

**Heteronormativity in Lesbian Pulp Fiction Cover Art: Comparing *Death of Anger* and *The Strange Path***

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Describing the genre of lesbian pulp fiction novels created during World War II, Keller states that “it is less content than cover that defines lesbian pulps as a genre” (393). Aiming to primarily attract the readership of soldiers during the war, lesbian pulp fiction authors had little to no say in the choice of the cover art (Theophano 2), thus resulting in overly sexualized images that would attract heterosexual male readers (Keller 385, Gibson et al. 242). Accordingly, these covers often feature male characters (primarily boyfriends and husbands) lurking in the background of the scene; this lurking brings the theme of voyeurism into lesbian pulp fiction, thus emphasizing the supposed importance of a masculine figure in lesbian relationships (Keller 385). Accordingly, the voyeuristic male figure in the background brings a sense of control and surveillance into the picture (Jacobson 8), in order for heterosexual readers to ‘allow’ the supposed immorality of a lesbian relationship. Essentially, his presence offers the potential for heteronormativity, which cover art featuring only two women would lack. On all-female cover art, the lesbian couple is therefore often characterized by stereotypes of the butch/femme couple, allowing the reader to project gender roles onto them in order to view them through a heteronormative lens (Theophano 2). The cover art of the two lesbian pulp fiction novels *Death of Anger* (see figure 1) and *The Strange Path* (see figure 2) therefore offer a compelling comparison between the voyeuristic male ‘intruder’ and the butch/femme couple that compensates for the lack of masculine characters on the cover, thus creating heteronormative potential. Therefore, by playing with the physical appearance, body language and lesbian gaze of the characters, the cover art of the lesbian pulp fiction novels *Death of Anger* and *The Strange Path* attempt to portray the butch/femme couple in heteronormative terms.

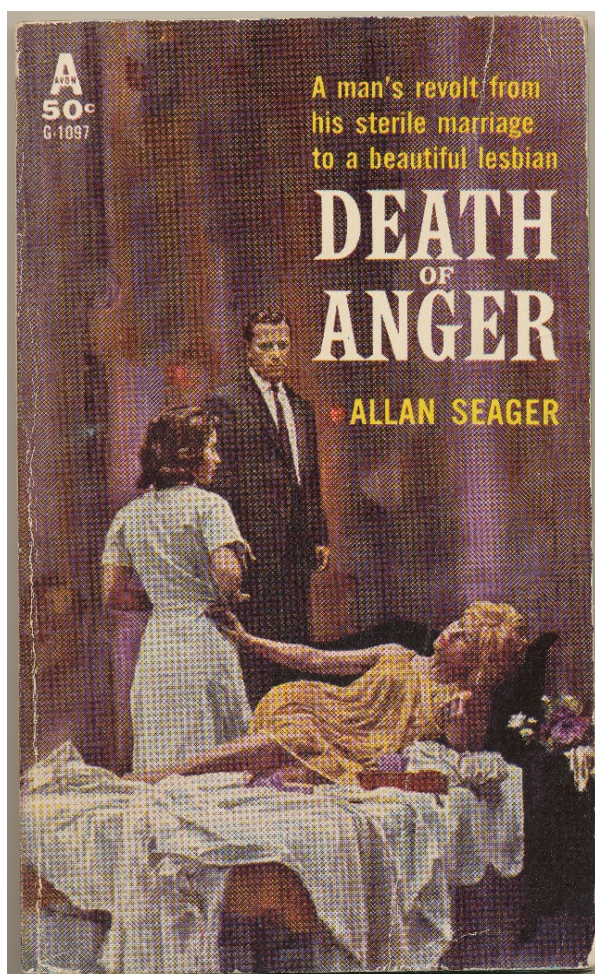


Figure 1 Unknown Artist. "Death of Anger," Seager, Allan, *The Lesbian Pulp Fiction Collection @ Mount Saint Vincent University*, accessed November 23, 2019, [msvulpf.omeka.net/items/show/684](http://msvulpf.omeka.net/items/show/684).

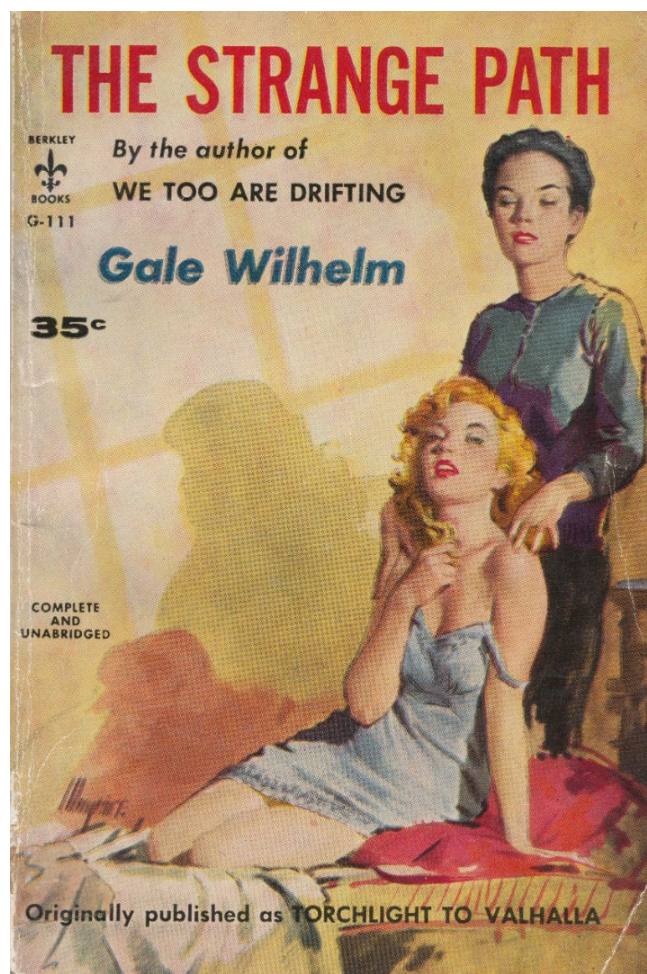


Figure 2 Maguire, Robert. "The Strange Path," Wilhelm, Gale, *The Lesbian Pulp Fiction Collection @ Mount Saint Vincent University*, accessed November 23, 2019, [msvulpf.omeka.net/items/show/806](http://msvulpf.omeka.net/items/show/806).

By giving the women on both covers the appearance of a typical butch/femme couple, they are assigned gender roles and are thus portrayed in heteronormative terms. Both butch women on the covers accord to Zimet's definition of the butch; they have brown, shorter hair and are dressed in a significantly less feminine way than their blonde femme counterparts (23). It is interesting to compare the cover of *Death of Anger*, where the butch/femme couple is not quite as compulsory,

given the heteronormative potential that is already created by the husband in the background, and the cover of *The Strange Path*, which relies solely on these stereotypes to assume heteronormativity. Accordingly, the butch in *The Strange Path* and the husband in *Death of Anger* bear a striking resemblance; apart from their nearly identical hair color and hairstyle, their dark clothing is similar as well, projecting seriousness and dominance. While on both covers there is a clear stereotypical butch and femme amongst the women, *Death of Anger* allows the butch more femininity in her appearance than in *The Strange Path*. Wearing a short-sleeved dress that resembles a nurse uniform, her clothing choice underlines her potential for cliché femininity while additionally allowing her to show more skin than the butch in *The Strange Path*. Contrastingly, the femmes on both covers look nearly identical, apart from the different colors of their revealing lingerie. Their similar physical appearance stresses the fact that, regardless of whether a stereotypical butch or a voyeuristic husband provides the potential for heteronormativity, at least one passive, overly sexualized and seductive vixen is required (Theophano 2) for the male target audience to project their erotic desires onto (Mulvey 35). On both covers, the femme fulfills these requirements with her styled, blonde curls and provocative lingerie. Her flawlessly painted red lips are slightly parted, thus emphasizing her seductiveness and drawing parallels between the lesbian pulp femme and pin-up girls, who are known to function solely as products for men to consume and watch (Mulvey 35). Therefore, by portraying the butch character in *The Strange Path* as physically similar to the husband in *Death of Anger* and by depicting the femme as an overly feminine product of consumption, the butch/femme couple stereotype is reinforced, thus portraying them in heteronormative terms.

Apart from their physical appearance, the body language and positioning of the characters reinforces the classic butch/femme roles of power and dominance, thus underlining their supposedly heteronormative relationship. The passivity that the femme projects is underlined by her sitting

position; in both *Death of Anger* and *The Strange Path*, the femme lounges on a bed with her female lover standing behind her. This positions the femme 'beneath 'the butch in both cases, thus reinforcing the notion of submissiveness and power relations by allowing the butch to look down on her. In addition, the way in which the lesbian couple touches each other on both covers is interesting to compare; in *Death of Anger*, the femme is the one who seeks physical contact and reaches out for the butch, seemingly trying to pull her closer. The fact that she has 'fallen for 'the seduction of the butch is only tolerable for the heterosexual male readers due to the fact that there is a male character in the background upholding the potential for heteronormativity. In contrast, in *The Strange Path* the butch appears to be holding down the femme by the shoulders, thus controlling her like a puppet and reinforcing the masculine role of the butch in this heteronormative relationship, as well as the illustration of the femme as a "passive erotic object" that serves to be looked at (Mulvey 35). Lastly, the beds on both covers differ in that the sheets on the *Death of Anger* cover are crumpled, implying eroticism and sex, whereas the sheets on the *The Strange Path* cover are folded over the bed in a neat fashion; it could be argued that this is done to reassure the heterosexual reader that two lesbian lovers could never engage in sexual activity without a voyeuristic male character in the background, as can be found in *Death of Anger*. Therefore, by altering the body language of the lesbian couples, power relationships are underlined, thus portraying them in heteronormative terms.

Furthermore, by playing with the male, lesbian and audience gaze, the femme is objectified, controlled and put on display, thus reinforcing heteronormative power roles and hierarchies. The male gaze involves a spectator observing a woman in a voyeuristic fashion, allowing him to objectify and fetishize her from afar and thus establish power and gender hierarchies (Evans and Gamman 12, 19). In lesbian pulp fiction cover art, it is not uncommon for the lesbian butch to take

over the role of the male spectator (Jacobsson 5), thus projecting male dominance and heteronormative ideals onto her. On both covers the butch lesbian looks down at the femme and appears to be eying her cleavage and legs, however, the femme's gaze differs significantly on both covers. While in *Death of Anger* she meets the butch's gaze with her husband watching from afar, *The Strange Path* could not afford to have the femme make direct eye contact with the butch, given that the two of them are not accompanied by a supervising male character. Instead, the femme gazes out into the audience, signaling shame ("Recognizing Lesbian Pulp") and seemingly pleading to be rescued by the male reader (Zimet 23). On this level the audience's gaze (Mulvey 35) is utilized as the male gaze as well, given that the implied readership for these novels was primarily male, thus involving the reader and giving them an active role in the story on an almost metatextual level. This is emphasized by the shadow of the window projected onto the wall of *The Strange Path* which resembles prison bars; this not only sends the message that lesbian eroticism without the involvement of a man should be condemned, but additionally plays into Foucault's panopticon theory of constant surveillance and observation (Duncan 49). As the audience's gaze functions as a surveillance of sorts, the fact that the femme acknowledges the audience breaks the fourth wall and ensures the male reader and spectator that this lesbian relationship would not be able to take place without his involvement and spectatorship as a reader. In this sense, the male, lesbian and audience gaze contribute to the same goal of portraying the lesbian couple in heteronormative terms by heavily objectifying the femme.

In conclusion, this essay has argued that the cover art of the lesbian pulp fiction works *Death of Anger* and *The Strange Path* attempt to portray the lesbian couple in heteronormative terms through the reinforcement of stereotypical butch/femme characteristics. This was accomplished by altering their appearances accordingly, sending messages with their body language and by playing

with the male, lesbian and audience gaze. It has been argued that in *Death of Anger*, where a lurking male character is present, the lesbian couple is permitted to drift a bit further away from the butch/femme physical stereotype, depicting the butch as slightly more feminine than the butch in *The Strange Path*, who holds the entire responsibility of creating a masculine dominance and heteronormative potential. Similarly, the lesbian couple's body language and positioning in *Death of Anger* implies more potential for a sexual relationship than in *The Strange Path*, where there is no male character to 'supervise' and control their relationship. Lastly, while the male gaze in *Death of Anger* is primarily performed by the husband, in *The Strange Path* this gaze is performed by the butch as well as by the male audience, thus reinforcing the need for a spectator and a passive erotic object and projecting the lesbian couple in heteronormative terms. Therefore, it can be concluded that, despite the lesbian culture that emerged from lesbian pulp fiction, its success was presumably largely due to a lack of competition in the market of lesbian literature, considering to what extent the cover art of these works remained considerably heteronormative.

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