

Crossing Cultural Hierarchies and Audience Appeal in Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*

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Patricia Highsmith's the *Price of Salt* (1952) has gone from hardcover to pulp to the big screen, each version of the text being characterized by what it privileges. In each case, it is evident that the creators of the that particular version shaped their marketing strategies with a specific audience in mind. According to Dr. Liam Burke (2015), "fan discourses, and what Colin MacCabe calls 'the grammar of value' (p. 9), can be a vibrant part of the many relations that shape an adaptation" (Burke 130). In the case of the hardcover, pulp, and film versions of *The Price of Salt*, audience is everything. By analyzing the cover art for each version, it is evident that the hardcover and film versions of *The Price of Salt* privilege a high-brow audience, whereas the pulp edition privileges a low-/middle-brow audience. As for content, everyone from low- to high-brow audiences can comprehend and enjoy the narrative, although there are some hidden gems that are just for high-brow sensibilities. Therefore, *The Price of Salt* is a text that travels across cultural hierarchies; that is, it can be packaged for and appeal to individuals with low-, middle-, and high-brow artistic tastes.¹

¹ For the purposes of the present investigation, the above-mentioned audience characterizations should be understood as follows: high-brow, having or believing oneself to have an elevated degree of cultural taste and knowledge; middle-brow, having a moderate degree of knowledge and culture that allows for some intellectual application; low-brow, having little to no cultural taste, knowledge, or, as a result, intellectual inclinations. As will be shown, these descriptions correspond loosely to Pierre Bourdieu's characterizations of legitimate taste, middle-brow taste, and popular taste, respectively. Although these terms can be viewed as conveying value judgment, they are not meant as such; for the purposes of the present investigation, these terms will function only as descriptors.

But how is it that a single text can be successfully crafted, packaged, and repackaged for such a wide-ranging audience? The key here is not the text itself, but the author. Before Highsmith was an acclaimed novelist, she was a comic book writer for Standard Comics, For Real Fact, Real Heroes, True Comics, Fawcett Publications, and Western Comics. Comic books, especially at the time Highsmith was writing them (1942–1948), have always been considered low-brow texts with their simplistic writing and trademark drawing style. Thus, having worked on short stories, comics, and novels alike, Highsmith knew how to write for different audiences, and *The Price of Salt* thematizes and theorizes this.

As stated in the Introduction, unlike the hardcover and cinematic versions of *The Price of Salt*, its pulp edition (1953) was targeted at a more low-brow audience known for fetishizing lesbian relationships. This intention is evident in the design of the cover, featuring two women in suggestive poses and a threatening male figure looming in the background. According to Yvonne Keller, “Covers of typical 1950s’ paperbacks...show two white women, one blond and one dark haired, in various stages of undress, touching each other,” and the more sexually explicit the cover, the more oriented toward men, and thus rather sensationalist and homophobic, the story would be (Keller 397–398); these are what Keller calls “virile adventure” lesbian pulps. Because the “virile adventure” pulps were so popular, and because paperbacks were cheap and incredibly accessible, it is safe to assume that the publishers of the pulp edition of *The Price of Salt* had a low-brow audience and monetary gain, not literary prestige, in mind.

Though *The Price of Salt* is not a “virile adventure,” the cover was purposefully made to give it the appearance of one. According to Keller, “often as crucial as the image in telegraphing a lesbian-specific message, the cover’s title or text was sometimes quite overt,” and the text on the cover of *The Price of Salt*’s pulp edition is no different (Keller 398). Interestingly, the pulp edition has a similar tagline to that of the hardcover, “A modern novel of two women,” advertising the work as “The novel of a love society forbids.” The difference in diction, however, suggests that the paperback was targeted at a middle- to low-brow audience, as its tagline does less to euphemize the story blatantly signaling the lesbian love. The *New York Times* blurb at the bottom of the paperback works in a similar way by referencing the theme as

“explosive material,” clearly privileging the novel’s saucy lesbian relationship.

The hardcover and also first edition of *The Price of Salt* (1952) was published by Coward-McCann under the pseudonym Claire Morgan, a move made by the publishers to keep the controversial subject matter from tarnishing the budding novelist’s reputation. It was not until 1990, when the novel was republished as *Carol*, that it carried Highsmith’s name. The tagline of the hardcover, “A modern novel of two women,” discretely plays on not only the innovative theme and ending, but also the unique way in which Highsmith implements a Bourdieu-ian gaze and aesthetic to make the reading experience an artistic one. The hardcover version of *The Price of Salt* bears no indication of the lesbian action within; the title, a handful of salt, the pseudonym, and the tagline are its only visual elements. Keller states that “The books with the most innocuous, least sexualized covers in both image and text...are most likely to be pro-lesbian pulps; their lesbian theme may be inferred more subtly” (Keller 398); additionally, pro-lesbian pulps are generally of a better literary quality than “virile adventure” pulps (Keller 398). Because *The Price of Salt* was first published in hardcover with minimalist and subtle visual elements, it may be assumed that the publishers were trying to designate a higher-quality literary product targeted at a high-brow audience interested in more than just saucy lesbian sex scenes. The fact that the “hardcover books averaged \$1.95, [and] Pocket Books and its competitors sold their paperbacks for twenty-five cents,” only reiterates this point (Keller 397–403), for high-brow audiences were the ones willing and able to spend the money for a hardcover.

The subtlety of the hardcover calls to mind Nick Prior’s discussion of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s “Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception.” However, before discussing Prior’s analysis of Bourdieu, it is important to briefly outline a few pertinent concepts from Bourdieu’s “The Aristocracy of Culture.” Bourdieu claims that there are “three zones of taste” which reflect an individual’s social class and level of education: legitimate taste, middle-brow taste, and popular taste (Bourdieu 228–229). Legitimate taste grows with an individual’s level of education and is thus held by those who can afford more extensive educations (Bourdieu 229). Middle-brow taste “brings together the minor works of the major arts” and is found in the lower-middle classes with moderate education (Bourdieu 229). Lastly, popular taste favors art and cultural texts that have been “devalued by

popularization” and have easily accessible meanings; it is thus characteristic of the working classes with the least amount of education (Bourdieu 229). Individuals with legitimate taste also boast what Bourdieu calls a “pure gaze,” which allows them to understand high-brow art and, consequently, separates them from the less-educated masses. This “pure gaze” “implies a break with the ordinary attitudes toward the world” (Bourdieu 236); that is, those with a “pure gaze” reject easily accessible interpretations of art and cultural texts. Taking this into account, Prior explains contends:

Because artworks are coded, meaning is dependent on socially-acquired mechanisms of comprehension possessed by perceivers at varying levels. Successful reception only occurs if there is a fit between the work’s codes and those possessed by the beholder . . . This is why, for Bourdieu, those with adequate levels of education ‘feel at home’ with high culture, while subordinate groups are bound to be disoriented. (Prior 126)

A similar phenomenon is at work with the hardcover edition of *The Price of Salt*. Its discreteness reveals the subject matter of the novel to the appropriate audience, for only the appropriate audience could decipher what its subtle visual elements imply. Prior continues:

Holders of high volumes of cultural capital are, in fact, the equivalent of an aristocracy, for Bourdieu, a ‘cultural nobility’ whose social being is defined by an essence: not of kin, blood, estate or tradition, but of aesthetic competences seen as ‘gifts of nature’ (Bourdieu 1984: 29). These are manifested in the self-assured detachment of the aesthete, the aptitude to appreciate a work ‘independently of its content’ with an air of ease or ‘cultivated naturalness.’ (Prior 128)

The publishers of hardcover version of *The Price of Salt* assumed that the high-brow audience they were targeting had these “gifts of nature” and thus constructed a cover that plays to “their culture [which is] shrouded by ideologies of the natural gift” (Prior 128).

The target audience of the hardcover edition is also reflected in the novel’s content through Carol, who demonstrates the “gifts

of nature” possessed by the aesthete. Carol is part of the aristocracy or “cultural nobility” described by Prior, who have what Bourdieu calls a pure aesthetic disposition. Bourdieu further defines the aesthetic disposition as

A generalized capacity to neutralize ordinary urgencies and to bracket off practical ends, a durable inclination and aptitude for practice without a practical function, can only be constituted within an experience of the world freed from urgency and through the practice of activities which are an end in themselves, such as scholastic exercises or the contemplation of works of art. (Bourdieu 251)

Carol has this “generalized capacity,” her aesthetic disposition reflecting itself in the disconnectedness that she exhibits from her life which allows her to observe that life in a rather unbiased and, consequently, unemotional way. This disconnectedness is evident in the way that Carol handles her messy divorce and custody suit as well as her relationship with Therese, who often fears that Carol’s distanciation is indicative of fading interest. For example, when Carol explains to Therese that Harge has sent a detective after them to gather incriminating evidence, Carol calmly lets her cigarette burn her lip and unflinchingly says, “He may be in Salt Lake City now. Checking on all the hotels. It’s a very dirty business, darling” (Highsmith 177). Not only is Carol dismissive and numb, but also her use of “darling” borders on condescension; Therese is constantly jarred by Carol’s seeming stoicism.

Carol’s aesthetic disposition arises from her great store of cultural capital, which she possesses because of her privileged origins (monetary capital) and education (educational capital), both of which result in a high-brow upbringing and the development of an aesthetic disposition. Therese recognizes Carol’s pure aesthetic disposition: “She felt the woman’s eyes could not look at anything without understanding completely” (Highsmith 36), though she does not necessarily understand it. What Therese does know is that she does not have Carol’s *je ne sais quoi* and is thus intimidated and intrigued by it: “Therese took some more of her drink, liking it, though it was like the woman to swallow, she thought, terrifying, and strong” (Highsmith 36).

Carol’s husband and home are also evidence of her privilege. The “white two-story house . . . [has] projecting side wings like the

paws of a resting lion” and a “driveway that . . . [makes] a great semicircular curve,” and her husband, Harge, is a man of money (Highsmith 47); because high-brow individuals of means tend to run in the same circles, one can assume that both Carol and Harge are wealthy. This is apparent in the way that Carol carries herself. When she and Therese first lay eyes on each other, Carol is described as follows as “tall and fair, her long figure graceful in the loose fur coat that she held open with a hand on her waist” (Highsmith 27). The “graceful” stance and subtle action of holding the coat open in just the right way suggest an upper-class sensibility. The way that Carol takes charge of situations is also demonstrative of her privileged upbringing: “They sat down in a large wooden booth, and the woman ordered an old-fashioned without sugar, and invited Therese to have one, or a sherry, and when Therese hesitated, sent the waiter away with the order” (Highsmith 35). The confidence that Carol possesses and the authority that she commands is surely in part a result of having unlimited monetary capital and thus social power.

Therese does not boast the same amount of cultural capital as Carol; she is afforded some cultural capital through her education and artistic abilities, but is clearly not presented as having Carol’s aesthetic disposition. In the novel, Therese is a set designer and, because the theater has always carried with it a great sense of legitimacy, both in the 1950s when Highsmith published *The Price of Salt* and in the 1980s when Bourdieu published “The Aristocracy of Culture,” it is evident that the choice of set-designer was meant to give Therese’s otherwise low-brow character a bit of an edge that would land her in the middle-brow category. This facilitates the interactions between Therese and Carol, as accessing the high-brow is more easily accomplished from the middle.

Therese’s access to both the low- and high-brow is a reflection of Highsmith’s ability to travel across cultural hierarchies. According to Joan Schenkar in her article for the *Los Angeles Times*, the novel was inspired by an actual encounter Highsmith had while working at a department store; thus, Therese can be considered a semi-autobiographical character. Regardless, Therese is still void of the pure aesthetic disposition that enables Carol to contemplate their relationship from an objective distance. This is one of the reasons why Therese fixates on Carol: “Carol seemed oblivious of her for several minutes, walking about slowly, planting her moccasined feet firmly . . . It was bitterly cold without a coat, but because Carol seemed oblivious of that, too, Therese tried to

imitate her” (Highsmith 49). Clearly, Therese acknowledges the cool disconnectedness as something she does not have, something to be desired. As a result, Therese often admires Carol from afar: “Therese watched her through half-closed lids, worried by Carol’s restlessness, though she loved the cigarette, loved to see her smoke” (Highsmith p. 52). Carol is like a work of art Therese cannot help but admire and long to obtain.

The filmmakers of *Carol* (2015), the cinematic version of *The Price of Salt*, evidently also had a high-brow audience in mind judging by the successful marketing strategies, screenwriting, and cinematography that landed the film six Oscar and five Golden Globe nominations, a cumulative worldwide gross of \$40,272,135, and a battery of positive critical reviews, like A. O. Scott’s *New York Times* review. *Carol* first opened to the general public in limited release on November 20, 2015, before advancing to wide release on January 15, 2016, which indicates that it showed in select theaters (specialty theaters like the Angelika Film Center) in major metropolitan areas across the country. This suggests that *Carol* was made in the style of an independent film which caters to more high-brow, niche sensibilities characteristic of individuals who have what Bourdieu calls “legitimate taste”; it is audiences comprising these kinds of individuals that are most likely to go to specialty theaters and watch independent films precisely because of their educational background and monetary capital.

The official U.S. trailer for *Carol* also seems to have been directed toward a high-brow target audience. First, there is visual mention of the prestige the film accrued at the Cannes Film Festival, where Rooney Mara won Best Actress for her performance as Therese and director Todd Hayes was nominated for the Palm d’Or. Second, the trailer references the author not by name but through the mention of one of her massively successful novels, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, also turned film. This is like stating the film’s credentials, a list of reasons why this entertainment product is not just a movie, but a *film*; a high-brow work of art that can be appreciated outside of its mere entertainment value. Because novel-to-film adaptations still receive the most scholarly attention, detailing the film’s success and alluding to the author in the trailer helped increase the film’s cultural capital which, according to Tony Bennett is “the ability of privileged groups to define their culture as superior to that of lower classes” (Bennett 9). It is these privileged groups who have the

aesthetic disposition necessary to pick up on the film's artistic nuances, such as its impressive cinematography and music.

Carol cinematographer Ed Lachman was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Achievement in Cinematography, and his work stands out for its use of the outdated 16mm film. According to Paula Bernstein, Lachman and Hayes made this film choice "to achieve the look of 1952." Furthermore, "the actual physical grain of [the] film adds another expressive layer . . . It has to do with how film captures movement and exposure in the frame . . . that gives a certain emotionality to the image that feels more human" (Lachman, as cited in Bernstein).

A perfect example of this can be found around four and half minutes into the film. The sequence follows Therese riding in a taxicab with Richard and his friends. The camera alternates from focusing on Therese's face to taking her point of view through the rain-spattered window of the cab. Whether the camera is looking into or out of the cab, the view is always rather unfocused, distorted by the droplets on the window and passing street lights. Therese longingly gazes out at everything she cannot have because of her same-sex attraction, such as the freedom of the children playing and the bliss of the heterosexual couple on a night out. The sequence then shifts to Therese's memory of when she and Carol first met; this too is shown as hazily as the cab ride, effectively blurring the lines between past/present and reality/memory. This sequence alone contains the essence of the entire story; it communicates the quiet desperation, claustrophobia, longing, and undercover existence of homosexuals in the 1950s. All of this is accomplished in just a minute and a half thanks to the aforementioned camera work, the muffled surrounding dialogue, the ambient sound, and the Academy Award-nominated original score.

The score was written by legendary composer Carter Burwell, who has also worked with the Coen brothers and Spike Jonze. Burwell mainly used woodwind and string instruments because they "felt like the look of the film" (Burwell, as cited in Rosen). According to Christopher Rosen, "for Burwell, *Carol* provided a 'fantastic canvas' on which to create because of its quiet nature." Burwell states: "There's not a great deal of dialogue . . . A lot of what the characters want to say to each other, they can't" (Rosen). Thus, the music expresses the words and emotions the characters cannot verbalize; it does the same work Therese's thoughts do in

the novel. The scene in which Therese and Carol are first intimate is a perfect example. In the novel, Highsmith writes,

I love you, Therese wanted to say again, and then the words were erased by the tingling and terrifying pleasure that spread in waves from Carol's lips over her neck, her shoulders, that rushed suddenly, the length of her body . . . And she did not have to ask if this were right, no one had to tell her, because this could not have been more right or perfect. (Highsmith 162–163)

None of this is said in the movie. Instead, the track “Lovers” from Burwell’s original score communicates every thought and emotion with a moving combination of piano, woodwind, and string instruments, the rises and falls of which match the emotional and visceral intensity of the scene.

Because the cinematography and music can be considered singular works of art independent from the film, *Carol* operates as metafiction, something characteristic of postmodern high-brow texts such as Don DeLillo’s *Mao II* (1991) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49* (1965); that is, *Carol* places art within a work of art, thus reproducing what it is. All of this is part of the “shrouded ideology,” as Prior would say, of the film, which, according to Bourdieu, can only be uncovered by those with “the aptitude to appreciate a work independently of its content with an air of ease or ‘cultivated naturalness’” (Prior 128). There are many instances of creation and artistic expression both in the film and novel. In the film, this is evident when Carol is shopping for a Christmas tree and Therese is photographing her from afar. The audience looks through the lens with Therese as she snaps pictures of Carol. Every time Therese snaps a shot, the camera frame freezes, approximating the look of a print photograph. A clear instance in the novel is when Carol asks Therese to play something on the piano and Therese complies by playing Scarlatti, the mention of Scarlatti being yet another subtle nod to high-brow readers. Another instance in the novel is when Therese has an epiphany observing the picture in the library in chapter twenty-one. In describing the painting, Therese realizes that it reminds her of Carol and has a sudden mental and emotional breakthrough. Exactly how she recognizes the painting and its significance is rather vague, but what is clear is that the painting communicates something emotionally clarifying and soothing to Therese, which

readers cannot exactly define, much like the novel communicated a unique sense of comfort and hope to its homosexual readers.

Outside of the influence of publishers and filmmakers, Highsmith had a homosexual audience in mind when writing the novel. According to Nathan Smith, upon its release, *The Price of Salt* saw droves of letters sent to Highsmith addressed, of course, to Claire Morgan. Smith states: "They arrived in the hundreds from male and female readers alike, thanking Highsmith for writing a book that finally showed a same-sex relationship that didn't end in tragedy." Although *The Price of Salt* was minimally autobiographical, Highsmith must have had in mind all those with same-sex attraction, as she was a lesbian and knew how painful and unacceptable being homosexual could be. According to Lillian Faderman in her book *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, the period after World War II ushered in what she calls "The Heyday of the Lesbian 'Sicko.'" As Faderman (2012) argues, this period was "the time that the lesbian 'sicko' became the dominant image of the woman who loved other women and curing lesbians on the couch became a big business in America" (Faderman 130). Thus, pro-lesbian pulps with non-tragic endings were one of the few sources lesbians and gays could access to read about, and identify with, the homosexual experience (Keller 401—402).

In the end, the variations of *The Price of Salt* managed to accrue a diverse audience of everything from low- to high-brow individuals. This is the result of publishers and filmmakers classifying their audience in Bourdieu-ian terms and accordingly targeting its different factions (low-, middle-, high-brow) with visual marketing. It is clear that the hardcover and cinematic versions of *The Price of Salt* privilege a high-brow audience, whereas the pulp edition privileges a low-brow audience. That is, the publishers and filmmakers packaged and marketed the entertainment product with the target audience in mind, their perception of these audiences falling heavily in line with Bourdieu's interpretation and classification of society and its power dynamics. However, publishers and filmmakers cannot take all the credit, for the only reason *The Price of Salt* was able to be successfully repackaged and marketed to different audiences is because Highsmith managed to write a novel that, like her, crosses cultural hierarchies; that is, Highsmith knew how to write for different audiences and thus created a text that reflects on the very thing its packaging theorizes. Considering that the low- and high-brow rarely come together effectively, *The Price of Salt* is undoubtedly not

only an innovative text in both its packaging and content, as both elements permit the novel to freely navigate low-, middle-, and high-brow audiences, but also a reflection and representation of that innovation.

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