

Same Women, Altered Autonomy

A Close Look at the Perception of Power in *Carol*

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ABSTRACT

This essay illuminates the delicate power dynamic that is present between Carol Aird (Cate Blanchett) and Therese Belevit (Rooney Mara) in the film, *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015), and argues that there is one integral repeated scene that represents a major shift in the characters' individual autonomies. The emblematic scene is deconstructed to illustrate that both the transformation of character and the viewers' perception of the characters' autonomies in the repeated scene are necessary antecedents to the outcome of the film. Close analysis of each iteration of the scene's *mise-en-scène* paves way for the distinct character shifts that ultimately lead to a dual metamorphosis between both protagonists in the midst of a complicated queer story.

Carol (Todd Haynes, 2015) is largely based on Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel, *The Price of Salt*, and it offers a glimpse into the complicated relationship of conflicted housewife, Carol Aird (Cate Blanchett), and twenty-something seasonal retail worker and aspiring photographer, Therese Belevit (Rooney Mara). In this article, I identify the power dynamic between Carol and Therese and illustrate the major character transformations that take place during the film. Both their metamorphoses can be identified through close *mise-en-scène* analysis, specifically in the film's two restaurant scenes. The first scene is from Therese's point of view, and the second from Carol's. Through slight alteration of camera angle and reframing, their alternate perspectives are offered. I suggest this scene was repeated because director Todd Haynes wanted to amplify the drastic shifts in the characters' individual autonomies to represent the duel awakening that occurred. In the second iteration of the scene, the viewer's perception of both Carol and Therese is drastically altered. The shots from the analyzed scenes occur inside a restaurant where Carol and Therese sit together at a table.

Before understanding how both Carol's and Therese's individual autonomies undergo substantial changes, the characters'



Fig. 1 | Carol's costume demonstrates her wealth and power, *Carol*, 00:20:43. The Weinstein Company, 2015.

initial characteristics must be examined. In the beginning of the film before the dual metamorphosis occurs, Haynes portrays Carol as wealthy, confident, charismatic, and dominant through her luxurious wardrobe and commanding red lip (Fig. 1). She is

sure of each decision she makes. Even her home symbolizes class and opulence (Fig. 2). On the other hand, Therese is the antithesis of Carol. Therese is younger, working class, underwhelmingly dressed, and indecisive, mimicking a leaf traveling in whichever direction the wind takes it. Haynes portrays these characteristics through her plain wardrobe and her dependency on Carol. She is indifferent in her relationship with her boyfriend, Richard (Jake Lacy), and cannot make a conclusive decision about anything in her life. She often needs guidance like a child would, and it is not until Therese's transformation that she sheds her child-like attributes.

At least in part, Carol's wealth makes her relationship with Therese maintainable. Carol and Therese travel cross-country in Carol's car, allowing their relationship to truly develop which would not have been possible if it were not for Carol's affluence. Ultimately, Carol's status contributes to her dominant persona and establishes her position atop a clear hierarchy.

Perhaps the most noticeable difference between the pair is their age (Fig. 3). Carol seems to be considerably older than Therese, especially in the way she is framed in scenes before her transformation. She often takes up more of the frame than Therese and appears to tower above her. Because of the way Carol is positioned in these scenes, she takes on the role of a more dominant or even motherly figure. Therese takes on a submissive role to Carol, almost filling the shoes of Carol's daughter, Rindy (Kennedy and Sadie Heim), who Carol had been barred from seeing during the custody battle. In *Lesbian Cinema After Queer Theory*, cinema theorist Clara Bradbury-Rance suggests it is impossible not to analyze *Carol* using "maternal metaphors." Bradbury-Rance identifies Therese's minimal backstory (her mother is never spoken about) and a series of scenes in which Carol takes on a distinct motherly role to Therese as contributing factors to the film's maternal metaphor. She also notes that actions like Carol teaching Therese to apply makeup and perfume or Carol watching Therese play the piano make Therese inherently doll-like (130).

Mandy Merck also draws attention to these mother-and-daughter beauty lessons in "Negative Oedipus: Carol as Lesbian Romance and Maternal Melodrama" (17). Merck looks at *Carol* as a maternal melodrama and her analysis supports the dramatic character transition that I assert takes place in several ways. She acknowledges the drastic makeover Therese endures, which I also perceive as an integral part of the transaction of power that is exchanged in the film between Carol and Therese (18). Additionally, she points out that in the couple's lovemaking scene, Carol says to Therese, "I never looked like that" (01:16:12) and subsequently argues that the film's "shift to Carol's perspective opens it to the dilemma of the maternal melodrama, whose heroines are typically torn between romantic and parental love" (20). During this scene, the shift in power from Carol to Therese begins to take shape. Carol begins to see Therese as an adult, and it is at this point in the film when their relationship advances (Fig. 4).



Fig. 2 | Carol's home and possessions symbolize her status, 00:16:02. The Weinstein Company, 2015.



Fig. 3 | Carol tenderly watches over Therese as she plays the piano, 00:36:27. The Weinstein Company, 2015.



Fig. 4 | Carol intently observes Therese as she demonstrates how to apply perfume, 01:08:18. The Weinstein Company, 2015.

Their relationship is able to develop because of the shifts that occur in their individual autonomies, but these shifts are only possible because of the integral role each character takes on as protagonist. In David Bordwell's "Pick Your Protagonist(s)" he suggests the film necessarily consists of two protagonists, Carol and Therese, rather than one. The notion that Carol and Therese both carry equally important roles in the film makes their transformations even more monumental. Without both characters as protagonists, the dynamic of the characters' original states would be different. Naturally, with one protagonist, the focus would have been either on Carol, or on Therese, but not both. Both leads display drastic shifts to their characters' autonomies, as clearly conveyed in both iterations of the restaurant scene.



Fig. 5 | Table light illuminates Carol's face and shoulders, drawing direct attention to her, 00:03:20. The Weinstein Company, 2015.



Fig. 6 | Carol's dominant aura hypnotizes Therese when she is left alone at the table, 00:04:12. The Weinstein Company / Film 4 / Killer Films, 2015.



Fig. 7 | Jack, introduces himself to Carol, and traps Therese, 00:04:15. The Weinstein Company / Film 4 / Killer Films, 2015.



Fig. 8 | After Therese's transformation, she commands the conversation, 01:45:34. The Weinstein Company, 2015.

In the first iteration of the restaurant scene, Carol is the first character the viewer sees (Fig. 5). The camera is positioned to see Carol but not Therese, suggesting that Carol is the more dominant character in the frame and manages, in turn, to control the conversation.

We see Carol's hand on Therese's shoulder for about five seconds, forcing the eye to focus on Carol's hand (Fig. 6). The length of time her hand is captured sitting on Therese's shoulder signifies control, and lets the viewer know she is confidently touching Therese as though she possesses her.

During the first iteration of this scene, the audience is unaware that Jack (Trent Rowland) is a mutual friend of Richard's. Carol leaves on what seems to be her own terms shortly after his arrival, giving the impression she has controlled the meeting's purpose. In fact, it seems Carol's departure is because she is largely uninterested and preoccupied with something of a higher importance. The framing of the handshake traps Therese within a tightly confined area, giving the illusion she is a prisoner of the shot with nowhere to go, thereby creating a physical and metaphorical fence (Fig. 7). Therese looks like a timorous child sitting at the table as she looks away while an adult transaction takes place.

The second iteration of this scene is portrayed much differently and occurs after Therese and Carol undergo major character transformations. Haynes shoots the same scene through a dramatically different lens, again inviting the audience to observe through Carol's perspective.

In this iteration, instead of seeing Carol first, we see Therese, whose appearance verifies that she has undergone a physical transformation. She wears makeup she applied herself, her hair is different and no longer mirrors Rindy's, and her wardrobe matches her age, all symbolizing growth and maturity (Fig. 8). Therese had grieved the end of their relationship, but she eventually landed a full-time job at *The New York Times* and discovered herself. What we did not know in the first iteration of the scene was that this meeting is the first one between Therese and Carol in months because Carol distanced herself to regain visiting rights of Rindy. This scene represents a drastic change in Carol, too. She divorced Harge (Kyle Chandler), found her own place, and even showed determination to work. These details suggest she has realized that hiding her sexuality is not worth the pain she has endured. This change means Carol no longer needs to rely on Therese to fill the space Rindy once occupied but, rather, she longs for Therese solely in a new capacity: as an equal partner. This time, a more dominant Therese takes up more of the frame than Carol. The same table light more clearly illuminates her face and shoulders. Carol's face is completely absent from the scene, signaling a shift in control.

As Carol places her hand on Therese's shoulder, a much different story is told—it is now evident that both characters have undergone a major shift in their own autonomies. Therese has turned down Carol's offer to move in together, and Richard's friend Jack has just arrived. In this iteration, it is clear that Carol does not leave on her own terms and feels inferior to Therese

because she has been turned down. A shift in perspective allows the viewer to understand that it is actually Therese who influences Carol to leave the restaurant (Fig. 9). We see this transformation represented through the *mise-en-scène* when the scene is filmed through different camera angles (Fig. 10). In the second restaurant scene, Carol's hand rests on Therese's shoulder for a significantly shorter amount of time than in the first scene. This hesitancy to touch Therese indicates the gulf between them.

In the second iteration of the handshake scene, Therese no longer appears to be trapped behind Carol in the frame. This time, the gesture occurs behind Therese instead of in front of her, releasing her from the physical and metaphorical fence that once trapped her. The new camera angle puts her in front of the fence, freeing her old character. This liberation symbolizes the space she demanded from Carol throughout the second half of the film. Therese leaves on her own terms unlike before, where it appeared Carol left Therese.

Highsmith's groundbreaking conclusion to *The Price of Salt* was preserved in *Carol*, leaving Haynes with a powerful dynamic to translate on screen. These recurring scenes act as the ultimate viewer's guide in showcasing a monumental shift in power and drastic character transformations. Before a heart-broken Carol leaves the restaurant, she tells Therese if she were to change her mind, she can find her at the Oak Room where she will be dining with friends. It is through Therese's necessary transformation that she can realize what she wants, which is to unconditionally belong with Carol. Upon this realization, she rushes to the Oak Room. I suggest that Carol and Therese's relationship was only able to occur because of their autonomous transformations. It was not until Carol realized that Therese was not a stand-in for Rindy, and that she would be unhappy without Therese in her life, that Carol was able to take control and continue life on her own terms. For Therese,



Fig. 9 | Therese influences Carol to leave the restaurant, 01:48:32. The Weinstein Company, 2015.



Fig. 10 | Therese ignores Carol as she leaves the restaurant, 01:48:36. The Weinstein Company, 2015.

it was not until she was apart from Carol that she was afforded the room to grow and get to know herself, ultimately coming to understand that Carol's decision to distance herself was one of love and not selfishness. At this pivotal point shown to us through two different lenses, both characters could reflect on their growth and, in the end, reunite. ■

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