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**ANALYSIS OF QUEER THEMES IN TRUMAN CAPOTE'S *BREAKFAST*
*AT TIFFANY'S***
BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The thesis focuses on how the characters in Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* challenge heteronormative ideas about sexuality.

The thesis is divided into two main sections: literature review and the analysis. The first part discusses the previous work on Capote's writing style and the queer aspects of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and explains how queer people were treated in the 1950s United States. The second section is divided into three parts: direct and indirect references to queerness, and references to sports which is used to emphasize how Capote's characters do not conform to the societal expectations. Afterwards, the analysis is tied to Capote's writing style to explain how he depicts his queer characters.

The conclusion presents the major findings of the thesis.

Key words: Truman Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, queer, American literature

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INTRODUCTION

Breakfast at Tiffany's is a novella by Truman Capote, published in 1958. The story is set in the 1940s, in New York City and is told from the first-person perspective by an unnamed narrator. It is based on the narrator's memories of his former neighbor, Holly Golightly, who had left the country and moved to Africa. The narrator moved to New York City a couple of weeks before Holly to pursue his dreams of becoming a writer. He met her while she tried to escape from one of the male guests she entertained for money. As they learn more about each other, the narrator also meets some of her acquaintances, such as her neighbor Mag Wildwood, a millionaire, Rusty Trawler, Holly's Hollywood agent O.J. Berman, Holly's husband from Texas and the Brazilian diplomat José Ybarra-Jaegar whom she romantically pursues later in the story. Throughout the book, the narrator learns more about Holly's unstable life. She becomes depressed when she finds out that her brother, Fred, had died while he was in the army. In addition, she also gets in trouble with the police for being connected to Sally Tomato who is in jail for drug trafficking. Holly tries to move to Brazil with her diplomat friend but he leaves her to protect his own image. However, Holly still leaves for South America and eventually goes to Africa, finally leaving behind the narrator and her nameless cat.

The novella was supposed to be published in *Harper's Bazaar*, a fashion magazine of Hearst Corporation, but the publisher wanted Capote to change the book due to inappropriate themes, such as Holly Golightly entertaining men in exchange for money (Attie 2015: 102). Though Capote emphasized that Holly is not a sex worker, the publishers still objected (Clarke 2005: 308). Capote reluctantly agreed, but *Harper's Bazaar* still refused to publish the novella (Attie 2015: 102). Capote then sold the novella to the *Esquire* magazine. The process of writing was not easy, either, as Capote had difficulties with coming up with a good ending (Clarke 2005:

307). Capote's other three short stories, *A Diamond Guitar*, *House of Flowers*, and *A Christmas Memory*, were published by Random House alongside the novella in the same year.

The novella mostly received positive feedback from the critics on its initial publication. A year after the release of the book, Norman Mailer (1992: 465) claimed that *Breakfast at Tiffany's* will become a classic. Similarly, Paul Levine (1959: 350) stated in *The Georgia Review* that *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is a significant improvement compared to earlier works by Capote. He noted that Capote wanted to challenge himself with this book, as he wanted to be able to speak his mind more (Levine 1959: 350). Though Levine (1959: 350) was not sure whether Capote was specifically talking about *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, he nonetheless believed that the readers will notice Capote's growth as a writer. Thomas F. Curley (1960: 555) praised the novella as well for its mastery in writing. The style of the novella was overall praised, though it was also noted by some critics that Capote did not do anything unique with the style, but simply used it well to tell the story (Hassan 1960: 81–82). While *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was not set in the South, unlike Capote's earlier works, Helen S. Garson (1980: 79) compared Holly Golightly to other characters from Capote's fiction, for example, Joel in *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*, and Miss Bobbit in *Children on Their Birthdays*. Holly, similarly to Miss Bobbit, was able to capture everybody's attention with her unique personality, and, like Joel, she was a traveler (Garson 1980: 79).

The praise, however, was not unanimous. For instance, although William Peden (1959: 158) praises Capote's pacing and wit, he also considers Holly's behavior childish, dull and overbearing. Louis D. Rubin (1966: 317), who is overall critical of Capote's work, called the novella a "popular magazine froth", with a surface-level understanding of human motivation and experience (cf Waldmeir and Waldmeir 1999: 3).

Considering the overall homophobic social context, it is not surprising that sexuality was not extensively discussed when the novella was first published, despite the fact that the novella

makes many references to gays and lesbians. Since Capote was honest about his own homosexuality (Pugh 2014: 19), it is not surprising that he included queer themes in his works as well. In this thesis, the word ‘queer’ is used as an umbrella term covering sexualities and genders that are non-heteronormative, which includes lesbians and gays (Stevens 2011: 92–94). The term has also, in the 1990s, come to mean “resistance on the broad social terrain of the normal” (Warner 1991: 16). Thus, in this thesis the term describes not only the homosexual characters (the narrator and Joe Bell) but also queer characters whose precise sexual identities are not clear (Holly being a “dyke”) but who challenge normative ideas about sexuality and relationships.

This was not the first text in which Capote writes about non-heteronormative identities. For instance, the novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was criticized at the time of publication for including queer topics (Joel’s struggle to accept his homosexuality) but also for its grotesque handling of dark themes, for example, pedophilia (Garson 1980: 5). Similarly, John W. Aldridge (1958: 100) wrote that the homosexual characters of Capote but also other authors such as Gore Vidal lacked other qualities besides just being homosexual. However, despite the overall homophobia of the time, his sexuality did not ruin Capote’s literary career as it actually added to his notoriety (Christensen 1993: 56). Yet, although he mentions non-normative sexuality in his work, the references are indirect and thus deserve closer textual attention.

This thesis analyzes how Truman Capote challenges heteronormative ideas of sexuality through his depiction of queer characters. The thesis is divided into two parts. The first part is the literature review which discusses the previous work on Capote’s writing style and the queer aspects of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. The second part is the main analysis of the book which is divided into three parts: direct and indirect references as well as how sports is used to explain the sexualities of the characters.

1. SEXUALITY IN THE 1950s USA AND IN CAPOTE'S WRITING STYLE

Truman Capote is one of the best-known writers in the 20th century United States, famous for works such as *In Cold Blood* (1966), *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), and the main focus of the thesis, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958). What makes Capote's literary career interesting in the early 1950s is that he was celebrated despite his sexuality about which he was quite open (Pugh 2014: 19). Although at the time the queer community was heavily policed due to the enforcement of the laws against sodomy, he included queer topics in his novels, especially in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, even if only indirectly. Capote's writing uses subtle tools for letting the readers know that the characters in the novella are not necessarily straight. The literature review will focus on the overall treatment of queer people at the time of writing, previous studies on the queerness of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and on Capote's style of writing.

The first reason for subtlety was the policing of the gay world which censored representations of homosexuality in movies, forbade homosexuals to be employed or served at restaurants or clubs, and many men were arrested during that period (Chauncey 1994: 8). The term "gay world" refers to a large social network of places where queer people would often gather, for example, bars, restaurants, even streets, in a cultural context where queer people were often unsafe in public spaces (Chauncey 1994: 2). There were many regulations against the gay world. For instance, many anti-vice societies and groups were formed around the end of the 19th century, which focused on enforcing purity and morality, that is, they wanted to eliminate those who were deemed against the "ideal social order" (Chauncey 1994: 139). There were three notable societies: the 1872 The Society for the Suppression of Vice, founded by Anthony Comstock, the 1872 The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and 1905 The Committee of Fourteen, which

was the strongest group up until the start of the Great Depression (Chauncey 1994: 138). However, the societies often broadened the definitions of what was considered “indecent”. For example, The Suppression of Vice mainly focused on obscene, pornographic literature, but they also tried to prevent scientific research on homosexuality and artistic depictions of unconventional sexual themes in fiction (Chauncey 1994: 139). The Committee of Fourteen, which was founded to fight prostitution, targeted saloons and cabarets alongside brothels because of their broad definition of prostitution (Chauncey 1994: 139). The Prevention of Cruelty to Children fought against sodomy, although homosexuality was not necessarily their prime target, as they fought against men wanting to sexually assault children (Chauncey 1994: 141). Gay men ended up as targets of all of the groups, even if only indirectly.

However, after World War I, homosexuality became the main societal issue since the anti-vice societies feared that the war had ruined the moral order, and thus, made homosexuality more visible (Chauncey 1994: 141). Essentially, it was not illegal for gay men and lesbians to meet in public, but they were often charged with “disorderly conduct” (Chauncey 1994: 171). The “disorderly conduct” referred to loitering, gambling, acting dangerously in public, but in regards to homosexuality, it referred to gay men meeting other gay men in public (Chauncey 1994: 172). It was a criminal offense to be visibly homosexual but it was not illegal to be homosexual if one remained hidden from the public.

Though the regulations applied to both lesbians and gay men, lesbians were far more invisible in the gay world. It was male-dominated and mostly focused on gay men’s experiences. Chauncey (1994: 27) explains that, due to men having much higher wages than women, they had more opportunities for freedom and independence. In addition, many queer spaces were made for gay men. Moreover, it was easier for lesbians show intimacy to one another because of the society’s

expectations on how affectionate men and women can be with each other and it was possible for them to remain safe in public spaces as well (Chauncey 1994: 27).

The fear of homosexuals was still strong even a couple of decades later, during the Cold War Lavender Scare. In the 1950s, the fear got even worse with the release of several queer literary works, such as Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948) and James Barr's *Quatrefoil* (1950) since they seemed to confirm that the queer community was expanding and had a strong influence on American culture (Trask 2017: 159). As such, the writers had to work around the public fear and stigmatization.

One method was writing homosexual characters in an indirect way. Trask (2017: 159) explains that authors could create homosexual characters as long as they were not depicted positively. Positive representations of homosexual characters could bring accusations of perversion (Ricciardi 2021: 7). For instance, a common theme for homosexual characters was their constant struggle with their identity and their lack of personal happiness and fulfilment. The main character of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), David, for example, often treated his lover terribly because he could not accept his homosexuality (Ricciardi 2021: 7–8). Thus, authors could avoid criticism if they portrayed homosexuality as something horrible.

Capote's earlier work, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), similarly to the work of Tennessee Williams, contains some extreme depictions of their homosexual characters, e.g., feminine boys, masculine women, transgender persons (Summers 1990: 130). The two writers even shared similar themes in their books, for example, the need to be loved (Summers 1990: 130). However, Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* differs from Williams' and other contemporary writers in terms of the ending. The novel has a happy ending which was uncommon during that period. It is actually claimed to be the first mainstream gay novel to have a good ending (Bibler 2015: 130). However, although the main character, Joel Knox, accepts his sexuality, it still

somewhat adhered to the 1950s way of portraying homosexuality. As Summers (1990: 132) explains, Joel Knox sees his homosexuality as disturbing, as it does not comfort him or make him feel free.

However, when *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was released, the queer themes were much subtler than in Capote's earlier work. If the story of Joel Knox was about the direct struggle of self-acceptance of a person who the reader can easily identify as gay, then the sexualities of Holly and others is less overt.

The queer themes of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* have been discussed by several academics, for example Tison Pugh, Thomas Fahy or Michael P. Bibler. One of the main topics is Holly Golightly and her sexual liberation and liberal views about sex and love. She openly talks about her past sexual encounters which were controversial at the time of publication (Fahy 2014: 7). In addition, Holly's non-heteronormative depiction was also noted by Bibler (2007: 222) who explains that Holly opposes the social norms by making it harder to truly identify her sexuality and gender because she has both masculine and female features, as well as the features of hetero- and homosexuality. A similar point was made by Svedjan (2020: 80) who explains that Holly's sexuality is fluid and flexible. Thus, Holly's sexual fluidity and free-mindedness stands in contrast to the stifling of sexual freedom in the 1940s and 1950s United States.

In addition, Fahy (2014: 104) points out that Holly believes that everyone deserves love. Her belief about love also shows that she is against the discrimination against homosexuality in the period. Although Holly does not directly mention homosexuality in the book, she specifically mentions that she does not mind if the narrator marries a "Man O' War" (Capote 1968: 80). Pugh (2014: 94) states that ignoring the queerness of Holly leads to the misunderstanding of the important moments of the novella. For instance, the Holly kisses the narrator on the cheek after the narrator proclaimed his love for her (Capote 1968: 89). It can be mistaken as romantic confession,

but the subtle references to his homosexuality and Holly's queerness suggest that they share a platonic connection.

Although she explicitly talks about sleeping with men, her sexual fluidity is revealed to the audience as well. Holly's gender expression, for example, is not traditionally feminine, as she is described to have short hair similar to men and a young boy's voice (Bibler 2007: 222). As the previous studies have shown, Holly is part of the queer world that Capote created in the novella, surrounded by other queer characters, such as the unnamed narrator and Joe Bell. The book hints that both men are gay, most likely closeted.

Pugh (2014: 95) also notes that Holly has a way of understanding whether a man is gay or not, by analyzing their interests. Holly tells the narrator that a man is homosexual if he is not interested in horses and baseball (Capote 1968: 38). Thus, Pugh (2014: 95) points out that, earlier in the story, the narrator pretended to be interested in books about horses and baseball on Holly's bookshelf. The narrator typically avoids talking about his sexuality, unlike Holly. Fahy (2014: 106) also recognizes that the narrator is repressing his sexuality. However, he notes that the narrator has given a few hints, like his fascination with the Brazilian diplomat's body (Fahy 2014: 105). In addition, both Fahy (2014) and Pugh (2014) recognize that Holly knows about the narrator's homosexuality. Both authors note that Holly calls the narrator a "Maude", which is a slang for homosexual or a homosexual prostitute (Fahy 2014: 105; Pugh 2014: 95). She is not using the term to offend him, but rather, to show how comfortable she is with queerness as she already has expressed her own sexual fluidity.

Joe Bell, similarly to the narrator, is also hiding his homosexuality in the story. In fact, it is implied that he is working in a gay bar. Pugh (2002: 53) explains that his bar does not have any noticeable, flashy signs that could advertise itself to the public and it is not possible to look inside the windows to protect the identities of clients. As Chauncey (1994: 9) explains, many gay places,

such as bars, had to be discreet in order to avoid scrutiny. Since many queer people had to protect their identities in public, so did Joe Bell, which is why the description of his bar emphasizes its quietness and minimal aesthetics. Both Pugh (2002: 52) and Fahy (2014: 105) note that Joe Bell has what have traditionally been considered feminine interests, such as taking care of flowers in his bar and watching soap series. In addition, Fahy (2014: 105) emphasizes the repression of one's sexuality at the time, which is represented through Joe. Fahy (2014: 105) claims that Joe's fear of sexual desire is his way of repressing himself, which is why he is an interesting contrast to Holly who has no shame in explicitly talking about her sexuality.

Another contrast to Holly is her neighbor Mag Wildwood, the conservative and traditional opposite of Holly. Both are beautiful women from the South who are easily able to capture men's attention, but Mag is the representation of 1940–1950s repression of sexuality, condemned by Holly. For instance, Svedjan (2020: 78) says that Mag claims to have difficulties with remembering details about intimate encounters, claiming such memories to be abnormal. Holly immediately rejects this idea and states that she prefers to be natural, i.e., look at her partner during sex. Holly considers expressing her desires more natural than Mag's need to be conventional (Fahy 2014: 103). Mag is also very fearful of homosexuals. As Svedjan (2020: 80) explains, Mag would go as far as to sleep in a separate bed so that she would not sleep next to Holly, who lied to that she is a lesbian. They are parallel characters as they reject each other's ideals but are similar because of their Southern origins and ability to be center of men's attention connect them.

There have been some papers analyzing how Capote writes. For instance, Scott Bede (2011: 129) considers Capote's writing in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* 'light'. The lightness of the story comes from the fact that the book is written in a simple, readable way which leaves the impression that it does not have hidden or extra meanings (Bede 2011: 131). The lightness has created the accusation of superficiality since the book does not seem to focus on serious topics, but is only interested in

creating unrealistic characters and light-hearted humor (Bede 2011: 129). Bede argues that the lightness is the main point of the story. According to Bede (2011: 133), readers are able to pick up on more obvious themes. For example, the themes of individualism expressed through Holly and her cat are directly mentioned, as she refuses to name the cat because she believes it does not belong to her, they simply found one another.

When discussing Capote's style, Levine also states that style was more important to Capote than the content (Levine 1958: 601). Levine divides Capote's style of writing into two: 'daylight' and 'nocturnal' (Levine 1958: 601). According to Levine (1958: 602), the 'daylight' style is more superficial, i.e., focused on humor, not the deeper meaning or psychology of the characters. In contrast, the importance of character development, understanding their psychology and inner struggles is evident in the 'nocturnal' style (Levine 1958: 602). Holly's individualism, both in sexual and social freedom, could be analyzed through the 'daylight' style, but her more queer aspects, like the relationship with the narrator, Joe Bell, and others, fit into the 'nocturnal' category. The male characters can be analyzed with the nocturnal style too, since their references to homosexuality are much subtler than those about Holly's sexuality. While Bede (2011) focuses more on the superficial and lightness, Levine (1958) notices the indirect references as well.

In addition to Levine's two categories, Capote has been claimed to be a Southern Gothic writer since he was from Louisiana and used Gothic themes in his work. The Gothic style focuses on horror and grotesque, for example through controversial and unconventional themes, such as murder, incestuous relationships, and the supernatural (Mitchell-Peters 2000: 110). The Southern Gothic focuses on the same themes as well, but links them to the issues of the American South (Bjerre 2017: 2–3). For instance, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* can be considered an example of the Southern Gothic style because of its grotesque themes, like crossdressing, violence or pedophilia (Bjerre 2017: 10). However, his Southern Gothicism can also be viewed as yet another

manifestation of the nocturnal style since they both handle darker themes (Garson 1992: 28). *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is mostly put into the daylight category, but it can also be seen to contain some examples of the Gothic, for instance, the references to homosexual themes.

In conclusion, previous research has touched on Capote's style of writing and queer themes in his novels. However, the two topics have not been brought together as closely as in this thesis. The indirect and light style can be seen as a necessary guise to hide marginalized identities from social criticism. Queer characters appear in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* but they are not as obvious as in his previous novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, a stronger example of Southern Gothic where the focus on the grotesque also allowed him to discuss themes that we otherwise suppressed. Analyzing his writing in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* will help us to understand how he managed to include queer characters in the 1950s United States by using what has been called daylight and nocturnal style. His works seem to be light-hearted and simple, but this does not mean that they lack psychology or complex characters.

2. REPRESENTATION OF THE SEXUALITIES OF THE CHARACTERS

The novella contains a surprising number of direct references to queerness and homosexuality, often mentioned in passing. These direct references will be contrasted to more indirect references that require some cultural knowledge to understand them. I will above all focus on the three characters who have been most extensively studied by previous scholars: Holly, Joe Bell and the narrator. The analysis is based on Capote's daylight and nocturnal styles, findings in the literature review, and Chauncey's discussion of the queer experience during the time period.

2.1 Direct references to the characters' sexualities

As it was stated in the literature review, Holly often talks about her sexual encounters with men. However, these representations are not fully heterosexual since she also calls herself a “dyke”. For instance, when she is discussing her old lesbian roommate with the narrator she says: “Of course people couldn’t help but think I must be a bit of a dyke myself. And of course I am. Everyone is: a bit. So what?” (Capote 1968: 22). This example is interesting for two reasons. First of all, it mentions lesbians directly, despite the social stigma against sexual minorities. Second, the line “Everyone is: a bit. So what?” (Capote 1968: 22) indicates her belief that everyone’s sexualities are not fixed and suggests that same-sex desires are widespread. It is the very casualness of the statement that makes it striking. She is unconventional but confident when discussing this topic, expressed by the last line “So what?”. In contrast to Holly, the narrator and Joe Bell are not willing to discuss this topic.

Although Holly is not hiding her heterosexual encounters in the story, it is notable that she also refuses to go home with her older husband, Doc, who was specifically searching for her. Holly compares herself to a wild animal, “a wild thing” (Capote 1968: 74), meaning that she is free to do whatever she desires. She admits that she still cares for Doc but will not return home: “I explained it to him very carefully, and it was something he could understand. We shook hands and held on to each other and he wished me luck” (Capote 1968: 74). She does not conform to the societal expectations of a housewife as she chose to keep her freedom and independence by leaving her husband and moving to New York. Though it is not necessarily a queer part of Holly, it still emphasizes her unconventional way of living.

Holly expresses her thoughts about love several times throughout the story. The biggest claim Holly has made was that she believes everyone deserves to marry whoever they want:

I'd settle for Garbo any day. Why not? A person ought to be able to marry men or women or—listen, if you came to me and said you wanted to hitch up with Man o' War, I'd respect your feeling. No, I'm serious. Love should be allowed. I'm all for it (Capote 1968: 83).

Holly not only confirms her progressive views about love but she also admits she would marry a woman as well. In this case, she specifically chose Greta Garbo, the Hollywood actress during the golden and silent era. She was in relationships with both men and women (Paris 2002: 279), similarly to Holly who had relationships with men but considered herself to be a lesbian as well. Garbo was famous within the queer community as many gay men watched her movies to silently extend the gay world further (Chauncey 1994: 288). Holly's reference to Garbo shows that she is aware of the gay world around her, and confirms to the narrator her sexuality is just as fluid as Garbo's.

Holly's direct expressions could reflect how lesbians were treated during the time period. As it was explained, both gay men and lesbians faced the "disorderly conduct" charges, but lesbians were not fully visible in the gay world (Chauncey 1994: 27). In addition, Holly is mostly seen with men, which could make people believe that she is not queer. Despite being friends with gay men too, their identities are hidden enough to not raise suspicion. Thus, Holly is able to freely express her own queer identity without fear.

Holly's direct references embody Capote's light style discussed in the literature review. The light style is considered to be light-hearted and comical, as explained by Levine (1958: 602). Most scenes about Holly's queerness are presented in a comical manner which allows Capote to write freely about Holly's queer identity. The casualness of the daylight style is not used to only express Holly's queerness. The novella is simply written to be easy to read and humorous. It could be a nod to Capote himself since he was open about his identity as well. Holly embodies Capote's philosophy of accepting people for who they are individually (Clarke 2005: 313).

2.2 Indirect references to the characters' sexualities

Capote includes many indirect references to the characters' queerness, too, which can be considered a part of the nocturnal style. The story has a greater number of these subtle references. As it was stated before, Joe Bell's homosexuality has only been hinted at. However, by analyzing the descriptions of his bar, it becomes clear that it is supposed to be a gay bar. For example, the narrator is describing the place as follows: "Joe Bell's is a quiet place compared to most Lexington Avenue bars. It boasts neither neon nor television. Two old mirrors reflect the weather from the streets" (Capote 1968: 5). Joe Bell's bar is discreet, and the emphasis is on how quiet it is. Joe tries not to make his bar stand out. Gay meeting places, such as bars or restaurants, had to become more hidden not to attract the unwanted attention of the police (Chauncey 1994: 9). Another hint is the mirrors which purposely do not show the inside of the bar. As Pugh (2002: 53) pointed out, it was done to protect the identities of the clients, like the narrator who is a regular customer of Joe Bell's.

Joe Bell's interests also hint at his homosexuality. He is interested in activities that are traditionally perceived to be feminine, such as taking care of flowers and watching soap series (Capote 1968: 5). The narrator points out that he arranges his flowers with "matronly care" (Capote 1968: 5), which further emphasizes Joe Bell's feminine side as matrons were female nurses or chief nurses. It is revealed that Joe is interested in masculine activities too, e.g., hockey, but the narrator specifically focuses on his feminine side, giving it more emphasis.

Another important hint to his homosexuality is his interest in Gilbert and Sullivan. The narrator explains that not only is Joe fixated on Gilbert and Sullivan but also "claims to be related to one or the other" but cannot remember to who exactly (Capote 1968: 4). This is most probably a reference to dramatist W. S. Gilbert and composer Arthur Sullivan who created comic operas together in the Victorian era. Comic opera can also be viewed as a slightly feminized genre. Pugh (2002: 52) explains that Sullivan was rumored to be a homosexual, which means that Joe Bell's

relation to Sullivan is through his hidden sexuality. Since the narrator does not remember who Joe Bell is related to, it is another way to protect his identity. The line suggests that he could be either related to Gilbert or to Sullivan, which gives a possibility for a heterosexual interpretation of heritage as well.

Joe Bell has also strongly expressed his love for Holly and the narrator was not sure whether it was romantic or platonic. Joe quickly explains that his feelings are not romantic nor sexual: ““Hold on,” he said, gripping my wrist. “Sure I loved her. But it wasn’t that I wanted to touch her.” and “You can love somebody without it being like that. You keep them a stranger, a stranger who’s a friend.” (Capote 1968: 9–10). The two characters share a queer identity but they are also quite different. In contrast to Holly, Joe Bell is much more afraid to discuss the topic of sexuality. The topic feels shameful to him and he points out that this feeling is getting worse:

It’s a peculiar fact—but, the older I grow, that side of things seems to be on my mind more and more. /.../ Maybe the older you grow and the less easy it is to put thought into action, maybe that’s why it gets all locked up in your head and becomes a burden (Capote 1968: 10).

His feelings of disgrace are due to years of repressing his sexuality to avoid being accused of perversion. Joe Bell’s internalized feelings were common among many queers of the period. As Chauncey (1994: 4) explains, a lot of gay men accepted the hateful view of homosexuals. Thus, his friendship with Holly is peculiar as they are complete opposites. It could also explain why he is protective of Holly as she has openly resisted the norm, which is something he could only do in subtler ways, for example by, embracing his feminine side. However, despite being opposites, both characters challenge the normative ideas of masculinity and femininity. Joe Bell is simply much subtler compared to Holly. This could be explained by the fact that gay men were more aggressively policed at the time than queer women and thus he had more to lose.

The narrator does not give explicit details about his sexuality. However, since he narrates the story, his inner monologues reveal quite a few details. The most notable example is the narrator

pretending to read Holly's books: "I was left abandoned by the bookshelves; of the books there, more than half were about horses, the rest baseball. Pretending an interest in *Horseflesh and How to Tell It* gave me a sufficiently private opportunity for sizing Holly's friends" (Capote 1968: 35). This part will be referenced later during the conversation with Holly, in which she notices the narrator was not reading the baseball book but rather the gossip columns about her she stashed in the book: "'Admiring my publicity, or are you just a baseball fan?'" she said, adjusting her dark glasses as she glanced over my shoulder. I said, "What was this week's weather report?" She winked at me, but it was humorless: a wink of warning" (Capote 1968: 37). Holly's wink suggests she noticed the narrator trying to change the topic. Just as Joe Bell hides his identity, so does the narrator. However, Holly directly confronts him: "If a man doesn't like baseball, then he must like horses, and if he doesn't like either of them, well, I'm in trouble anyway: he doesn't like girls" (Capote 1968: 38). Though it is more of a direct reference to the narrator's sexuality, it could have gone unnoticed by inattentive readers since it happened a few pages ago. In addition, the narrator does not accept or deny Holly's claim, leaving his sexuality vague. However, it also shows Holly's solidarity with the narrator since she has already revealed her own sexuality to him.

Similarly to Joe Bell, the narrator has claimed to love Holly, though only platonically. They have a strong bond that the story heavily emphasizes:

/.../ was my outrage a little the result of being in love with Holly myself? A little. For I was in love with her. Just as I'd once been in love with my mother's elderly colored cook and a postman who let me follow him on his rounds and a whole family named McKendrick. That category of love generates jealousy, too (Capote 1968: 76).

This part could cause confusion within the readers who have not picked up on previous subtle references to his sexuality, especially since he describes himself being jealous. However, the narrator specifically calls it "that category of love", implying that it is purely platonic. In addition, he compares it to his previous friendships with people when he was younger. These relationships,

most strikingly, include the postman from his childhood. Although the narrator stresses the platonic nature of this relationship, the feeling for another man is nevertheless called love, which is quite bold in the time period.

The narrator's sexuality can also be explored through the usage of certain terms. Similarly to Holly's usage of the word "dyke", the narrator has claimed to have visited a "Nancy's Landing": "Never mind why, but once I walked from New Orleans to Nancy's Landing, Mississippi, just under five hundred miles. It was a light-hearted lark compared to the journey to Joe Bell's bar" (Capote 1968: 105). According to Pugh (2002: 52), "Nancy" is used to describe homosexual men. Although it is a subtle reference, the narrator's comparison of Nancy's Landing to Joe Bell's bar could be a reference to another meeting place for gay people. He avoids explaining his reasons for going there ("Never mind why") but it is not the first time a slang word has been used to refer to the narrator. For instance, Holly has called him "Maude" (Capote 1968: 102–103), which Fahy (2014: 105) and Pugh (2014: 95) have previously explained as "homosexual" or "homosexual prostitute". It is fascinating that "Nancy" and "Maude" are only used once, while "dyke" is referenced several times by Holly. Both Joe and the narrator are actively trying to hide their identities, with the few notable exceptions such as "Nancy's Landing", but Holly is freer and more open to use "dyke" on herself and openly talking about her sexual fluidity.

Though Holly has more direct than indirect references, there is one part of her character that could subtly allude to her queerness. One such direct reference is her apartment party with other characters. It could be a hidden reference to her queerness due to the fact that apartment parties were popular among gay men. As it was stated before, it became dangerous to visit queer spaces. Thus, in the 1930s and 1940s, apartment parties were important to the gay world since they allowed gay men to meet one another without having to worry about police (Chauncey 1994: 278).

Moreover, that is when the narrator meets the majority of Holly's acquaintances, further emphasizing its importance as a means of bringing queer people together (Chauncey 1994: 2).

2.3 References to the sports

The indirect references to sexuality are also associated with pastimes that are considered appropriate for men, especially sports. Throughout the story, there is a strong emphasis on the characters' interests in sports. Both Joe and the narrator are either fixated on traditionally feminine activities or they simply pretend to care about masculine interests. It was believed at the beginning of the 20th century that manhood was slowly being destroyed by the feminization of American culture. Chauncey (1994: 113) explains that rough sports, hunting, and prizefighting were actively promoted among men during the period to counter the supposed feminization. As a result, men would try to appear more manly and physically stronger to avoid stigma. However, Capote challenges these norms.

The narrator and Joe Bell do not participate or show interest in these sports, which is why Capote has heavily emphasized these points. Through Holly's words, he wanted to subtly explain to the readers that the narrator is not the traditional masculine man the early 20th century society promoted. The same could be said about Joe Bell, who has been described as a "matron" with a passion for flower arrangements. Holly is the only one who has participated in sports, specifically horse riding with the narrator (Capote 1968: 87–88), showing her more masculine side to the readers. This idea can also be seen through her last conversation about sports with the narrator. Although it can be said that the narrator is technically participating in a "masculine activity", the narrator explains he has no prior experience: ".../ ten-cent pony rides at childhood carnivals were the limit of my equestrian experience" (Capote 1968: 87). Essentially, Holly had to help him participate in a masculine activity.

All of the indirect references can be analyzed through Capote's nocturnal style. The nocturnal style is considered the opposite of the light one because of its focus on understanding characters' mindsets (Levine 1958: 602). Capote uses it in several ways, most commonly by dropping subtle hints through the narrator's monologue and dialogue with Holly. The first-person point of view of the narrator gives the readers a better understanding of his thoughts, especially about his sexual identity. His nocturnal monologue contrasts with Holly's light dialogue. Whenever the narrator is close to revealing his identity ("Nancy's Landing"), he quickly stops himself as he cannot be as casual as Holly. Capote uses the nocturnal style to keep the narrator's sexuality mysterious, while also giving hints to those who are able to understand them. However, sometimes Capote mixes both styles, for instance, in the scene where Holly calls him Maude. The scene is interesting as he uses the light style to confidently and casually use a female name to refer to himself, but the indirectness comes from the meaning of the term itself, which could be missed by most readers unaware of the slang. The same can be said about the use of "Nancy", although this time the term was disguised as a location.

Joe Bell's bar is a great example of Capote's nocturnal style, as it is meant to be hidden and barely noticeable to the outsiders. It not only reflects the repressiveness of the time period but also Joe Bell's character. Capote depicts a character that is open to those who truly understand his difficult position. Gay bars were a safe space for gay men to meet up and so is Joe Bell's. However, there is a layer of protection from outsiders, that is, the windows do not show the inside of his bar. Joe Bell is not willing to fully embrace his identity and display it to other, unlike Holly, which is why he hides himself. It is a subtle hint to his sexuality and a reflection of the 1950s.

Similarly to the narrator, Capote uses the indirect style to mask Joe Bell's identity through cultural references. The notable example is his relation to either Gilbert or Sullivan. The joke could be missed by people who are not aware of the duo, or if they are, then they might not know that

Sullivan could have been homosexual. However, when it comes to Holly, he chose a famous Hollywood actress, further emphasizing the lightness of Holly. If Joe was given an old, perhaps even an obscure reference, then Capote had no issues with choosing a more direct comparison to a well-known queer actress in the case of Holly.

Capote also uses the nocturnal style to challenge the idea of what could be considered a masculine activity. As it was stated, there is a strong emphasis on sports but none of the male characters are seen to be interested in them. However, Capote intentionally made Holly the only character enjoying sports. Capote, through his nocturnal style, tried to reflect the time period when people were fearful about changing gender roles. Holly's masculine side is only seen briefly but still leaves an impact as the narrator is shown to be incapable of riding a horse. She is taking charge, instead of the narrator, which could be considered unusual at that time. Joe Bell, however, is known to like hockey but his masculine interest is overshadowed by his passion for flowers and soap series. Thus, Capote wrote the narrator as well as Joe Bell and Holly to contrast the society's ideals of masculine and feminine pastimes.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the thesis was to analyze how Capote challenges societal norms about sexuality in his novella *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. The analysis focuses on Capote's two writing styles, the daylight and nocturnal styles, and how he uses them to subtly depict his queer and homosexual characters, Holly, the narrator, and Joe Bell. The previous research on the novella and George Chauncey's book about homosexual experience in the late 19th and early 20th century New York were also used as the basis of the analysis. Chauncey shows how, despite different attempts to police queer communities, they developed their meeting spaces and cultural practices that

permitted them to communicate with each other without being recognized by mainstream society. This is also done in Capote's novella that is both open about sexuality and also hides it with the help of different stylistic choices.

The introduction gives a brief summary of the novella as well as the history of the publication and the reception of the book. The literature review gives an insight into the novella's queer characters, Holly, the narrator, and Joe Bell, and focuses on Capote's two styles. In addition, it provides an overview of the treatment of queer people in the 1950s United States, which forced many people into hiding to avoid being arrested due to "indecentness". The policing inevitably led to authors depicting their queer characters in a negative light, including Capote in his earlier work *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. However, with the release of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Capote chose to indirectly reference the queerness and homosexuality of his characters. The previous research shows that the novella challenges conventional ideas about love, mainly through Holly. However, the studies do not analyze the representation of sexuality in the novella through Capote's two styles.

The empirical analysis found that Capote often relies on his knowledge on the gay world and cultural figures. Capote uses certain gay terms throughout the book, mainly with reference to Holly and the narrator. These references are clearer in the case of Holly who directly uses the word "dyke" to describe herself. Meanwhile, the narrator and Joe Bell have been described in indirect terms. The more obvious references were analyzed as examples of the daylight style, as this style is freer, humorous, and most importantly, casual. The direct references are associated with Holly, which is why Capote does not necessarily hide her queer identity. In addition to openly using "dyke", Capote mentions a famous queer Hollywood actress, emphasizing not only Holly's own queerness but also her freedom to openly express herself. Her queerness is humorous and casual, embodying the daylight style, but also challenging the heteronormative ideas about femininity. The

most important element here is the very casualness with which the references to queerness are made.

The nocturnal style is primarily used to analyze the narrator and Joe Bell. Their sexualities have only been hinted at by either emphasizing their femininity or using less obvious gay terms. The narrator does not talk directly about his love life, emphasizing his need to hide his sexuality, for example when he disguised “Nancy” as a fake location. Joe Bell, however, does not use gay terms but, rather, the focus is on his femininity and how he represses himself. Capote’s reference to the rumored homosexual composer Sullivan also shows how Joe Bell is not able to freely express himself. In addition, Capote challenges the ideas of masculine pastimes, creating two male characters who are not interested in sports and a female character who openly enjoys horse riding. The analysis shows that both characters embody the nocturnal style as they are secretive and their experiences reflect the repressiveness of the 1950s. However, just like Holly, they are still able to rebel against the norms as they challenge the ideal 20th century masculine men.

The thesis thus shows that Capote is able to use his two writing styles to write about the queer world of the 1950s New York. The use of nocturnal style permits him to speak about gay men’s experiences in a coded way that was recognizable to the members of the community but not necessarily to the general public. The daylight style is used with Holly, as women’s sexuality was less strongly policed at the time. The very openness and casualness of the references to queerness in the book is the most remarkable aspect of the work, as the seeming superficiality and lightness allow queerness to be brought to broad daylight. Since the daylight style is regarded as the lighthearted and the unserious side of the nocturnal one, it lets Capote to be straightforward when writing about queerness and societal norms without issues. Thus, it explains how he was able to subtly write about queerness while also openly show it through Holly.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Aljona Tamm

**Analysis of Queer Themes in Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*
Truman Capote'i „Hommikueine Tiffany juures“ kväär-teemade analüüs**

Bakalaureusetöö

2025

Lehekülgede arv: 30

Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö eesmärgiks on analüüsida, kuidas Truman Capote kujutab teoses „Hommikueine Tiffany juures“ kväär-tegelasi oma kirjutamisstiili kaudu. Lõputöö jaguneb kaheks peamiseks osaks: kirjanduse ülevaade ja raamatu analüüs.

Sissejuhatuses esitab raamatu lühikokkuvõtte ning tutvustab selle avaldamise ajalugu ja retseptiooni. Kirjanduse ülevaade annab taustainformatsiooni sellest, kuidas kväär-inimesi 1950ndate USAs koheldi. Ülevaates tutvustatakse ka varasemaid uuringuid Capote'i kirjutamisstiilist ja raamatu kväär-teemadest. Ülevaates selgus, et Capote'i stiil samuti jaguneb kaheks: niinimetatud päevane ja öine stiil. Päevane stiil on kergemeelne ja humoorikas, öine on tõsine ja keskendub tegelaste sisemaailmale ning arengule.

Empiiriline analüüs keskendub nii otsestele kui ka kaudsetele viidetele kväärteemadele. Otsesed viited on seotud päevase stiiliga, kaudsed ja spordiviited on uuritud öise stiiliga. Analüüs uurib kolme tegelast: Hollyt, Joe Belli ja jutustajat ning näitab, et naistegelase kujutamises kasutatakse päevast, meestegelaste kujutamisel öist stiili. Selle valiku põhjuseks on toleaeagne ühiskondlik kontekst.

Märksõnad: Truman Capote, „Hommikueine Tiffany juures“, ameerika kirjandus, kväär

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