is significant. Indeed, gender, sexuality, race, and the family roles inform one another. Through a framework of Butler and Ahmed's work, motherhood can be understood as a heteronormative function defined along lines of race and class and while the act of being a Mother certainly has many benefits, the way in which it is practiced in Western society works to enforce performative roles. Further, the idea of a performative self necessitates an authentic self, suggesting an innate duality in the normative role of the

mother. It is impossible to perfectly fulfil this role as it is nothing more than a pervasive cultural ideal, and thus the unidealized self is constantly in conflict with the idealized self. The authentic and the culturally idealized are constantly at odds with one another, intimately marking the experience of femininity and of motherhood with a sense of duality.

Indeed, an understanding of the performative nature of gender and sexual identity is necessary in deconstructing the normative constructions of the Wife and Mother outlined in the first chapter of this essay. Through the establishment of historical context in convergence with an exploration of media depictions of these roles, we are offered an idealized and performative representation of the family unit that coincides with, informs, and results from demographic shifts within the early twentieth century. The accompanying standardized models of femininity and wifeliness is essential to this paper because it illuminates how people were imagining the ideal marriage in this era. Of course, there are subversive examples of the family structure and the figure of the woman in contemporary visual media and cultural imagery, but for the purpose of this paper, it is essential to examine general trends that inform idealized norms. With this image of the Wife and Mother and a thorough understanding of Butler and Ahmed's work, this essay will now examine how female-identified figures are depicted as diverging from these performative roles in the fictionalized realm of marriage in literary texts.

Part III: Carson McCullers's *Member of the Wedding*

With an established understanding of gender performance and its effects on the creation of the social roles of Wife and Mother , we will now examine fictional characters that challenge—or *trouble*—these restrictive categories^x. Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) will be utilized at the first of two case studies. The text follows a few days in the life of 12-year-old Frankie Addams who becomes increasingly obsessed with her brother, Jarvis, and his bride, Janice, as their wedding draws near. Frankie is a young girl who feels displaced in her small Southern town, as her father is distant and her Mother died due to complications in childbirth. Her friends are limited to the family's African American maid Berenice and her six-year-old cousin John. The novel allows for a deeply personal portrait of Frankie's sense of social and cultural displacement within her community. She wishes to escape, desperately hoping to join her brother and his bride on their honeymoon in the Alaskan wilderness. While McCullers book has moments of disturbing action, the text relies predominantly on creating a sense of character and space through Frankie's narrative. While both Berenice and Janice will be examined, this essay will focus primarily on Frankie as she negotiates—and attempts to occupy—the role of the Wife. I will address issues of race in the formation of the idealized woman both in examining Frankie's privilege as well as the experience of Berenice as a black woman. Ultimately, an exploration of Frankie in McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding* will reveal a portrait of a young white girl attempting to perform the acts associated with Southern femininity but ultimately failing to do so.

However, to thoroughly deconstruct Frankie's character, it is essential to first establish an understanding of the geographical and cultural context in which she operates. First, we must recall the construction of the nuclear family and performative roles of women in this period, as established in Part 1 of this essay. However, McCullers' work is distinctly Southern—more specifically, Southern Gothic—in form. Thus, it is important to expand this contextualizing research into the cultural norms that are, to a certain extent, specific to this region of the United States. Sarah Gleeson White's essay "A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness: Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor" suggests that the history of Southern femininity "not only revolves around burdensome models of femininity, but also slavery and its tragic legacy and a literally fatal regional patriotism" ("Peculiarly" 27). As discussed previously, idealized depictions of female figures such as the Wife and the Mother are intrinsically tied to racial injustice within the United States. This is true throughout the country, but it is important to consider how the history of slavery and confederate patriotism impacts the Southern cultural narrative. Anne Goodwyn Jones' essay "The Work of Gender in the Southern Renaissance" (1972) unpacks how the unique and often traumatic history of the South contributes to the normative female figure dominating the cultural conversation of the post-WWII period. Indeed, the idealized depiction of the woman is marked through her privilege and through her race. Jones writes:

the body of the privileged white woman was revered as a marble statue, a Grecian urn, a human body that by nature resembled the finest productions of masculine art. As such, it needed protection from vandals (Jones 59-60).

In this construction of femininity, the white woman's body becomes something crafted by masculine artistic authority. She is beautiful and delicate, aesthetically pleasing in a way that elevates her to an inhuman status. Her form is placed alongside the prestigious ranks of the Grecian urn, comparing her to the art objects created by the old masters. Thus, the white woman's body was the work and subsequently the property of the masculine. As Jones suggests, esteemed works of art are coveted, and thus the dominant white culture assumed that there was a need for "protection from vandals"—other men and more specifically, men of color. Once again, this expectation of white woman as vulnerable to harm from men of color is a fictional narrative based on a deep-seated sense of institutional racism. Indeed, Jones continues:

[F]or white men, this image implied the purity of blood and thus of white patriarchal lineage: white supremacy a [sic] well as the male line of succession and inheritance were guaranteed by her chastity and desirelessness. (Jones 59-60)

For Jones, the idea of white male ownership over the white female form implies not only the commodification of the female form, but the ownership that the white male has specifically at the detriment of the black man. An interracial relationship would destabilize this authority and might thus create anxiety in the greater construction of cultural hegemony. Further, a woman who engages in a sexual relationship outside of a marital partnership similarly destabilizes white male hegemony, through her reclamation of sex outside of his authority. The ideal white woman was defined through her fragility, and through "her chastity and desirelessness" (Jones 59-60).

Indeed, separating the white woman from the black woman further enforced the authority of the white patriarch. Jones writes again:

Dividing women into categories—black and white, lady and woman—was one way to maintain a sense of control. . . The white woman's fragility further guaranteed her distance from earthy interests and gave the man an opportunity to construct his own manhood in protecting her. (Jones 59-60)

Before we take a closer look at this passage, it is essential to note that white women were not passive viewers in this construction of the racial other. While white women certainly faced injustice, they often inflicted injustice upon people of color within the South and beyond. Certainly, white women who operated within households which were able to afford enslaved people were both complacent in this industry and might even take an active role in practicing physical or verbal violence against black men, women, and children exploited by the white family. Indeed, white women actively participated in the villainizing of black men, creating a narrative in which they were criminal by nature. The lynching of black men was commonly contributed to accusations made by white women who suggested that they were predatory. Once again, it becomes important to consider the way in which white women were so commonly understood as fragile and “vulnerable, passively in need of protection by their white-clad knights,” (“Peculiarly Southern” 49). While this narrative speaks in part to the commodification of the white woman’s form, this stereotype is also created in part through the narrative white women themselves helped create around the black man.

White women similarly participated in the construction of a racialized social order through their role in defining the black woman in opposition to the white female form. In both the antebellum South and North, the appearance of enslaved black women and indentured servants were policed in part by the white women who occupied the role of matriarch in upper-class households. In her autobiographical novel *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* written in 1859, Harriet Wilson details the extent to which

a white mistress subjugates a black woman. This story follows the life of Frado, a multiracial orphaned girl, as she serves as the Bellmont family's indentured servant. Throughout the text, Mrs. Bellmont and her Daughter Mary serve as antagonists to Frado. While it is important to note that this is a fictionalized narrative, it is likely inspired by Wilson's time spent as an indentured servant for the Hayward family^{xi}. Wilson details the othering faced by the black woman by the white women, writing:

No matter how powerful the heat when sent to rake hay or guard the grazing herd, she was never permitted to shield her skin from the sun. She was not many shades darker than Mary now; what a calamity it would be ever to hear the contrast spoken of. Mrs. Bellmont was determined the sun should have full power to darken the shade which nature had first bestowed upon her best befitting. (Wilson 39)

This passage demonstrates the extent to which white women worked to maintain distance between their white form and the form of women of color. Frado is a multiracial woman whose skin tone appears lighter depending on the amount of time she spends in the sun. As her skin tone becomes nearly indistinguishable from that of Mrs. Bellmont's white Daughter Mary, this increasing homogeneity creates tension regarding the construction of race in the home and thus the stability of a racial hierarchy. Whiteness exists only in contrast to a racialized other, which is both constructed and enforced by the white majority as they assume that "nature had first bestowed upon [the black body their] best befitting," (Wilson 39). This is to say that the white majority constructed a racial narrative in order to oppress a perceived other, yet reinforces this narrative through the proliferation of a perceived natural order. To reestablish this power dynamic within her own household, Mrs. Bellmont forces Frado to sun herself, darkening her skin tone and ultimately reaffirming her blackness in opposition to Mary's whiteness. In Wilson's text, white women exploit the cultural

assumptions created around blackness to reassert their relative authority within the household and the more public sphere.

It is also important to consider that even the role of the Mother has been uniquely informed by contemporary racial relations and often has been explicitly reinforced by white women. Black motherhood has historically existed between two stereotypes—the assumption of a natural superiority in the primal act of childrearing and protection, and the assumption of a dehumanized female form in consideration of the black Mother. Each of these stereotypes can be recognized in the practice of wet-nursing in the antebellum South. While the act of breastfeeding seems like a traditionally associated element of motherhood, upper-class women in the antebellum South would often force black enslaved women to occupy the role of wet-nurse for their white children. Certainly, the assumption that black women had a greater capability for lactation is not new. Predating transatlantic slavery, white female travelers visiting West Africa commonly wrote about the aesthetic of the black breast. Jennifer L. Morgan referred to the black woman's breast as “dugges,”- an archaic word that can refer to either a woman's breast or to an animal's teat (West and Knight 39). In this, white female colonial writers are actively positioning the black body as something animalistic, thus explicitly dehumanizing the black woman. This stereotyped understanding of the black woman's body clearly facilitated the rise of forced wet-nursing. In their article “Mothers' milk: slavery, wet-nursing, and black and white women in the antebellum South” (2017), Emily White and R.J. West suggest that the assumption of black women as innately superior child care providers in convergence with a sexualized narrative of enslaved wet-nurses constructed by slaveholders created an environment in which the

white family could justify the “dual exploitation of enslaved women’s bodies as both reproducers and as workers” (West and Knight 40). While there is evidence of white women breastfeeding the children of enslaved women, the practice of wet-nursing was always based in an uneven power dynamic between the black and the white woman, as the white woman had a certain amount of choice in how her child was fed and regarding which child she served as a wet-nurse for.

The extent to which enslaved black women were stripped of this choice is perhaps most evident in the account from T.W. Cotton who was born into slavery. Cotton recalls how he was bottle-fed by his grandmother, as his Mother was forced to use her milk to feed the white infant of the slaveholding family. Indeed, white women utilized the practice of wet-nursing—which was uncommon outside of the Southern slave states—as a means of manipulating the motherhood of enslaved women. These racial relations, actively forged throughout colonial history, inform the cultural narrative of America into the twentieth century. Thus, it is clear that white women—and indeed, wealthy white women—actively facilitated the oppression of black Americans throughout early U.S. history and beyond.

Clearly, one must hold white women accountable for their involvement in the oppression of black Americans and indeed, this history of racism and white female complacency is also present in the experiences of other racial minorities in the United States. Each of these experiences demands proper attention in the academic sphere. Further, the deconstruction of racial narratives is of course necessary in analyzing the construction of idealized womanhood, considering the oppressive exultation of the white female form. I do not suggest in this paper that white authors are the only writers

subverting or challenging gender roles in the period in which I am working. While my work focuses predominantly on white authors such as Carson McCullers—and later, Patricia Highsmith—further investigation into this topic demands the voices of authors of color.

With these limitations in consideration and with a recognition of white female complacency, let us return to Jones' work. Indeed, the role of white men in "Dividing women into categories—black and white, lady and woman— was one way to maintain a sense of control," (Jones 60). Positioning the idealized white female form as something uniquely delicate and valuable allowed white men to position themselves as protectors of white women. However, the role of protector suggests ownership, which also places the white man in the position of captor. The white woman must be subject to the whims of this patriarch, contorting her form into the chaste and beautiful object that this man expects to desire. In fact, this contortion removes the woman from reality, as the image of this perfect woman exists only in the imagination, at a "distance from earthly interests," (Jones 60). It is, indeed, a performance of male expectation. As determined, the image of the Wife and Mother presented in the South similarly rely on these aestheticized stereotypes.

Carson McCullers' Frankie offers us an excellent jumping-off point in considering questions of gender stereotypes in association with the Southern American family structure. While a young adolescent may seem like a strange figure to examine in a consideration of marriage, the extent to which Frankie attempts to preemptively perform the role of Wife is significant. Indeed, I argue that Frankie attempts to contort her personhood into the role of Wife as a means of refiguring herself into a feminine

space from which her strangeness has largely barred her from. However, the issue of marriage as a reifying construct within the text is contradictory in nature as her strangeness is simultaneously what draws her to the institution of marriage and prevents her from engaging in it successfully. This contradiction is further complicated through Frankie's ability to fulfil certain aspects of the normative woman, designated through her whiteness, for example—however it is important to recall that stereotypes are always complex as no one fits perfectly within one and few fit perfectly outside of one. Instead, certain individuals are able to convincingly perform these roles regardless of authenticity within this space. Frankie does not accomplish this.

McCullers immediately constructs a sense of otherness around Frankie as she introduces the setting of her novel as “the summer when for a long time [Frankie] had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world” (McCullers 1). Indeed, Frankie is immediately positioned as an outsider. Membership to a club denotes the acceptance of a presented identity and thus denial of entry suggests an incompatibility with an organization. If one is barred from all memberships, it follows that they are incompatible with the more general community as they are unable to conform to one accepted identity. Although McCullers does not specify all of the clubs from which Frankie has been rejected, it is soon revealed that at least one space that she is not allowed to enter is “the neighborhood... clubhouse... The members of the club were girls who were thirteen and fourteen and even fifteen years old,” (McCullers 10). While Frankie was once allowed to play with these girls, she had since been denied access because, “she was too young and too mean” (McCullers 10). It is significant that McCullers designates a specifically female space as inaccessible to

Frankie, as this suggests her incompatibility with women of a similar age. Her gradual removal from the neighborhood club proposes that Frankie was once compatible with this group, but has since grown in an adverse way to the other young women as they enter puberty. Indeed, if we allow ourselves to think of these otherwise unnamed clubs that she does not belong to as cultural boundaries—such as the framework of the feminine—in which one is able to negotiate their identity in consideration of predetermined societal roles, it becomes clear that Frankie occupies a space on the fringe of her society.

Certainly, McCullers constructs the physical image of Frankie in direct opposition to the expected and idealized Southern female form. Frankie's body does not coalesce with the dainty and small proportions expected of a woman, as she had "grown so tall that she was almost a big freak, and her shoulders were narrow, her legs too long," (McCullers 2). In this, the textural description of her features suggests an almost monstrous aesthetic. This description is especially significant when one considers how Janice—the idealized figure of the Wife-to-be—is described. While Frankie is large and gawky, Janice is "kind of brunette and small and pretty," (McCullers 27). The ways in which Frankie perceives her comparative strangeness are jarring. However, it is important to note that Frankie is not the only character that occupies the societal fringe within this text. Berenice, with whom Frankie spends most of her time, is an unmarried black woman. She occupies the gaping space that Frankie's absent Mother has left, thus Frankie's relationship with Berenice continues the aforementioned tradition of black women sacrificing time and energy to raise the child of a white woman. Just as Frankie exists within the liminal space between the masculine and the feminine, so too does

Berenice exist in a distinctly othered realm in the American South. This is perhaps best demonstrated as Berenice and Frankie share their image of an ideal world. Berenice paints a picture of racial equality in which “there would be no separate colored people in the world, but all human beings would be light brown color with blue eyes and black hair,” (McCullers 91). In this image, Berenice conjures a world devoid of physical difference. She argues that if everyone looked the same—no skin lighter or darker than another—there would be “no white people to make the colored people feel cheap and sorry- (McCullers 91). Thus, Berenice strives to eliminate both ends of a constructed racially oppositional binary so that the in-between becomes the norm.

Frankie, a white girl, does not address race in the same way as Berenice, but she does present an ideal world in which “people can instantly change back and forth from boys to girls,” (McCullers 92). Instead of eliminating a binary as Berenice does, Frankie maintains it but allows movement between gendered poles. However, it is significant to note that both othered women do attempt to shift their positioning within their societal structure through the refiguring of what it means to be liminal. Berenice is a black woman—her form is othered specifically as a means of defining and idealizing the white woman’s body. Indeed, each one of them is “somehow caught all by [themselves]-”, however Berenice makes it clear that she is “caught worse than [Frankie] is. Because [Berenice is] Black,” (McCullers 72). Frankie benefits from the active oppression that Berenice faces and her whiteness allows her a certain barrier against negative public perception. In this, it becomes clear that the ability to even attempt to refigure oneself into a normative form demands a certain element of privilege. While Frankie is able to attempt such a performance, the color of Berenice’s

skin—and the visual perception those in the dominant community use to oppress her demographic—makes it impossible for her to navigate this same performance. Indeed, Frankie does not need to worry about a cultural orientation towards whiteness and away from blackness, distinctly marking her experience of otherness as different from that of a black woman. However, it remains significant to note that she too fails to occupy the role of the beautiful and delicate white Southern woman despite this privilege.

Indeed, Frankie's strangeness is meaningful and should be considered in conjunction with an understanding of the theory of the grotesque. Alan Spiegel defines the Southern grotesque in his article "A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" (1972), writing that "the grotesque.... refers neither to its mode... nor to its mode of expression... the grotesque refers rather to a type of character' defined by either physical or mental deformity-" ("Ugliness" 428). Thus, differences from the culturally accepted bodily norm—or culturally accepted mental norm, for that matter—can be understood as examples of the literary grotesque. I would like to pause here to recognize the distinctly ableist language that the theory of the grotesque utilizes. Utilizing grotesque as a descriptor suggests a sense of ridiculousness and culturally determined ugliness in the object it describes. This theory—or perhaps more accurately, the fictional narratives that use the grotesque as a literary device—are thus intrinsically problematic, as individuals with physical or mental disabilities should not be utilized as a plot device. The association between monstrosity and disability— and indeed the dehumanization of those with disabilities— is a historic trend, and often manifests within McCullers' work. With this in mind, it is still important to examine what McCullers accomplishes through this problematic device.

Just as Spiegel believes that the literary grotesque suggests the marking of the body, so too does Mikhail Bakhtin emphasize the construction of the grotesque within the corporeal realm. Indeed, to Bakhtin, the grotesque directly challenges the construction of normative identity through its oppositional tension with the body. The grotesque form exceeds the borders of the body—moving, changing, expanding, and pulsing as it strains against normative structures. Thus, the grotesque body represents the form that challenge or presses up against cultural boundaries and identities. Bakhtin suggests that the textual inclusion is “transgressive because it challenges normative forms of representation and behavior, it disturbs because it loves the abject and will not rest, it is always in a state of becoming” (Gleeson-White 44). This is to say that the grotesque body is by definition defiant, as it ignores the framework that limits notions of identity. For example, the grotesque woman would not be restricted by the cultural narrative determined throughout this paper. It is also important to consider how the idea of continuous becoming impacts McCullers’ text. Indeed, a body unable to remain within the confines of a given identity must constantly evolve or reform. It does not inhabit a fixed position. Consider again Frankie’s positioning on the fringe. She is not a member of any one community, instead existing within the gutter. Perhaps most pertinent to this paper’s discussion of performative femininity and marriage is Frankie’s exclusion from the female clubhouse. This evidence in convergence with the physical description of Frankie as something other suggests the extent to which the young girl operates outside of the feminine. However, she does not exist fully within the masculine either. Indeed, Frankie exists in the space between—constantly becoming and reforming in the liminal area between the masculine and the feminine.

Frankie is established as outside of stereotyped notions of femininity through the description of her body as both marred and oversized. As demonstrated in both textual and extratextual sources, the ideal female form is delicate, healthy, and beautiful. In deliberating why the female members of the neighborhood club denied her access, she determines that the young women must “have been reading it all over town that [she] smells bad,” (McCullers 10). Frankie argues that they must have smelled her “When [she] had those boils and that black bitter smelling ointment,” (McCullers 10). In the most literal understanding of this passage, it becomes clear that Frankie’s form does not have the idealized and beautiful shape that is expected of a woman. In being considered for entrance into the club—which we will read as the constructed community of the idealized feminine— it is assumed that her aesthetic form operated as a determining factor. However, she does not fit the appropriate mold—beautiful, healthy, hygienic, small—that is required of her. Instead, smooth skin has been replaced with imperfections that permeate her form. Further, boils form when puss collects within a hair follicle or oil gland. It can be effectively understood as a growth under the skin. This growth is significant when one considers it in conversation with the preestablished theory of the grotesque. As discussed, Bakhtin argues that the body in liminal space is constantly in the act of becoming, or growth. Without a fixed space, the form is in constant movement. Thus, the growth of boils along Frankie’s skin can be understood as an example of this growth. This idea is particularly poignant when one considers that it was indeed these growths—and the subsequent smell that they became associated with—which barred her from entrance to a feminine-coded club. Her becoming, or her occupation of the in-between, is incompatible with the construct of the feminine.

McCullers further demonstrates otherness through the grotesque as she juxtaposes the character of Frankie alongside circus performers. As Frankie frets about her height, she recalls a group of people collectively referred to as The Freak House. The troop includes “The Giant, The Fat Lady, The Midget... and The Half-Man Half-Woman,” amongst others^{xii}. The inclusion of this group is significant, as it presents people who are explicitly forced into the fringe of society. They are used as entertainment for the normative majority, positioned as an other against which a majority can define themselves. While all of these figures are worth considering, I will look specifically at The Giant and The Half-Man Half-Woman. The Giant is uniquely associated with Frankie, as the young girl is so deeply concerned with her size, as discussed previously. Frankie is worried that “if she reached her height on her eighteenth birthday...unless she could somehow stop herself, she would grow to be over nine feet tall,” (McCullers 16). Once again, the novel presents the idea of growth (and, more specifically, unimpeded growth) as something that is unidealized. Frankie does not want to continue this unceasing becoming, and is afraid that she will not find a way to stop it. In other words, she fears that she will not be able to escape the liminal space in which this unimpeded growth occurs. Indeed, the giant represents this fear taken to its furthest limits as he “was more than eight feet high, with huge loose hands and a hang-jaw face,” (McCullers 17). The Giant was unable to stop this act of becoming, instead growing larger and larger. To Frankie, The Giant represents the absolute limit of the unincorporated other.

Further, the figure of the Half-Man Half-Woman reifies the liminal space between the masculine and the feminine in which Frankie inhabits^{xiii}. Gleeson-White writes:

The image of hermaphroditism powerfully suggests their failure, or perhaps inability, to conform to normative gender practices, that is, to the role of the southern belle. And because they fail in the gendering stakes, they internalize society's act of branding them "freaks." (Gleeson-White 115)

In this, Gleeson-White suggests that just as Frankie is unable to conform to the Southern construct of femininity, so too is the Half-Man Half-Woman. Each figure exists within the in-between, never fully venturing entirely into the constructed realm of the masculine or the feminine. As Gleeson-White argues, this inability to conform is unacceptable to a normative majority. Their existence outside of constructed norms—intentional or otherwise—destabilizes carefully constructed systems of power. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Frankie feels as if the “Freaks” had “looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with their long Freak eyes,” (McCullers 18). These othered individuals recognize their societal strangeness within one another. While the “Freaks” might understand that recognition as solidarity, Frankie seems to understand it as a threat. As discussed, she wants to overcome her strangeness and her interaction with individuals such as The Giant and the Half-Man Half-Woman suggest to her that this might be impossible. However, she remains determined. Although Frankie has “[become] an unjoined person” as she operates within the liminal space between the masculine and the feminine, her journey throughout the text demonstrates the ways in which she attempts to renegotiate her identity within the feminine (McCullers 1).

Indeed, Frankie attempts to perform this renegotiation through the gendered practice of marriage. More specifically, she attempts to insert herself in the marriage between her brother Jarvis and his fiancée Janice. Marriage—the performative act of becoming a Wife—is significant because it reaffirms previously determined gender roles. Marriage as a structure signifies the normality of those participating. Frankie, in talking to her caretaker Berenice, asks “Does marrying really stop your growth?” to which Berenice responds, “It certainly do,” (McCullers 25). If we once again understand the motif of growth within the text as an indicator of *becoming* within a liminal and othered space, then we can recognize this quote to mean that the performance of marriage positions an individual within a stabilized gender category. However, this text suggests that an othered individual must reach a point outside of this aforementioned liminal space before they are able to participate, as demonstrated by the Freaks. In fact, Frankie expresses “doubt [that the Freaks will] ever get married or go to a wedding” (McCullers 18). In this, it becomes clear that Frankie views marriage as something exclusive to those that fit normative definitions of femininity. Consider Berenice, a divorcee four times over and who is currently unmarried. As an othered figure within the text, she too is unable to maintain a position within the structure of marriage. Indeed, to Frankie the act of becoming a Wife can be accomplished only by a person who already fits a stereotyped norm, and those outside of this are not even able to witness the act being performed by another. Marriage, then, is a conditional structure that both normalizes an individual but is also unavailable to those who do not already operate within their normative gender category. Thus, Frankie’s form—and her gender

identity— must be refigured before she is able to successfully occupy the role of the Wife.

Frankie works to refigure her gender identity firstly through transposing her form onto both Jarvis and Janice. This is demonstrated through Frankie's daydreams of a wedding in which both her brother's and his fiancée's faces are devoid of features. As she pictures the ceremony, the "groom in this wedding was her brother, and there was a brightness where his face should be. The bride was there in a long white train and the bride also was faceless," (McCullers 2). In this, Frankie perceives a certain emptiness within the Wife-Husband dyad. If we are to understand Jarvis and Janice as a unit that works to represent the idealized structure of a marriage, then it follows that this emptiness signifies the extent to which Frankie feels as if there is space for her to occupy within this structure. Further, the absence of a face—which is so intimately associated with individual identity—suggests the ejection of contained and unique personhood in Frankie's understanding of the pair. This absence leaves an empty space onto which Frankie can attempt to superimpose her own personhood. An empty space within the structure of marriage in which she is able to define herself would offer Frankie an escape-route from the liminal otherness.

Consequently, Frankie begins to understand herself as an integral element of the coupling—a member of the wedding. As Jarvis and Janis discuss their plans to visit Alaska on their honeymoon, Frankie begins to dread their leaving. She pictures them leaving and thinks:

They were them, and leaving her, and she was her, and sitting left all by herself there at the kitchen table. But a part of her was with them, and she could feel this part of her own self going away, and farther away; farther and farther, so that a drawn-out sickness came in her, going away

and farther away, so that the kitchen Frankie was an old hull left there at the table (McCullers 27).

In this, Frankie begins to perceive a physical connection between her and the romantic couple. As she imagines them physically distancing themselves from her, she becomes so sick that she eventually is left, “an old hull... at the table” (McCullers 27). This degeneration of Frankie’s physical form suggests the extent to which Frankie has associated her personhood with the structure of a marriage. Removal from this dyad does not feel like a possibility for her. Indeed, the ejection of Frankie from this marriage repositions her within a state of *becoming*, or in this case, an inverted example of the *becoming* we have been privy to earlier in the text. Instead of a constant growth, Frankie feels as if removal from the normative structure of marriage after she has inserted herself will result in the constant diminishment of her form. She will once again be placed in the liminal space in which she has spent most of her childhood. Indeed, Frankie believes that “They [Jarvis and Janice] are the we of me” (McCullers 39). The relationship between her and the couple becomes necessary as Frankie feels as if she needs them to exit the space of constant *becoming*. Frankie must be allotted entry into this space if she wants to enter the normative gender category of woman.

Frankie attempts to reinforce her position within the structure of Jarvis and Janice’s marriage through the adoption of the couple’s characteristics. Part II of the novel reveals an inconsistent narrative and temporal structure in which the narrator—Frankie— chooses not to adhere to a chronological depiction of the events she describes. Instead, Part II sees McCullers describe the events of Saturday early morning and into the early evening—a section that the narrator neglected to describe in the first part of the novel. This instability of time within the narrative structure further supports

the volatility of Frankie's personal identity, an idea that is further enforced as it becomes clear that Frankie no longer refers to herself with her given name in Part II. Instead, she is introduced as F. Jasmine. This choice of name is significant as the use of a name starting with a "J" directly associates her with Janis and Jarvis. The removal of her full name, Frankie, suggests the rejection of her previous identity and the birth of a new person formed in her self-insertion. Indeed, she muses that "It was the old Frankie of yesterday who had been puzzled, but F. Jasmine did not wonder any more," (McCullers 45). The character associated with the moniker Frankie has become associated with the constant instability of an identity in flux, while F. Jasmine—whether true or not—has become associated with a stable gender category formed through her insertion in the structure of marriage.

However, Frankie is ultimately unable to effectively insert herself within the Husband-Wife dyad and thus her attempt to refigure her othered form into the structure of a normative gender fails. After the wedding, Janice and Jarvis depart for Alaska without Frankie. Consequently, the young girl believes that "The wedding was all wrong," and that the ceremony has forced her to a point of anger (McCullers 136). Indeed, "Herself she hated the worst of all, and she wanted the whole world to burn," (McCullers 135). Her inability to refigure her form into a normative shape seems devastating to Frankie. However, this result should not come as a surprise to the reader. Indeed, in attempting to force her way into the construct of marriage, Frankie perverts the very structure that traditionally works in a normative form. As discussed, a traditional marriage is between two people, one man and one women. In fact, Berenice reminds Frankie of this, asking her if she can recall "the time of the flood? Remember

Noah and the ark... He admitted them creatures two by two,” (McCullers 73). In this biblical reference, Berenice frames the dualistic nature of marriage as an aspect of divine design. Disrupting this structure through the inclusion of a third individual—no less, a female figure that disturbs the distinctly heterosexual nature of traditional marriages at this time—would nullify the normalizing results that Frankie is attempting to accomplish^{xiv}. Indeed, Frankie has now shed the name F. Jasmine in favor of calling herself Frances, further suggesting the failure of her insertion into a feminine role and the subsequent shift in identity that becomes necessary. Ultimately, Frankie’s attempt at gender refiguring through the active insertion of self within the structure of a marriage is fruitless. She remains trapped within the liminal and strange space in-between the masculine and the feminine^{xv}.

Clearly, the structure of marriage plays a significant role throughout Carson McCullers’ *Member of the Wedding*. The text works to demonstrate how marriage can be understood as a normative structure in which gender is both negotiated and reified. The normative woman can enter the performative role of the Wife through this ceremony, and thus those who do not fulfill—or are unable to become—the stereotyped and enacted woman are excluded from its framework. In McCullers’ text, those who are excluded from the constructed category of the white Southern female are depicted as strange. However, McCullers does not critique nonnormative figures within her novel. Instead, the strange and the grotesque become a subversive act of defiance in the face of strict depictions of the stereotyped woman.

Part IV: Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*

Subversive demonstrations of women and marriage are similarly significant in Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Price of Salt* (1952). This text follows Therese Belivet as she develops a romantic relationship with Carol Aird, a married older woman. We meet Therese as she is working in a Manhattan department store. Young and interested in a career in theater set design, Therese appears dissatisfied with the life she is currently living. Her relationship with Richard is unsatisfying and her introduction to Carol seems to come as a welcome reprieve from a deep sense of monotony. As their bond deepens, Carol is navigating a difficult divorce from her Husband Harge. As Harge becomes more and more suspicious of the nature of Therese and Carol's relationship, he begins to limit Carol's access to her Daughter Rindy. Through the help of a private investigator, Harge collects enough evidence of Carol's homosexuality to use against her in their upcoming custody hearing and ultimately gains full custody of their Daughter. Despite Carol's futile attempt to maintain custody over Rindy through the termination of her relationship with Therese, the novel ends hopefully as the women arrange to reunite in New York.

Clearly, the blatant and empathetic inclusion of queer romance in a mid-century American text is subversive. While same-sex desire had been previously depicted in literature, *The Price of Salt* is largely credited as the first piece of lesbian literature that concludes with a conventionally happy ending. While both Carol and Therese are significant examples of textually represented queer homosexual women, my analysis of the text will focus predominantly on the figure of Carol. Her position as both a Wife and a Mother makes an examination of her figure invaluable to the overall themes

present in my thesis. Further, Carol operates as an example of a queer figure positioned not only within the idealized position of marriage, but as a woman who comfortably fulfills many requirements of the normative woman. She is described as white, beautiful, slender, and as a member of the suburban upper-middle class. Thus, her queer desire serves as a disruption to an otherwise cohesive attempt to perform normative femininity. Ultimately, an exploration of Carol in Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* will further reveal the instability of the normative representation of the Wife and Mother, specifically through an understanding of queerness in women.

However, before we can examine the subversive nature of Highsmith's text, we must first establish a clearer picture of contemporary norms surrounding queerness. The language that I will be using to discuss same-sex attraction will be imperfect. While the descriptor "homosexual" has since been considered pseudo-scientific and offensive, it is a helpful term when discussing historical context as this was the prevailing term utilized in the contemporary era. I will also be using the acronym LGBTQ+ at times^{xvi}. It is important to note that this term is a recent innovation and thus ahistorical to employ in discussion of mid-century American culture. However, it is a useful term for us as modern readers. Finally, "queer" will be utilized to discuss nonnormative sexualities. The history of this term is complicated, as it has traditionally been used as a slur. However, in more recent discourse the expression has been largely reclaimed as an umbrella term by and for those who do not perform normative gender or sexuality^{xvii}. With the limitations of this language in mind, let us now examine contemporary understandings of queerness.

Indeed, “the general public was becoming more aware of homosexuality” by the late 1940s with books such as Alfred Kinsey’s 1948 book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* which suggested that homosexual experiences were relatively common (Adkins 1). However, this is not to say that the public was accepting of queerness. Indeed, the Cold War period ushered in intense rhetoric and policies against queer individuals. It is perhaps impossible to discuss representations of same-sex romance and desire in mid-century America without discussing the widespread impact of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s rhetorical propaganda and implication of smear tactics against determined internal threats. McCarthy argued that Communists and Soviet spies had infiltrated the interior of American culture during the Cold War. Indeed, McCarthy also utilized similar tactics against those perceived as homosexual. In her essay “Patriotic Perversions: Patricia Highsmith’s Queer Vision of Cold War America in *The Price of Salt*, *The Blunderer*, and *Deep Water*” (2005), Victoria Hesford posits that the constant uncertainty of the Cold War and the associated nuclear threat demanded the construction of a sense of certainty elsewhere. Hesford suggests that certain myths of certainty—such as the aforementioned suburban and heterosexual family structure—were enforced in this era as a means of creating a false sense of security in the face of persistent threat from the Soviet Union. Indeed, while the U.S. attempted to contain the expansion of the Soviet Union, so too did U.S. cultural pressures attempt to contain perceived internal threats that might disrupt the stabilizing myth of the domestic space. McCarthy’s rhetoric—referred to as McCarthyism—created an intense fear that outsiders could, or already have, infiltrated this space. The fear that your neighbor living in the suburban home next to your own might be a communist or a homosexual—

both cultural identities that might work to destabilize constructed cultural norms—would disrupt the culturally accepted nature of American national identity. These anxieties around Communist and homosexual influences, referred to as the Second Red Scare and the Lavender Scare respectively, are intrinsically intertwined in the post-WWII period.

We should remind ourselves here that the image of the normative white, heterosexual, middle-class suburban family is indeed a fictional and innately fragile narrative throughout the post-war period and thus threats to the cohesion of this narrative were often met with intense anxiety. The encroaching fear of the international threat of communism seeped into the domestic sphere. Indeed, international events—such as the introduction of the Iron Curtain in 1945, the Soviet Union’s first nuclear weapons test in 1949, and the success of the communist party in the Chinese Civil War, also in 1949—prompted a deep fear of communist influence and concerns about the United States’ ability to defend itself against its impact. However, internal events—such as the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, U.S. citizens who spied for the Soviet Union and were consequently executed in 1953—set the stage for McCarthy’s divisive rhetoric and subsequent hysteria regarding the potential presence of clandestine communists in American spaces.

However, it is also significant to note that the Red Scare directly initiated—or perhaps exasperated—the aforementioned Lavender Scare in which homosexual people were targeted as security risks. Indeed, former U.S. senator Alan K. Simpson wrote in 2013 that although the Red Scare has been the predominate focus of historians, “A lesser-known element... and one that harmed far more people was the witch-hunt

McCarthy and others conducted against homosexuals,” (McDaniel 10). Just as McCarthy had claimed that sections of the U.S. government had been infiltrated by communists, so too did he claim that it had been permeated by homosexuals who were either sympathetic to the communist cause or could be blackmailed into revealing state secrets (McDaniel 34). As a committee established by the U.S. Senate investigated these charges, they found no evidence of treason by homosexual employees, but the committee nevertheless maintained that these employees were vulnerable to blackmail and determined that they had a “corrosive influence” on their colleagues due to their moral character (Adkins 1). In 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10450, allowing department heads to fire those who practiced so-called sexual perversion. New hiring policies were enforced that focused on identifying subtle signs of queerness such as gender-nonconformity. Those assumed to be queer would also often be surveilled in their private lives to determine whether they frequented queer spaces or associated with other queer individuals. Indeed, lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals were fired or pressured into resignation across the country. This paranoia, as discussed, also infiltrated the domestic and other private spaces in which individuals outed as queer would often be rejected by their heteronormative peers.

Of course, the LGBTQ+ community often demonstrated resistance against the oppressive policies and cultural atmosphere that characterized the post-WWII period. One example of contemporary resistance can be seen in the actions of Frank Kameny who argued that anti-gay discrimination was “no less illegal and no less odious than discrimination based upon religious or racial grounds” in front of the U.S. Supreme Court (Johnson 33)^{xviii}. While this historical contextualization of the Cold War and its

socio-political impact on queer individuals is limited in scope, it offers a fuller image of societal norms. Indeed, subversion and resistance can also be seen in literary texts such as Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*. Queer women were seen as a perverse threat to the normative social order, especially in the myth of certainty associated with the domestic suburban space. With an understanding of this historical and cultural context, we can now examine how Highsmith's Carol and the relationship she develops with Therese works to subvert these social norms.

As previously discussed, Carol attempts to perform certain aspects of the constructed normative woman and successfully occupies this space until her queerness ultimately destabilizes such a performance. When Therese first encounters Carol, the latter is described as, "tall and fair, her long figure graceful in the loose fur coat that she held open with a hand on her waist. Her eyes were gray, colorless, yet dominant as light or fire" (Highsmith 27). Immediately, the audience is alerted to her fairness, a quality of complexion that is directly associated with whiteness. Her eyes, too, are grey—a color that similarly denotes whiteness. Indeed, they are "colorless", devoid of any markings that might suggest otherness (Highsmith 27). In this, Carol fits within the constructed racial norm of idealized femininity. Further, she is wearing a fur coat—an item of clothing explicitly associated with wealth as it is an expensive and superfluous item of clothing. This is to say that it is not utilitarian in nature, instead operating as a luxury item accessible only to the upper-middle class. Once again, Carol is positioned within the performative norm. However, even within this successful outwards presentation of the performative norm, Carol seems strange to Therese. Therese thinks that Carol's "voice was like her coat, rich and supple, and somehow full of secrets," (Highsmith 27).

In this, Carol's secret—her queerness— becomes associated with her external presentation. More specifically, her queerness becomes interrelated with a materialistic item that serves as an indicator of her ability to otherwise fit the idealized norm. This distinct contrast between the normative and the subversive in a single symbolic object works to destabilize the figure of Carol. She both is and isn't the idealized woman simultaneously. In her ability to "pass" as a normative woman, Carol can be understood as an intruder within the suburban world in which she resides.

Carol's position within a marriage—operating as both a Wife to Harge and a Mother to Ridley— further showcases the contradiction between the image and the reality of the performative woman. While motherhood can, as discussed, take on performative traits, it is clear that the relationship between Carol and Ridley is authentic and significant as Carol loves her "deeper than she would probably ever love anyone else," (Highsmith 112). I would like to note here that this is an important aspect of any performative identity. In any performance of a certain self, there may be—and likely are— aspects of truth within the inauthenticity. However, Carol fails to fulfil the requirements of the myth of the normative Mother due to her queerness. Her performance of the Wife fails in a much more prominent way, leaving little room for authenticity in the textual depiction of the relationship between Carol and Harge. Indeed, Carol muses that Harge has never actually loved her— instead their marriage has been a transaction in which her Husband hoped to attain the ideal Wife that he could dominate within the suburban space. She suggests that he "picked [her] out like a rug for his living room, and he made a bad mistake," (Highsmith 112). Recalling the way in which Therese initially associated Carol with an object intimately related to her

position of wealth, so too does Carol understand her relationship to her Husband as a decorative object within his suburban space. However, Therese quickly sees past this performative aspect of Carol's identity, whereas Harge resents her for not fulfilling the role. He picked her like a rug, an often costly and ornamental object. Most importantly, a rug is exactly that—an object, something that one walks over and expects no resistance from. A rug simply ties together a living room, it completes the social center of the suburban home. However, Carol suggests that Harge made the wrong decision in picking out a rug. There is a difference in this rug, in Carol, that suggests an inconsistency within the suburban environment in which it is supposed to fit seamlessly. While Carol might seem to fit within the space as a Wife, indeed she is made strange by this difference—this queerness.

It is significant to observe that gender and sexuality are intertwined within this text, because, as previously discussed, a constructed standard gender necessitates a constructed standard sexuality. However, the scope of my project limits the extent to which I can examine sexuality specifically. While my main interest lies in how sexuality informs normative gender, future research regarding *The Price of Salt* would benefit from a thorough examination of sexuality as the primary focus. With this in mind, Carol—and her homoromantic relationship with Therese—threatens the myth of heteronormative stability within the American suburbs. This is further suggested through Carol's introduction of queer partners into this space. As Carol and Therese travel together from the urban center in which they meet into Carol's residential neighborhood, the two women are crossing a symbolic cultural border into an environment in which their existence as queer women becomes incompatible. The

crossing of such a border becomes literalized within the text, as Carol and Therese pass through the Lincoln Tunnel that connects midtown Manhattan to Weehawken, New Jersey. While Weehawken itself is not a suburb, it is a significantly less populated and urban space than Manhattan and works as a point of decentralization as the two women travel to the suburbs. Thus, the Lincoln Tunnel operates as a liminal space between the urban and the suburban—a space in which othered reality can penetrate the impossibly constructed norm. As they pass through, a, “wild, inexplicable excitement mounted in Therese as she stared through the windshield. She wished the tunnel might cave in and kill them both, that their bodies might be dragged out together,” (Highsmith 47). Therese wishes to remain in this in-between space. Thus, the liminal holds a different role in Highsmith’s scene than it did in McCullers’ text.

While the liminal in *Member of the Wedding* was largely concerned with the unidentified and unstable space between the masculine and the feminine and is something to be avoided, the in-between as represented by the Lincoln Tunnel seems to instead suggest a sense of freedom for Therese. She feels “wild, inexplicable” as she speeds through the tunnel with Carol, states of being that are removed from logic or intellectual reason. The idea of being inexplicable is interesting as it suggests that Therese is impossible to succinctly define or understand. This is particularly significant when one considers Therese’s—and, of course, Carol’s—position as queer. Indeed, both women are impossible figures through the eyes of the general culture. While they might fulfil certain requirements of the normative woman—Therese, too, is white and described as traditionally attractive—their queer desire bars them from being fully understood through a heteronormative framework. In this space between urban and

suburban expectations, Therese and Carol can experience their comparative strangeness without question. They are able to experience their queerness without the cultural anxieties concerned with how this attraction might impact their perceived gender expression. However, this ability to exist away from cultural expectations is limited, ending as soon as they exit the Lincoln Tunnel into an increasingly more suburban environment. Therese's desire to die in that tunnel with Carol further suggests the extent to which freedom from these cultural boundaries is ultimately limited. The liminal—reified by the tunnel, and later by the act of travel—allows the women to briefly escape the influence of societal expectations in their experience of womanhood. However, the entering of a tunnel necessitates an accompanying exit, unless one is willing to die in the in-between.

Thus, Carol and Therese attempt to remedy this formality by fleeing entirely from the suburban center in which they initially spent most of their time together. The textual inclusion of flight is a common theme in both McCullers' and Highsmith's novels. Frankie attempts to join Janice and Jarvis on their honeymoon, and when that is impossible she unsuccessfully attempts to run away from home. In *The Price of Salt*, the women leave for a road trip together, traveling west as far as Utah. Gleeson-White suggests that flight lines—or, the paths in which an individual attempts to travel away from or outside of a stable space—are a common trope of female freedom. Working from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of *ligne de fuite*, this idea is textually represented through acts of travel, fleeing, eluding, flowing, and disappearing. Further, this idea is particularly concerned with the transference between paradigms. When one pairs this theoretical framework with Ahmed's understanding of sexuality through a

phenomenological lens, we can read flight in Highsmith's text as an extended moment of queer disorientation and an attempt to exist outside of the heteronormative and culturally enforced path. Indeed, the two women are traveling away from the suburban space—Carol's idealized home—and into the liminal and disoriented space offered in fleeing. However, recall again how Gleeson-White argues that moments of disorientation must always become reoriented within the heteronormative framework. This is textually demonstrated through both Carol's and Therese's inevitable return home as well as through their inability to exist fully outside of cultural pressures even as they are in the act of fleeing.

Although Carol and Therese are under the impression that their road trip offers them a certain amount of freedom from cultural pressures, it is soon revealed that Carol's Husband has been monitoring their movement through the help of a hired detective. In one of their hotel rooms, Carol finds a "little instrument fastened up in a corner under the bed table" (Highsmith 188). This instrument, a Dictaphone, was being used to monitor their conversations and actions for homosexual actions, recalling of course the actions of the American people in response to the Lavender Scare. When the women are finally able to confront the detective who is following them, he tells them that he has "orders to follow [them] on this trip. But if [Carol and Therese go] back to New York, [he] won't have to any more," (Highsmith 193). While there is a literal truth to this statement—if the women end their trip, there is no need to follow them any longer—it is also important to consider the impact this passage has when understood once again through the idea of flight lines and disorientation. As the women move west and continue their queer relationship, they are disorienting their normative role.

Specifically, Carol disorients her position as the Wife and the Mother in her family structure. If they were to return east, she would begin the process of reorientation, repositioning herself within the heteronormative framework indicated by the domestic space in which she normally resides. However, the evidence of her queer disorientation has already been collected by the detective and sent to her Husband Harge, who intends to use it against her in their upcoming custody battle. Thus, even reorientation—which Carol attempts to accomplish through separating with Therese toward the end of the novel—proves futile^{xix}.

Ultimately, Carol's inability to occupy the space of the normative woman threatens her role as a Wife and a Mother. Indeed, the performative nature of the Wife and Mother in this period demands the fulfilment of a heterosexual role, which Carol's queerness restricts her from accomplishing. In a letter written to Therese, Carol writes that there is no use in going to court over the custody of her Daughter as the evidence Harge has collected regarding her queerness is overwhelming. She confides in Therese that she "should be ashamed, not of [herself] oddly enough, but for [her] own child" (McCullers 219). In this, Carol is describing a sense of shame she would feel to publicly air her queerness. It is significant that she is not embarrassed for herself as this suggests a sense of personal acceptance paired with the reluctance to place the cultural impact of queerness on her Daughter. In this, Carol is revealing the way in which she has internalized cultural rhetoric surrounding the construction of the normative mother. This is, of course, untrue and based simply in these predetermined stereotypes. Regardless, she feels as if motherhood has truly become—or has always been— incompatible with her gender nonconformity informed through her same-sex attraction.

However, it is significant that Highsmith is not critiquing or condemning either woman's queerness. While Carol's right to motherhood is largely diminished, Highsmith is critiquing the society that views Carol as strange and limits her cultural ability to act as a mother^{xx}. The text subverts expectations of queer women as deviant by allowing Carol and Therese a happy ending, the first American novel to do so. Instead of punishing them for their relationship, Highsmith allows them hope. The novel closes as they meet again after a period of romantic separation. As they see each other, Therese watches a "small smile growing [on Carol's face], before her arm lifted suddenly, her hand waved a quick, eager greeting that Therese had never seen before. Therese walked toward her" (Highsmith 249). These final two lines of the novel suggest a sense of excitement as they move into the future. Carol is eager, suggesting a willingness and readiness to attempt a queer relationship with Therese. Perhaps most significant is the closing line, in which "Therese walked toward her" (Highsmith 249). In this, Therese and Carol orient themselves towards one another. Of course, there is always the fear of Ahmed's reorientation to the heteronormative, yet the pressures of wifedom and normative motherhood have been to varying extents removed. Highsmith closes the novel with a distinctly subversive sense of hope.

Clearly, queerness is a subversive element within Highsmith's text. Just as Frankie's position within the liminal space of a constructed gender binary limits her ability to perform idealized femininity, so too does queerness. Lines of flight operate at varying levels of success in the act of maintaining freedom from heteronormative boundaries. While Carol's same-sex desire limits her ability to operate within the domestic sphere as both a Wife and, more tragically, a Mother, she is allowed space

within the text to explore and embrace this othered aspect of herself. This is significant in the era during which Highsmith was writing and works to directly counteract the idealized image of the Wife and Mother that this paper has worked to detail.

Part V: Conclusion

I began work on this thesis with a simple goal—examine how marriage and the associated figures of the Wife and the Mother are textually depicted in the work of American women’s fiction in the immediate post-WWII period. I was curious to see evidence of gender subversion within an extremely strict cultural framework that reinforced a very specific structure of the idealized woman. As discussed, the image of a normative and idealized family structure was significant in this period, as it was associated with Cold War propaganda and the creation of a sense of certainty in an otherwise turbulent global climate. Through the research performed for this project, it became clear that textual resistance to cultural norms was an important aspect of certain works from the contemporary period. This was demonstrated in each of the novels used as a case study—Carson McCullers’ *The Member of the Wedding* and Patricia Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt*.

While these texts present very different narratives, they each portray women who are unable to successfully perform the normative role of the woman as defined through societal expectations. While Frankie is not authentically engaged in the performative act of marriage, she attempts to co-opt its structure as a means of reorienting herself within a normative framework of femininity. Carol—and Therese, although for the purpose of this research I focused much less on her textual presence—similarly fails to occupy this same normative space. While Carol does operate within the position of both Wife and Mother, she is ultimately incompatible with its structure due to her queer orientation. It is also significant to note that both Frankie and Carol fail to reorient themselves within the constructed image of the ideal woman.

Although they both attempt to refigure their form to fulfil necessary requirements, they remain unsuccessful. I argue that this is because the normative image of the woman, the Wife, and the Mother is simply that—an image. While certain individuals might perform the roles better than others, idealized femininity is ultimately impossible to completely occupy authentically. Performance, as Butler reminds us, is the result of constant work to refigure oneself. Orientation towards a heteronormative position, as Ahmed reminds us, is the result of constant decisions to arrange oneself towards a normative object or position. These performances are ultimately unsustainable as any interruption destabilizes the very framework on which the actions are executed. However, it is important to note that neither McCullers or Highsmith punish or critique their characters for giving an unstable performance of femininity. Instead, they create empathetic portraits of complex womanhood, wifedom, and motherhood. Indeed, it is the suffocating cultural framework that is positioned as perverse. The strange women presented in these texts simply challenge and subvert the framework that attempts to reject them.

Of course, there were limitations to this project. As discussed, the voices of women of color were largely omitted from my thesis. The experiences of women who are not seen as white are multifaceted and can often distinctly diverge from the experiences of white women who indeed benefit from their whiteness. Further, the scope of this paper did not allow for an examination of trans experience in the navigation of normative femininity. While I focused primarily on the experiences of cisgender white women failing to occupy the space reserved for ideal femininity, future

research demands a cohesive and thorough examination of the experiences of these different communities.

With this in mind, it is still significant to examine how the normative woman is constructed in the post-WWII period and to understand how white women, despite their privilege, fail to occupy this role as well. Failure, however, is a subversive act in both Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding* and Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*. The constructed norm detailed in this research and the subsequent literary diversion by woman authors is worth researching because it reflects larger themes, both in the contemporary and modern sense. The post-WWII period to 1955 is significant as it presents a unique period of American history between two relatively progressive eras within the realm of gender relations. However, perhaps more important is the way in which this era impacts our cultural structure and conversation to this day.

The reinforcement of the nuclear family as the normative societal structure is still a significant element of the American cultural fabric. The construction of gender within an oppositional binary and the relationship within that structure, while shifting closer and closer to equality, still echo the model seen in the post-WWII period. Progress has of course been made, but ghosts of the period still haunt us. Thus, it is important to look back at the construction of such stereotypes as well as acts of subversion against them. Further, looking at imaginative literature specifically is important. The construction of a normative woman as white, wealthy, beautiful, and subservient reflects modes of cultural power that work to oppress communities that are already at risk. Acts of literary subversion undermine these power structures through a medium that forces a reader to identify—and thus emphasize—with a figure that might

not directly reflect their own lived experiences. Thus, the inclusion of subversive female figures in literature can be understood as an act of socio-political resistance.

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ⁱ "Wife" and "Mother" will be capitalized throughout this paper to remind the reader that these are formal roles in which a woman is attempting to occupy. These terms will be capitalized to remind us that these are constructed titles for performative cultural positions.

ⁱⁱ Sarah Ahmed looks closer at the dining room table as a marker of heteronormative performativity in her essay "Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others".

ⁱⁱⁱ As this paper will examine, only certain demographics were able to attempt to occupy this fictional narrative. White, wealthier, heterosexual individuals were given much more space to perform this role than people of color, people from lower classes, people with nonnormative sexual identities, or any intersection of these possible identities.

^{iv} Of course, agrarian work was still important. This shift speaks to larger trends in U.S. economic history.

^v The beginning of the civil rights movement is marked as 1954. The beginning of the Gay Liberation movement is often attributed to the Stonewall Riot which occurred in 1969. Further information regarding the timeframe of these movements can be found in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing* edited by Doug McAdam et al.

^{vi} This report was performed through the examination of WWII air raids on the European people.

^{vii} However, it is important to note that some academics have argued that these shows do indeed demonstrate subversive elements.

^{viii} This is to say that the performative nature of the idealized heterosexual couple—which I will discuss at greater length later in the paper—allows room for subversion because the couple is by definition unstable.

^{ix} It is also interesting to note that women as well as men were proponents of a normative stereotype.

^x This essay will focus in part on the way that these fictional depictions trouble the internalized performance of the feminine.

^{xi} While Wilson was born in New Hampshire as a free person of color, her status as an orphan resulted in her work as an indentured servant.

^{xii} As this text was written in the 1940s, there are examples of offensive and outdated language. The phenomenon of The Freak Show has historically made a spectacle of people of color and individuals with disabilities and this is unacceptable. Once again, McCullers' *Member of the Wedding* is a problematic text. This must be continuously recognized even as we analyze the way in which gender is being constructed.

^{xiii} The figure of the Half-Woman Half-Man is intrinsically problematic. As gender exists on a spectrum, the idea of an individual showcased to demonstrate their inability to fit on an oppositional binary is old fashioned and offensive. Once again, the language utilized in this text is indicative of the era in which it was written and I do not support the dehumanization of individuals such as these.

^{xiv} While my main focus here is on Frankie's gender positioning, her positioning herself within this couple suggests something about her sexual orientation that is worth exploring in further research. It is also interesting to note that the inclusion of herself within a marriage—and indeed, a honeymoon—denotes sex and the accompanying sexuality. Further, Frankie's position within a liminal position also speaks to sexuality in that a nonnormative gender might denote a nonnormative sexual identity, although one must also remember that Frankie's textual understanding of sexual desire is understandably limited. Regardless, my research is looking primarily at the construction of gender.

^{xv} It is significant to note that McCullers does suggest a certain shift in the character of Frankie as she becomes less interested in the Freak Pavilion. While some may argue that this works as evidence for Frankie's shift away from the strange or othered, I would argue that there is not enough evidence to prove this. Although Frankie certainly undergoes changes by the end of the novel, the language in the final pages suggests her continued placement in a liminal space. The final paragraph describes the sky as Frankie looks at it in the space between day and night (McCullers 153). Indeed, she gazes upon the sky as it exists within the space between—the liminal.

^{xvi} Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer. This term, too, is limiting as the nonnormative identities that are encapsulated through a plus sign deserve space to be defined individually rather than being lumped together. Sometimes you will see this acronym with additional letters, written instead as LGBTQIA³ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Question, Intersex, Asexual, Agender, Aromantic),

^{xvii} This is not without pushback, of course. Some members of the LGBTQ+ community reject this term due largely to its historical use as an oppressive slur.

^{xviii} While Kameny lost this case, his bravery and persistence is admirable.

^{xix} It is also interesting to note the role of technology and surveillance as a deterrent to flight lines.

^{xx} I would like to note here that queerness does not limit an individual's ability to be a mother or to act in the capacity as an effective maternal figure. Instead, I am suggesting that the culturally enforced framework of motherhood is based on a heteronormative model. In this, queerness is incompatible with the idealized understanding of what a mother is *supposed* to be. ‘