

## Displacing Presumptive Heterosexuality: Reading Queer (?) Characters using Thin Description

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**ABSTRACT:** Alexander Doty's description of the "heterocentrist trap" as the assumption "that all characters in a film [or other narrative] are straight unless labeled, coded, or otherwise proven to be queer" has made it possible to start the work of displacing the presumption of heterosexuality from the reading process. However, in the two decades since the "trap" was clearly identified, very little work has been done towards forcing this displacement. In this article, I propose a means of identifying where an intervention in the reading process can take place, using Heather Love's separation of thin and thick description alongside the reader-response theory of Wolfgang Iser. This intervention forces the reader to justify both straight and queer readings of unmarked characters equally, and in doing so displaces the presumption of heterosexuality. In this way, pluralistic readings of unmarked characters are made available, where multiple understandings of a character's sexuality can exist equally and at the same time in a textual surface. I then explore possible ways that plurality can exist in this space using the example of Joan Lindsay's 1967 novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and two of its filmed adaptations.

**KEYWORDS:** thin description, thick description, presumption of heterosexuality, queer adaptation



## INTRODUCTION

In the two decades since Alexander Doty described the “heterocentrist trap,” theories of queer reading practices have struggled to overcome that great (terrible, frustrating) assumption—“that all characters in a film [or other narrative] are straight unless labeled, coded, or otherwise proven to be queer.”<sup>1</sup> So much of the discourse surrounding queer reading practice focuses on ideas of resistance and subversion that we seem to have missed an opportunity to explore a necessary conclusion of exposing the heterocentrist trap: that characters might be queer without being labelled, coded, or otherwise marked in the text. There is a lot of untapped potential in the idea that texts and characters, previously assumed to be straight or heteronormative, might be queer, even if they are not marked as such.

This potential has remained untapped in part because queer reading practices were primarily developed using suspicious and paranoid reading techniques like intentionally reading against the grain.<sup>2</sup> It has been particularly difficult for queer reading to shed these suspicions, and no wonder—the framework of heterocentrism is so consistently enforced by other readers, critics, and writers that it is counterintuitive to conceive of interpretative moves which simply do not address it. Even in this article where I will lay out a reading method which does not address it, I still will have to point out how I am not addressing it. While queer theory more broadly seems to share an affinity with postcritical discourses on critical practices, practices of reading queerness and reading queerly are still dealing with the heterocentrist trap.<sup>3</sup>

A curious example of this struggle is in Sharon Marcus’ 2007 book *Between Women*, where she argues that, because there were recorded instances of socially acknowledged (if not accepted or celebrated) same-sex relationships between women in the Victorian era, authors would have (and did) portray these in novels if they wanted to.<sup>4</sup> However, this argument seems to suggest that these recorded instances are the *only* ways that authors could portray same-sex female relationships or desire. This is despite Marcus’ own assertion that same-sex desire was a normalized part of gender performance for women in Victorian society, which leads one to ask—why do we not believe that this desire was genuine, and possibly acted upon, even if it is not explicitly recorded?<sup>5</sup> Surely we are able to comprehend a woman who both flirts with and marries a man, and experiences same-sex attraction and possibly engages in sexual behaviour with women? She may not be in one of the female marriages which Marcus discusses, or writing about it in her diaries.<sup>6</sup> But it is a limitation to queer reading practice

to argue that evidence of same-sex desire can only be considered as such if it fulfils these relationship structures, especially when they have historically been read and mediated by a patriarchal, heterocentrist academic establishment.

A reorientation of this nature can have significant ramifications, not only for queer reading, but also for adaptation studies and the reception of queer characters in adaptation texts. Adaptations make up a significant portion of the mainstream texts that are widely consumed in the Western world.<sup>7</sup> By expanding the possibility of portraying characters in adapted texts as queer, the potential for the mainstream consumption of queer representation is therefore also expanded. Further, by drawing attention to the potentially queer status of these unmarked characters, we enable the spectators and readers of these adaptations to reflect on their own reading practices. An adaptation, after all, allows the people who create the adaptation to disseminate their understanding of a text to a wide audience. By disseminating a reading of a text which does not play into the heterocentrist trap, and which does closely adapt the content of the adapted text, spectators and readers are exposed to new ways of reading which are broadly beneficial to the representation of queer people. This is not to say that fidelity is a standard by which adaptations should be measured—only that, given the unique intertextual relationship between an adapted text and its adaptation, the decision to keep, alter, or discard particular plot points or characters indicates a space worth examining. There is a difference between gender-swapping a character in order to achieve a queer plotline, and portraying an existing plotline and character as queer when there is the potential to read it as such. It is only a benefit to have more options for portraying queer characters—they do not detract from each other.

One way to reduce the power of a heteronormative reading practice, then, is to open the text up to pluralistic reading possibilities. I propose that this is best done by drawing on surface reading discourse of the past two decades, specifically Heather Love's separation of "thin" and "thick" description, and then closely examining the role of the reader in providing "thick" description.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, we can consider what the thinly described surface of the text contributes, and begin to define the space in which the reader's or spectator's assumptions inform what they perceive as the thickly described textual surface using an approach which draws on a reparative, collaborative urge.<sup>9</sup> In order to elaborate on this description of the reading process, I believe it is valuable to return to Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, which describes the process of constructing the "aesthetic object" which the reader perceives as the text itself.<sup>10</sup>

Once we have identified where our intervention in the heterocentrist trap can take place, we can start to experiment with supplying different meanings to the thinly described content. In this article, I will focus on the thought, dialogue, and behaviour of characters, rather than on examining the text more broadly. However, this kind of analysis of the reading process can be applied in other ways. I am concerned with the reading and portrayal of potentially queer characters, so it is the specific means by which they are portrayed that I will interrogate. By looking at what characters say, do, and think, we can start to see how the thinly described behaviours of some characters are open to queer possibilities, once the smog of presumed heterosexuality has dissipated. To demonstrate this, I will examine the relationship between Sara Waybourne and Miranda in Joan Lindsay's classic 1967 novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and its portrayal in two filmed adaptations.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, I will demonstrate how the potential for both queer and non-queer readings can co-exist on the surface of the novel.

#### OPENING UP THE TEXT

In order to achieve a polysemous reading method, it is first critical to establish precisely what the text *is*. Over the past few decades, a significant amount of work has been done towards this end, most recently evaluated in the excellent *Critique and postcritique* edited by Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski.<sup>12</sup> While this discussion has ranged broadly from Moretti's distant reading methods to Miller's too-close film analysis, this article is most closely related to surface reading and description theories which deal specifically with what is produced during the reader-text interaction.<sup>13</sup> My starting point, then, is the thin description methodology described by Heather Love, which establishes a "flat" textual surface using thin description which must then be thickly described.<sup>14</sup> Thin description attempts "an unadorned, first-order account of behaviour, one that could be recorded just as well by a camera as by a human agent."<sup>15</sup> A concept taken from ethnographic research by Gilbert Ryle, thin description was originally a way of accounting for actual, observed human behaviour. By describing behaviour without assuming what it was meant to convey—Ryle uses the example of a wink, compared with a twitch, both described as the closing and opening of one eye—the researcher is able to do analysis which separates the social aspects of a situation from the behaviour itself.<sup>16</sup>

Love has elaborated on this thin description process through the analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.<sup>17</sup> She describes the functional aspects of the text,

essentially performing a close reading analysis of what can be accounted for on the text's "flat" surface.<sup>18</sup> In doing so, she analyses the text as a functional object which *does* things through its structural elements, using as an example the way that Morrison draws attention to the process of dehumanization by blurring the bounds between narrator and slave-catcher.<sup>19</sup> Rather than reading the words as evidence of some deeper, obscured process, she sees them as the process *per se*. In contrast to this use of thin description, I believe there is value in using the ethnographical tool of thin description in the process of reading character behaviour. This shift from perceiving the text itself as an actor, to seeing the characters as actors from the perspective of the reader, is reflective of my move away from the context of critique (in which Love is operating) towards a context of queer reading practice. By focusing on unmarked characters, I have shifted my reading practice away from features of the text like coding cues and genre signifiers. Instead, I am entirely reliant on the evidence provided by the characters themselves, and their relationships with others. Thin description therefore provides a means of paying direct attention to character behaviour. The question of whether they are queer (or gay, or lesbian, or same-sex attracted, or any number of other identifiers for non-heterosexual individuals), becomes, then, "do they seem to behave in ways which are consistent with the ways someone who is queer might behave?" Likewise, of course, for the question of whether they are straight.

This description of character behaviour therefore provides recourse to the text in ways that can be easily verified and disputed by other researchers. While it would be aspirational to assume that every critic would describe a scene identically, thin description provides a way to treat the bare behaviour of characters in a text as a more or less fixed point.

Thin description is then complemented by the reader's thick description of the text. By attributing motivation, affect, and thought to the bare behaviour of characters, the reader develops an understanding of the textual evidence grounded in their own knowledge of what that behaviour might indicate.<sup>20</sup> Iser describes the result of this synthesising process, once the book has been entirely read, as an "aesthetic object" which "has its roots in the text," but is nonetheless a product of both the text and the reader.<sup>21</sup> In this way, it is impossible to claim that there is merely an objective textual surface in any reading of a text: work must be done by the reader to supply meaning to the information provided by the text. This does not mean that all readings stray from the surface of the text;

rather, it is necessary to consider the reader-text interaction as part of that surface.

Not only does the reader supply meaning, and therefore play an active role in creating a textual surface, but their understanding of what this surface looks like is impacted by their position in relation to the text. Iser proposes that the reader exists in relation to the text as a “wandering viewpoint,” necessarily incapable of grasping the text as a whole.<sup>22</sup> Because new information becomes available as the reader progresses through the text, they therefore add to and adjust their understanding of what the surface of the text is over time. This is compounded by the potential for readers to flip back and forth through a text, returning to prior information as they feel compelled to, or skipping ahead to see if their expectations are fulfilled.

More than that, however, it is necessarily impossible to grasp every piece of information presented by a text at any particular time.<sup>23</sup> Rather, readers pay attention to the information that they use to form connections across the text, and use these connections to inform how they receive and prioritise new information as it arises. When it comes to understanding characters and their relationships, these connections are primarily made up of assumptions regarding the motivations, affect, and thoughts of the characters which make their behaviours seem consistent.<sup>24</sup> Because these connections are usually only partially explicated in the text, or are not explicated at all, these connections are what Iser refers to as “structured blanks of the text.”<sup>25</sup> It is only by supplying meaning to these blanks that the reader is able to form the text into a coherent object with a meaningful surface, rather than a jumble of bare behaviours. In this way, Love’s thick description of a text takes place within the same conceptual space as Iser’s “structured blanks.”

By breaking the reading process down in this way, we are able to see clearly where the presumption of heterosexuality occurs: in the process of supplying thick description, and connecting the bare behaviours provided by the thinly described text. Approaching a text with the assumption that a character is straight unless marked otherwise forecloses possible queer thick descriptions of bare behaviour, and therefore reduces the likelihood of a character being read as queer regardless of whether or not they are actually marked as straight.

Describing this interaction with the text therefore allows us to explore with intentionality the possibility that the surface of the text is polysemous. By considering how we thickly describe the text, we are able to choose to read the text in accordance with one of many equally possible readings. In particular, we

can see that characters who have previously been assumed to be straight can be read queerly without having to use actively resistant reading techniques such as coding, or any number of queer reading strategies that are premised on the belief that textual queerness must be justified after a presumption of heterosexuality.<sup>26</sup> We are instead able to displace that presumption and claim the space between what the text actually provides and our understanding of the text as neutral.

### PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK

If we turn, then, to an example of how this kind of analysis might be done, we can begin to see how the process of separating a text into its thinly and thickly described parts can diversify the possible choices an adapter might make. Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is a particularly productive text for this style of analysis, because it does not contain the usual markers of queerness for any of its characters—none of them are labelled as such, nor are they coded, or shown performing any sexual behaviour at all, let alone any which would be considered definitively queer. By the same token, however, very few of its characters are clearly designated as straight, which therefore creates the potential for a multitude of thick descriptions.

In order to examine this potential, we must first thinly describe the behaviour of characters in an adapted text—in the case of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the adapted text is a novel.<sup>27</sup> In this kind of written text, the separation of bare behaviour from the inflected parts of the text, like metaphor and simile, must be carefully negotiated. The purpose of the thin description of the scene is to pay close attention to the bare behaviours of the characters, rather than focusing on other interpretative factors such as genre, and then using these bare behaviours as the starting point for considering the relationship dynamic between these two characters. Considerations of genre, or any other factor, can be discussed in the thick description, and used to justify particular interpretative moves when making sense of a character or relationship. They do not, however, necessarily inform the reader's understanding of a character or relationship, and therefore do not belong in this level of description.

Take, for instance, this sentence:

The boarders at Mrs Appleyard's College for Young Ladies had been up and scanning the bright unclouded sky since six o'clock and were now fluttering about in their holiday muslins like a flock of excited butterflies.<sup>28</sup>

To describe the characters' behaviour, we must first identify the affected parts of the sentence. The verb phrase "fluttering ... like a flock of excited butterflies" uses simile to convey the actions of the boarders, and clearly inflects the actions of the "Young Ladies."<sup>29</sup> To thinly describe this strip of behaviour we must pare back that metaphor and choose terms which will more plainly represent that behaviour. A possible paraphrase of this sentence, then, is that the boarders had been awake since six o'clock, had looked at the sunny blue sky, and were now moving about in short, erratic bursts wearing the muslin dresses they kept for special occasions. The passage goes on to say that it was St. Valentine's Day, and that the girls were celebrating through "the interchange of elaborate cards and favours. All were madly romantic and strictly anonymous – supposedly the silent tributes of lovesick admirers."<sup>30</sup> Pared back, this sentence tells the reader that they gave romantic cards to each other anonymously.

It is this behaviour, then, that further character behaviour is interpreted in line with—the reader is asked to make a connection between the giving of romantic cards to whatever other behaviour is described. Sara Waybourne, for instance, is described by another character as writing "poetry. In the dunnie, you know ... all about Miranda."<sup>31</sup> Considered in light of the earlier description of the girls giving each other anonymous, romantic cards for Valentine's Day, it is possible to understand that, at least for Sara, the card giving and the poetry are related by her romantic intentions towards, or queer desire for, Miranda. This reading is enabled by the inclusion of the comment that this poetry was written "in the dunnie," which has possible connotations not only of privacy, but also autoeroticism, secrecy, and vulnerability. This kind of romantic reading is further enabled by fellow student Irma saying that she "[doesn't] believe [Sara] loves anyone in the world except you, Miranda."<sup>32</sup>

The theme of Sara's queer romantic attraction, created in the structured blank of the text which links romantic card giving to the writing of poetry, therefore acts as a background against which Sara's other behaviour can be understood. For instance, she carries a photo of Miranda with her at all times, and, after Miranda's disappearance, falls into a deep depression marked by ongoing illness, and repeatedly asks about Miranda.<sup>33</sup> The more these potentially queer behaviours are described in the text, the more a thick description of Sara's behaviour as queer is enabled. Of course, there are other possibilities for how these separate pieces of textual evidence can be accounted for, which the text does not foreclose.<sup>34</sup> It is possible, for example, that a reader might connect those pieces of information by considering their relationship as pseudo-familial, with



Sara in the position of an adoring younger sister—which still does not necessarily foreclose Sara’s potential queerness. What is important, however, is that none of these possible thick descriptions are foreclosed by the text, and it is therefore in the power of the reader to make sense of the bare behaviour as they see fit. By teasing the thin and thick descriptions apart in this way, the reader is forced to either assert normative heterosexuality *in spite of* what is actually provided by the text, or accept Sara’s potential queerness.

In the 1975 Peter Weir film adaptation of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, we are able to see how Weir’s decisions regarding the portrayal of Sara’s behaviour towards Miranda also enable queer thick description of their relationship, maintaining that space of plurality while drawing attention to Sara’s potential queerness.<sup>35</sup> Of course, there are necessary differences between the texts, as in any adaptation across media. Where written texts often do not need to describe behaviour in great detail, film texts necessarily provide visual evidence of character behaviour, and there is less room to contest the thin description of that behaviour. However, this does mean that a thin description of a film scene must account for what is included in a much more extended way. In this article, I have indented the thin description of film and television scenes in order to clearly separate it from the relevant thick description—in alternate accounts of the relationship between Sara and Miranda, this indented thin description would be very similar, regardless of how different the thick description might be.

To examine, then, the adapted scenes from the novel, I have selected scenes from the film which share common plot points or relevant characters. For instance, where the novel’s card-giving scene lacks description of specific characters giving or receiving cards, the film presents a montage of short clips of individual characters giving each other cards. One of these is of Sara giving a Valentine’s Day card to Miranda.<sup>36</sup>

## SCENE I

The scene opens on a waist-high close-up of Miranda, leaning over a sink filled with flowers and water. Her hair is pulled back, her arms close to her sides, and her hands cupped in the water. She brings her hands, filled with water, up to her mouth and nose twice. She slowly rises and shakes her hands up and down several times. She straightens up fully, and the viewer can now see Sara standing next to the sink. The camera zooms in on Sara, so that Miranda’s shoulders and head are in the frame, out of focus, while Sara stands next to her, now in focus. Sara is holding a card

with her right hand in front of her body, her left hand hanging limp in front of her body. Sara brings her hands together, the card in her left hand, and she holds out the card towards Miranda. Sara's mouth is partly open, her cheeks pull back into a smile, and she touches Miranda's shoulder with her right hand. Miranda takes the card with both hands, then faces Sara and tilts her head to the left. Sara looks at the card, lets go of it, and moves her hands together, back down in front of her body. Miranda looks at the card, then back to Sara, then turns away from Sara towards the camera while looking at the card. Miranda holds the card at shoulder height in both hands. Her cheeks are tight, her lips closed. She continues to look at the card and holds it in her right hand. Sara continues to look at Miranda. Miranda opens her mouth slightly and closes it again, then tilts her head to the right. Sara closes her mouth and slowly looks down. Miranda's mouth opens, she smiles, her head turns to look inside the card as she holds it open. She says, "Meet me love," and as she says "love," her head rises slightly. She continues, "when day is ending." Her mouth closes, then she smiles, wider than before, and half closes the card. Sara looks back up at Miranda.<sup>37</sup>

The bare behaviours performed by Sara in this scene can be thickly described as the result of Sara's queer affection for Miranda. Sara's silence as she gives the card to Miranda, and the fact that she uses both hands to give Miranda the card, indicate that she is nervous about giving her such a romantic item. The romantic lines of the poem, "Meet me love, when day is ending," then reinforce the possibility that she is confessing her queer affection for Miranda. Further, Sara's reverent attitude, indicated by the way she looks down as Miranda reads the card aloud, becomes hopeful when she looks at Miranda again at the end of the scene. The ability of these various factors to be so readily linked as romantic evidence of same-sex desire therefore establishes a theme for their relationship which subsequent scenes must be reconciled with. The only way for a text to disrupt a theme, once it has been established in the mind of the reader, is to foreclose a particular thick description either by explicitly confirming or very heavily enabling another, or by explicitly foreclosing that thick description. Given that the text continues to enable a queer thick description of Sara's desire for Miranda, through actions like staring at Miranda when they are together, and being rendered so upset by Miranda's disappearance that she gets seriously ill, a reading of Sara as same-sex attracted is made possible by the thinly described text, and does not require any suspicious or paranoid interpretative moves. An

alternative reading could, of course, be offered which links these behaviours as merely the performance of romantic desire for the sake of the holiday, without a connection of this to Sara actually experiencing same-sex attraction. Both of these readings are therefore enabled by the thinly described content of the film, and exist within the textual surface simultaneously.

As can be observed, this thick description demonstrates how a queer reading of Sara does not require addressing a presumed heterosexuality—in the process of thickly describing her behaviour, I have merely accounted for what she does in the way that most obviously makes it coherent to me, based on an understanding of what that behaviour may entail. These actions, performed by another character or in a different situation, may not enable queer thick description in the same way that Sara's behaviour here does. It is because of this specificity that this method of separating thin and thick description differs from, say, analysis based on coding. Where queer coding uses a system of symbols known to both creator and audience to indicate queerness, thin and thick description does not rely on that collaboration—it merely requires a reader to justify how they have made sense of what is present on the thinly described textual surface.

The way that the card-giving scene has been portrayed in the 1975 film contrasts starkly with its portrayal in FremantleMedia's 2018 miniseries adaptation.<sup>38</sup> While the modern adaptation still aligns with the description provided by the novel, it actively forecloses the possibility of a queer relationship between the two students.

One of the key distinctions between film and television adaptations is the drastic difference in runtime. In the case of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the 1975 film runs for nearly two hours, while the 2018 miniseries runs for just over five. As a result, where Peter Weir has made decisions to not portray scenes in the film which were described in the novel, the miniseries has often embellished details, or returned to particular scenes from multiple perspectives, in order to fill each episode and maintain narrative consistency. This means that the miniseries adaptation has had the opportunity to provide much more, and much more detailed, visual evidence on its surface. This abundance of visual evidence means that there are more variables that must be considered by the viewer when supplying meaning to the textual blanks and creating coherency across the series as a whole. As a consequence, the miniseries often comes closer to confirming or foreclosing particular possibilities for thick description than either the film or

novel. This is exemplified in Sara and Miranda's separate card-giving scenes, which take place in different episodes.

## SCENE 2

A wide shot of Sara and Miranda, dimly lit, with Sara standing behind a table, face-on to the camera, looking to the right of the frame towards Miranda. Miranda is seated profile to the camera, looking left of the screen towards Sara. They are silhouetted in front of large windows. The windows have large black drapes which have been pulled to the side to reveal lace curtains. On the table is a lamp and two toy horses. The camera slowly begins to zoom in. Sara says, "Beside the creek she sits to rest, her feet as white as purest snow. She dips them in the water blessed, like laughter does that water flow. A lizard up a tree stops still, in silent reverie." As she says "she dips them in the water blessed," Sara moves her right foot from in front of her left ankle and touches her toes to the ground. She tilts her head upwards as she says, "like laughter does that water flow," and moves her right foot to touch the inner side of her left ankle. Her right shoulder drops slightly. Her left foot moves behind her right ankle, and she touches her toenails to the floor. Her head tilts back down to look at Miranda. Her left foot moves back to the left side, and she leans forwards. Her shoulders move up slightly. The shot cuts to a mid-close-up of Miranda. She is looking towards Sara, slightly left of the camera. She moves her right hand up to her chin, which rests on the heel of her palm, fingers curled, elbow on the table in front of her chest. Her left hand moves slightly up, then down, out of the frame. "No one has ever written me a poem," she says. Miranda leans into her hand, and her eyebrows slightly furrow as she says "ever." She exhales, and presses her lips together. Cut to a mid-close-up of Sara as Miranda says, "Thank you, Puss." Sara's head is tilted to her right, and she smiles. She brings her chin back towards her neck, and her head straightens. Sara closes her eyes, then opens them as Miranda says, "Thank you." Sara raises her shoulders slightly, then lowers them again. Her head tilts slightly to the right as she says, "Happy St. Valentine's Day." Her shoulders move up again, then back down. Her head tilts slightly forwards, and her eyes close slightly. Her mouth closes, still in a smile. Cut back to Miranda. Miranda says, "Happy St. Valentine's Day." She is smiling and moving her head up and down as she says it.<sup>39</sup>

This scene, which takes place in episode 1, begins to establish a theme of familial bonds between Sara and Miranda. By positioning Sara as standing, with Miranda sitting and watching her performance of the poem, the scene recalls a child performing for a parent or teacher, an image which is further enforced by the appearance of the actresses' ages. 14 year-old Inez Currõ, who plays Sara, is visually presented as a child, significantly younger than 25 year-old Lily Sullivan's Miranda, who is presented as an adult. This casting decision in and of itself all but forecloses the possibility of queer desire for a contemporary 21<sup>st</sup>-century viewer, as the possibility of romantic or sexual relationship between a child and adult is perceived as taboo. That being said, it is not entirely foreclosed, as Kathryn VanArendonk acknowledges in her 2018 review on Vulture.com.<sup>40</sup>

The content of the poem is also not explicitly romantic, positioning the subject of the poem, presumably Miranda or a Miranda stand-in, as alone in the Australian bush, watched only by a lizard. When contrasted with the highly romantic poem used in the 1975 film, this poem is hardly able to be considered an expression of desire on Sara's part. It is much more effectively explained as a poem in admiration of an older sister, which links the content of the poem with the physical positioning of the two girls, and which is also enabled by Sara's nervous shifting from foot to foot as she reads the poem—she seems anxious to impress Miranda, in the way a child wants to impress those they look up to.

Miranda's behaviour complements Sara's childlike attitude through her calm, grounded position sitting at the piano. She only moves once Sara finishes her recital, leaning forward to smile and thank Sara for the poem using the nickname "Puss," which reinforces the idea that Miranda sees Sara as a pet or small child, and herself as a substitute for an elder sister. The gratification Sara feels at this is shown in the closing of her eyes and movement of her shoulders, relieved that her poem has impressed Miranda. Miranda's laughing "Happy St Valentine's Day" concludes this sequence, further enabling the thick description of this card-giving scene as a light-hearted, platonic play on the romantic ritual, rather than actually motivated by same-sex desire.

This theme is returned to throughout the series and is particularly reinforced in the later card-giving scene, in episode 4.

### SCENE 3

Miranda sits down on Sara's bed, next to Sara. Miranda leans forwards so their faces are almost touching, then leans back again. Cut to a mid-close-

up of Miranda, Sara in the foreground facing away from the camera, making eye contact with Miranda. Miranda's mouth is closed, her right shoulder slightly raised and left shoulder dropped. She moves her torso to the right, levels her shoulders, and contracts the muscles around her top lip for a moment. She lifts her bent left arm, holding a photo frame, and looks down at it. Sara looks down at it as well, head tilted forwards. Cut to a mid-close-up of the photo frame, which has a photo of Miranda in it. Miranda's left hand holds the top end of the frame, thumb over the edge of the frame. Sara's right hand holds the bottom right corner of it, thumb on the glass next to the frame, fingers loosely underneath. Sara grips the photo and moves it closer to her body as Miranda says, "It's from our holiday," and lets her fingers go limp. Miranda runs her thumbnail over the edge of the frame, and Sara's thumb moves slightly across the glass. Cut to a close-up of Sara over Miranda's shoulder. Sara's head is tilted forwards, she is smiling, showing her teeth, and her right shoulder is leaning forwards. She looks up towards Miranda, still smiling, her chin pushed forwards. Cut to a close-up of Miranda over Sara's shoulder. Miranda is looking at Sara, head tilted forwards slightly, smiling, cheeks bunched. Miranda says, "Happy St. Valentine's Day." Her cheeks relax as Sara moves across and back a little. "For tomorrow," Miranda says. Miranda raises her eyebrows slightly and closes her mouth, no longer smiling. Cut back to a mid-close-up of Sara, leaning forwards and smiling. Sara says, "Sisters?" while looking at Miranda, and moves her head forwards more. Cut back to the close-up of Miranda, who says, "That's right." Cut back to Sara, who brings her right arm up to Miranda's left shoulder and leans forwards. Miranda also leans forwards and Sara holds her arm tightly around Miranda's back. She presses the left part of her neck into Miranda's left shoulder, then shuts her eyes and smiles. They rock back and forth once, and Miranda's left hand presses into Sara's back. Miranda tenses her fingers. Cut to a close-up of Miranda, chin over Sara's right shoulder, eyes shut. Her fingers on Sara's back, which are barely visible, move slightly. She opens her eyes, then lifts her head up and moves backwards slowly. She moves her head around in front of Sara's and tilts her head to the left slightly, lips relaxed and slightly open. Miranda is looking down at Sara, who also moves back. Miranda's eyes move up slightly, and she says quietly, "You must learn to love people," her eyebrows move upwards, "other than me." Cut to a

close-up of both of them in profile. Sara, no longer smiling, shuts her eyes, then opens them and moves both her head and her eyebrows up as she makes the noise, “Hm?” and looks at Miranda. Sara closes and opens her eyes quickly twice. Cut to a full body shot with Sara and Miranda slightly out of focus, looking at each other, then Miranda moves her left hand to Sara’s cheek as the camera tracks to the right.<sup>41</sup>

This scene continues to enable the thick description of their relationship as familial, and, further, forecloses the possibility of any other thick description through the explicit confirmation of that sisterly relationship. By including the spoken word “Sisters?” from Sara, the miniseries retroactively guides the viewer on how to synthesise the two scenes by foreclosing the possibility of Sara’s queer desire for Miranda—if a viewer had been making sense of their relationship in line with a non-familial theme, they would be forced to actively reconsider and adjust their reading to incorporate that line.

Miranda’s action of giving Sara a photograph from their holiday at Miranda’s family farm links with several other pieces of information from the series which enable the perception of their relationship as familial. Firstly, it marks the gift giving from the earlier scene as reciprocal, something that they are doing for each other. It also functions as a continuation of their ongoing sisterly relationship in which Miranda took Sara to meet her family, because Sara does not have a family of her own. Further, it acts as a means by which Miranda acknowledges the position she holds for Sara. Accompanied by the line, “You must learn to love people other than me,” and Miranda’s subsequent disappearance, the giving of the photo indicates that Miranda may know or suspect that she will be disappearing from Sara’s life soon. Sara’s naïve response, “Hm?” again recalls a parental or elder sibling relationship dynamic, in which the knowing Miranda gives to and guides the unsuspecting Sara. The scene, made internally consistent by a thick description of their relationship as sisterly, also reaches across the text to link with previous scenes, and enables that thick description across the text as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

Because producers of screen adaptations necessarily make decisions like those described above, regarding the specific embodiment of characters as well as the presentation of particular behaviours and dialogue, they are therefore required to choose which thick description possibilities they enable and foreclose in the

adaptation process. In this way, adaptations guide the viewer in making characters and their relationships coherent across the text.

This is not to value particular adaptation choices or techniques as more or less faithful to the adapted text. We can see that it is not necessary for the heterocentrist trap to be a part of queer reading practices, because there exist many possible options for the thick description for a character's behaviour, only some of which align with normative heterosexuality. This has been demonstrated through my reading of Sara Waybourne and Miranda in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, as an example of a relationship which can be read as queer both without the use of suspicious or paranoid reading methods, and without referring to the presumption of heterosexuality within the reading. Of course, the method that I have demonstrated here is an experimental one and is merely one possible way of accounting for the thinly described textual surface in the context of queer reading.

This methodology becomes especially powerful in the hands of readers who influence the reading of others—people like teachers, parents, and adapters. When a screenwriter, playwright, or director chooses to adapt a particular text, they disseminate a particular reading of a text to an audience. The intertextual connection between an adapted text and its adaptation(s) is particularly close and allows for a kind of comparative discussion which other texts cannot provide in the same way. By opening up the space for adaptations to offer multiple portrayals of the same specific parts of an adapted text, new, queer perspectives of the polysemous nature of texts are made possible. Rather than being bound to the limitations of heterocentrist reading and adaptation practices, this polysemy therefore creates the space for readers and adapters to understand and portray unmarked characters as queer.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2-3.



- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, Wayne Koestenbaum, "Wilde's Hard Labour and the Birth of Gay Reading," in *Readers and Reading*, ed. Andrew Bennett (London: Longman, 1995).
- <sup>3</sup> Anker, Elizabeth S., and Rita Felski, eds. *Critique and postcritique* (Duke University Press, 2017), 16.
- <sup>4</sup> Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 227.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> "Publishing's Contribution to the Wider Creative Industries," (The Publishers Association, 2018).
- <sup>8</sup> Heather Love, "Close Reading and Thin Description," *Public Culture* 25, no. 3 (2013).
- <sup>9</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
- <sup>10</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 88.
- <sup>11</sup> Joan Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1967); Michael Rymer, Larysa Kondracki, and Amanda Brotchie, "Picnic at Hanging Rock," (FremantleMedia, 2018); Peter Weir, "Picnic at Hanging Rock," (British Empire Film, 1975).
- <sup>12</sup> E.S. Anker and R. Felski, *Critique and postcritique* (Duke University Press, 2017).
- <sup>13</sup> D. A. Miller, "Hitchcock's Understyle: A Too-Close View of Rope," *Representations* 121, no. 1 (2013); Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (New York: Verso, 2013).
- <sup>14</sup> Heather Love, "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 375.
- <sup>15</sup> "Close Reading and Thin Description," 403.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.
- <sup>17</sup> Love, "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn."
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.
- <sup>19</sup> Heather Love, "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 385.
- <sup>20</sup> Love, "Close Reading and Thin Description," 403.
- <sup>21</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, x.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.
- <sup>25</sup> Wolfgang Iser, "Interaction between Text and Reader," in *Readers and Reading*, ed. Andrew Bennett (London: Longman, 1995), 24.
- <sup>26</sup> For instance, the wilfully against-the-grain reading proposed in Koestenbaum, "Wilde's Hard Labour."; or, similarly, the reading-as-fantasy described in Claire Whatling, *Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, the description of Sara's condition in *ibid.*, 123.

<sup>34</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 182.

<sup>35</sup> Weir, "Picnic at Hanging Rock."

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 00:07:13-00:07:32; Emily Wotherspoon, "Here and Queer: Moving Past the Heterocentrist Trap," Honours, Australian National University, 2018, 42-3.

<sup>38</sup> Rymer, Kondracki, and Brotchie, "Picnic at Hanging Rock."

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., E1, 21:50-22:15, Wotherspoon; "Here and Queer," 45-6.

<sup>40</sup> Kathryn VanArendonk, "How Does Amazon's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* Compare to the Movie and the Book?" Vulture, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/picnic-at-hanging-rock-amazon-movie-book-differences.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Rymer, Kondracki, and Brotchie, "Picnic at Hanging Rock," E4, 40:03-41:33; Wotherspoon, "Here and Queer," 46-8.