

“I feel like I spent my whole life loving her”: the representation of a relationship  
between two women in Taylor Jenkins Reid’s novel *The Seven Husbands of  
Evelyn Hugo*

Bachelor’s Thesis

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English

December 2022

## JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta – Faculty Humanistis-yhteiskuntatieteellinen tiedekunta	Laitos – Department Kieli- ja viestintätieteiden laitos
Tekijä – Author Emmi-Noora Roos	
Työn nimi – Title “I feel like I spent my whole life loving her”: the representation of a relationship between two women in Taylor Jenkins Reid’s novel <i>The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo</i>	
Oppiaine – Subject Englanti	Työn laji – Level Kandidaatintutkielma
Aika – Month and year Joulukuu 2022	Sivumäärä – Number of pages 18
Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Historiallinen fiktiokirjallisuus avaa lukijalle ovet historiallisiin aikakausiin ja paikkoihin, tarjoten kuitenkin esimerkiksi fiktiiviset tapahtumat ja hahmot. Queer- hahmojen esitys on muuttunut vuosien saatossa, ja esimerkiksi lesbohahmot ovat muuttuneet ongelmia aiheuttavista viettelijöistä tunnetuiksi Hollywood ikoneiksi, sekä ihan tavallisiksi ihmisiksi ympärillämme.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tarkoitus oli selvittää, miten <i>The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo</i> romaanissa kahden naisen välistä suhdetta kuvataan. Tutkimuksessa tutkitaan yhteiskunnan aiheuttamia haasteita, sekä seksuaalisen suuntautumisen aiheuttamia eriäviä näkemyksiä suhteesta. Analyysimetodeina on kriittinen diskurssianalyysi ja feministinen kriittinen diskurssianalyysi.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa huomattiin, että kirjan kahden naisen välinen suhde pidetään piilossa yhteiskunnallisten odotusten takia. Tarina sijoittuu aikakaudelle, jolloin saman sukupuolen välisiä suhteita ei hyväksytty. Kirjan päähenkilö on vahva, mutta parisuhteessa itsekäs eikä ota kumppaniaan huomioon. Suhteen toinen osapuoli ottaa päähenkilön paremmin huomioon, muttei hyväksy tätä itsenään.</p>	
Asiasanat – Keywords critical discourse analysis, feminist critical discourse analysis, queer relationship, LGBTQ+	
Säilytyspaikka – Depository JYX	
Muita tietoja – Additional information	

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## 1. Introduction

Historical fiction is a genre of literature, opera, video games and many more. Historical fictions tell a fictional story that takes place in the past age, conveying the manners and social conditions as realistically as possible (Britannica encyclopedia 24.9.2022). The genre has vague boundaries and often clashes with other genres, such as romance, children's fiction, or gothic fiction. There are some issues with historical fiction, as it is sometimes hard to distinguish the fiction from non-fiction. It can be difficult to confirm the story's accuracy and provenance. (Brown 1998)

*The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017) by an American author Taylor Jenkins Reid is historical fiction at its best. The story sets on modern day Manhattan and travels through Evelyn Hugo's memories of her career and love life in the scandal filled Hollywood starting from the late 1950s. The reader gets to experience Hollywood and people through decades. The novel deals with many topics, such as heterosexual romances, homosexual romances, alcoholism, and domestic violence.

Saresma, Rossi & Juvonen (2012: 41-45) explain that representations are part of societies, but do not explicitly reflect societies' values, but participate in shaping them. Representations are modified in different medias to suit the ideals of the time, by leaning into norms and conventions. Different times can be identified through representations. In literature, representations are chosen by the author.

The protagonist Evelyn Hugo shares many similarities with a Hollywood icon Elizabeth Taylor, who also had many marriages and scandals. In an interview with HuffPost (2017) Jenkins Reid says that one cannot write about an actress in the sixties without crossing paths with Elizabeth Taylor.

Five years after its first publication, the book is 7<sup>th</sup> on the New York Times' list of bestselling paperback trade fictions, and it has stayed on the list for 77 weeks (New York Times, 24.09.2022).

The aim of this study is to find out how the relationship between the two female characters Evelyn Hugo and Celia St. James is represented in the novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*.

## 2. Background

In this section, I will introduce the theoretical framework for this study. First, I will present the analytical frameworks, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA). I will also define representation briefly. In the second part I will discuss female representation in novels. Lastly, I will briefly discuss previous research regarding queer characters in literature.

### 2.1 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

Discourses have the ability and the power to shift what we think about the world, people, and events through language and culture. Discourse studies focus on observing language use in different situations, fields, and contexts. Pälli and Lillqvist (2020: 375) describe that discourse analysis method studies the use of language combining it with observations of social actions. It aims to provide understanding of what language is used for and what kind of social actions it relates to.

Critical discourse analysis adds the critique to the studies. Rather than having just one way of doing critical discourse analysis, there are common guidelines and general ideas how to implement it. This allows CDA to be applied in various topics and to be used in different ways. Critical discourse analysis usually focuses on significant phenomena in societies such as power and ideologies and how these create inequality. Even though the topic of CDA study would be very narrow, it often relates to a larger societal phenomenon such as racism. Critical discourse analysis is interested in studying underlying assumptions and stereotypes in different texts, for example, what is seen as normal and good. (Pälli & Lillqvist 2020: 387-388, 399)

#### 2.1.1 Discourses, representation, and power

It is said that language represents the world. Specifically, this means the way the world is presented and described. As representation literally means presenting matters in a new way, every time something is represented, something new has been added to it. The new

representation can be built on to previous presentations, but every representation is unique. Representation allows us to examine how, from what point of view and with what ways reality is described. Language is able to create meaning due to its representational nature, for example to emotions, events, and thoughts. Representation is also bound to context and previous representations affect the meaning, which connects it to macro-level discourse studies, for example historical progressions, political situations, and ideological battles. (Pietikäinen 2009: Chapter 2.3)

Discourses built our understanding of the surrounding world and the reality of it. They are condensation of linguistic, semiotic, and social actions. Discourses are lasting, systematic, and recognized by the linguistic societies. All of these give discourses power. Pietikäinen recites Foucault in their text, as he has stated that knowledge and power are inseparable and tightly wrapped together. (Pietikäinen 2019: 71-74)

## 2.2 Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA)

Compared to CDA, feminist CDA has a more sophisticated theory of gender. Third-wave feminist and post-structuralists theories have affected the understanding of gender, as it is viewed as fluid and with multiple variables. Gender is constructed socially and individually, and interacts with other aspects of identity, such as ethnicity, age, and sexual identity. (Tapionkaski 2007:5). Lazar (2005: 1) sees that the critical perspective on unequal social arrangements sustained through language use, with the goals of social transformation and liberation, are similar characteristics of both, critical discourse analysis and feminist language studies.

Feminist CDA focuses on empirical studies and the way that gender is constructed in texts and situations. According to Tapionkaski (2007:5) feminist CDA does not understand gender as product of discourse, it is discursively produced. When analyzing gender, the focus is on representation and relationships in their specific contexts (Lazar 2005:11, cited in Tapionkaski 2007:5).

Feminist critical discourse analysis brings together feminist studies with discourse studies. It is interested in studying unequal gendered power relations and forms of empowerment in texts (Tapionkaski 2007: 3). Lazar (2005: 5) states that feminist discourse analysts aim is to critique

discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order. This signifies power relations privileging men as a social group and oppresses women as a social group. One aim is to present that social practices are not neutral but gendered. Lazar (2007:160) states that feminist critical discourse analysis is a form of analytical activism, which pushes the efforts of critical feminists at radical social change. It has been influenced by third-wave feminist and post-structuralist theories (Tapionkaski 2007:5).

### 2.3 Previous research

John Donovan's *I'll Get There* was published in 1969 and it was the first young adult (YA) novel that had gay content. Following Donovan's novel, the number of LGBTQ+ books has noticeably increased. The early novels presented gays in a stereotypical way and often in a negative light. On the contrary, multiple books also presented them as realistic humans, from different backgrounds, ages, and cultures, and as people we encounter with in our daily life, such as neighbors. There has been discussion whether these books are suitable for example educational purposes. Some states have even tried to ban schools and libraries from providing books that deal with LGBTQ+ topic. (Cart & Jenkins 2006: XV-XVII)

The novels with queer topic in the 1970s and 1980s presented characters' coming out voluntarily or involuntarily (Cart & Jenkins 2006:XX). One of the first, and best-known literature piece with lesbian content was published in 1928 by Radclyffe Hall. Cart & Jenkins (2006: 4) explain that in the 50s there was demand for romances with lesbian content. Lesbian characters were not represented in a good light, they were often pictured like seducers and the heterosexual woman had to overcome the deviation, eventually ending up with a man who provided marriage, home, and children. The lesbian character often died or ended up in a mental hospital.

### **3. Research aim, and question**

The aim of this study is to find out how the relationship between the two female characters is presented in the novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. In the study I will attempt to answer the following question:

- How the relationship of the two female characters is represented in the historical fiction novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*?

As the novel is historical fiction, it is not based on reality. But as mentioned before, historical fiction sets imaginary people and events in a real place or time, I will take the era it sets to in consideration in the analysis. In order to analyze the novel, I will also take context into consideration, as it is important for the overall understanding of the nature of the relationship. The analysis aims to answer the research question based on the descriptions of the protagonist's story in the novel as she describes her life and her love interests.



## 4. Data and methods

In this section I will introduce the data of my research. I will explain what the data consists of and the reason for choosing it. Then I will tell how the data was gathered and why. Lastly, I will introduce the analyzing method and why that method was chosen.

### 4.1 Data

The data consists of the novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. Although the book was published in 2017, its popularity has risen through for example the social media platform TikTok. The data is document-based, meaning it was collected from already existing document, in this case, from the novel. I chose this novel because I had heard a lot of good things about it, and I was curious. I found the protagonist interesting, and the structure of the novel intrigued me.

As the focus of this study is to study how the relationship between two female characters is represented, the data was collected by choosing some examples where the relationship is described directly or indirectly. As the novel is called *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, it handles Evelyn's marriages with seven males. In the analysis section, I will talk about these marriages briefly, if necessary, to provide important context to the analyzed examples.

The novel is constructed by starting in the modern-day Manhattan, where the protagonist Evelyn Hugo is being interviewed by a journalist Monique Grant. The narration jumps between the current time when she wants to give content for her memoir, and the memories she talks about. So, there are two stories told at the same time, both narrated in their individual chronological order. All of Evelyn's marriages have been very different from each other, some were tied due to love, and some were staged to protect her reputation. She's suffered domestic violence, been with men with alcoholism, but also been in a platonic loving marriage that even gave her a daughter. Sadly, she never got to be in an official marriage with the one she truly loved: Celia St. James, a former competitor, co-star, and the love of her life. The women did have a relationship a few times, broke up a couple of times, but eventually ended up together until Celia passed away. Throughout her life, Evelyn never confessed having a romantic

relationship with a woman, but as her time is coming to an end due to cancer, she decides that she wants the world to know her real story and decides to come clean in her memoir. She never had to face any consequences caused by the revelations of her memoir, because she took her life soon after the interview was completed.

## 4.2 Methods

The data was analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA). These analyzing methods are the most suitable when it comes to analyzing content from a critical point of view. Tapionkaski (2007: 9) points out that CDA takes social context in consideration and notes that context can be defined in multiple ways. As an example, they bring up social situation including specific gender relations between participants, which suits the main focus of my study. Tapionkaski also points out that feminist critical discourse analysis focuses on social emancipation, which I find particularly suitable for this study.

One aspect of critical discourse analysis is to study intersectionality. When an individual fits into two or more categories of social hierarchies such as age, gender, sexual orientation, and race impact simultaneously their life, it is intersectionality. It is often part of feminist studies, therefore making it relevant to this study. It is important to note, that the author has already made the choices regarding what kind of characters there are in the book. Tapionkaski (2007: 10) also points out that the author might have made the choices for example on what kind of gendered characters they have presented, to gain a certain audience. By choosing to write about queer characters, the author has most likely aimed to have young audience, because nowadays LGBTQ+ is a very popular topic and gains a big young audience.

## 5. Analysis

I have divided this section into three parts. First, I will introduce the context of the book, because it is important when analyzing the relationship. After that I will briefly talk about the sexual orientation of the characters Evelyn and Celia, for it brings important aspects to the analysis of the relationship. Lastly, I will analyze the relationship, and how the previously mentioned categorizations affect it. As previously mentioned, the genre of the novel is historical fiction, meaning that it is fiction, but it can be set on real time and place. I will analyze the novel with the assumption of it being based in the actual historical times and places, but the characters are fictive.

### 5.1 Context

To understand the nature of the characters' relationship, it is important to explain the social context. Evelyn's memories start from her teenage years in the 1950s, when the society's structure was different from the book's current time, as it was published in 2017. She was a young woman of Cuban heritage, coming from a poor background. This already puts her in minority groups. In the 1950s the society was more sexist and very racist compared to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For a very long time Evelyn hid her ethnical background, even changing her last name to Hugo from Diaz, which was her first husband's last name. This was to make her more appealing to the audiences at the time. She even dyed her hair blonde to get roles, as "bombshell" look was popular at the time.

As the story goes on and Evelyn starts to explore her sexual orientation, it is important to note that the society was very homophobic in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It could have been dangerous to admit being part of the LGBTQ+ community during those times. At one point of the novel, setting on the early 1960s, Celia wants to go public with their relationship, but Evelyn refuses as it is dangerous and could lead to ending up in prison or mental hospital. Although the story is fictional, it is something that queer people have had to be afraid of in the history, and even today, it is illegal to be homosexual in some countries and many religions forbid it.

## 5.2 The characters' sexuality

As the aim of this study is to analyze the relationship between two women, it is important to understand their sexualities. Already in the title of the book it is revealed that Evelyn has been in relationships with men. She has loved men and ends up falling in love with a woman, and she identifies herself as a bisexual. On the page 130 of the novel, Evelyn admits to her friend Harry that she is not heterosexual: (1) *"I might be, and Celia might be too."* This confession happened after a party where she and Celia kissed for the first time, and Evelyn found out that her husband had cheated on her.

Celia however told that she only loves women, but she did marry a man in order to fool the public about her relationship with Evelyn. Something that caused friction in Evelyn and Celia's relationship was, that Celia belittled and blamed Evelyn for her sexual orientation.

As previously mentioned, being part of the LGBTQ+ community was most often hidden due to the possible consequences. The lack of queer models increases the threshold of one's sexual exploration, and they discussed the lack of publicly queer people. Evelyn was open about her bisexuality to Celia, but it was an issue to her and caused jealousy. Evelyn felt like Celia never truly accepted her, and it even caused them to break up.

(2) *"I hated being called a lesbian. Not because I thought there was anything wrong with loving a woman, mind you. No, I'd come to terms with that a long time ago. But Celia only saw things in black and white. She loved women and only women. And I like her. And so she often denied the rest of me"* (page 238)

## 5.3 Evelyn and Celia's relationship

Evelyn and Celia's relationship was rocky. They started as competitors and colleagues, eventually fell in love but throughout the years their relationship was on and off. Due to the previously presented societal restraints, they never admitted their relationship during their lifetimes. After the incident around the events of example (1) they started to see each other in secret. After a while, Evelyn got a divorce from her husband, Evelyn admits to Celia that she loves her and their relationship blooms.

On some pages of the novel, there are fictive news articles, and on page 167, there is one where the nature of Evelyn and Celia's relationship is speculated. As they were spotted holding hands in a concert and Celia's car has been parked in front of Evelyn's house so often. To cover their relationship and to make people forget about the speculations, Evelyn decides to go on a date with a famous musician Mick Riva. She ends up with a plan of marrying him in Vegas, and once the reality sets in the next morning, they decide to get an annulment. After two months since her rapid marriage in Vegas, Evelyn finds out she's pregnant. Celia is furious because she wasn't aware that Evelyn and Mick were intimate. Evelyn and Celia have a huge fight, since Celia thought that Evelyn was a lesbian like her, but Evelyn points out that she can love a man, and that she is a bisexual. They end up ending their three-year relationship. After that, they did not have any contact for five years.

Later during the interview Monique asks Evelyn if being bisexual put a strain on her relationship with Celia. She denies it, but it is clear that every time they had a huge argument, it had something to do with Evelyn being with a man. Evelyn says, "Being bisexual didn't make me disloyal" (Page 271). She reasons that she was being selfish by using men to get what she wants and discarding Celia's feelings. Even though Evelyn explains that her sexuality wasn't the cause of their relationship to fall apart, it did in fact influence it. Israel and Mohr (2004: 122-123) discussed the loyalty of bisexual women and men in their article. For example, they found that bisexual individuals are perceived more disloyal than heterosexuals and unable to stay monogamous. Considering the belief presented in the article, Celia's worries of Evelyn's loyalty are understandable. Evelyn tried to convince Celia that her reasons being with a man has nothing to do with disloyalty and blames their problems on Celia's lack of trust.

After the breakup, Evelyn was heartbroken and wanted to focus on her career. She married another man who she was working with on a movie, to lure more viewers. They ended up divorcing because he fell in love with another woman. Evelyn's best friend Harry suggests that they get married and raise a family together. It would make both of their lives easier, so that they can fool everyone else about being married but can have their individual love lives without hurting anyone. Evelyn accepts his idea, and they decide to get married.

Evelyn and Harry are engaged as they attend a party together, and Evelyn sees Celia for the first time in a long time. After both losing an award, they meet at the restroom and clear things out. They make up for the fight and decide to continue their romantic relationship (3) "*Because now we both knew what we're willing to risk. Just to be together.*" (Page 231)

Next, Harry and Evelyn tie the knot, and Celia is married to a football player John, who is in a relationship with Harry. Now the four of them can live happily, hiding their true relationships from the judgmental society. (4) *“Harry and John were in love. Celia and I were sky-high”* (Page 233)

After Evelyn has a child with Harry, her relationship dynamics with Celia gets a little complicated. As Evelyn focuses on being a mother, Celia wants her to get back to acting. (5) *“She had said, Go, have a baby. But she had meant to add, Just don’t act like a mother.”* (Page 251)

Celia has always been possessive over Evelyn, and when Evelyn asks if filming a sex-scene is okay with her, she hesitates. What she didn’t know, is that at the time Evelyn had already done it. After Evelyn confesses to Celia that she indeed had already done the scene, it breaks Celia, and she decides to leave Evelyn. (6) *“All I’ve ever wanted was for you to be truly mine. But you’ve never been mine”*. (Page 267) They previously broke up due to Evelyn’s sexual encounter with a man, and now the history repeats itself. Even after being devastated after their previous break up, it seems like Evelyn learned nothing from that, and once again hurts Celia’s feelings knowing that she would not be okay with her actions.

Celia and Evelyn had not been in contact. A long time after their breakup Celia says something during her award acceptance speech that only Evelyn could understand. This encourages Evelyn to write to Celia and they keep sending each other letters, and eventually calling and agreeing to meet. At the time, Evelyn is in her sixth marriage and her husband finds out about the letters and figures out that something is going on between the two women. Evelyn admits to her husband that she has always loved Celia. After her husband indicates that he can destroy her career and life by telling everyone, Evelyn decides to ignore his empty threats. She even tells Celia that at the age of fifty, she is tired of being concerned about others and wants to be happy with who she wants to. This shows that Evelyn has grown and wants to focus on her own happiness, disregarding what the public thinks of her. It might also be related to her age, as she does not expect to get many roles anymore.

Unfortunately, Celia is terminally ill with a lung disease, and she is concerned if Evelyn can handle that. They decide that Evelyn divorces her husband and marries Celia’s brother for a cover up, so that they can move to Spain together. They live there happily for over a decade, and even symbolically got married. Legally Evelyn is married to Celia’s brother, but as they knew they did not have a lot of time left, they wanted to make a pact between them. Six years

after marrying each other in the comfort of their home, Celia passed away due to her illness. Their decision to move to Spain is due to wanting privacy, although Evelyn starred in a movie that was an international hit. Even though Evelyn's character showed some development, the decision to move to Spain can be interpreted as wanting to hide, but considering their social statuses as celebrities, it is also understandable wanting privacy during their retirement.

After Celia passed away, Evelyn moved back to Manhattan to be closer to her child. Evelyn and her husband, Celia's brother, donated Celia's money to LGBTQ+ organizations and lung disease research. They had been donating money to LGBTQ+ organizations before, but they had to do it in secret, but by doing this, Evelyn became more transparent.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyze how the relationship between two women is represented in a historical fiction novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. Evelyn and Celia's relationship is complex and has a lot of difficulties. Although Evelyn loves Celia, she also has had quite a few relationships with men. Evelyn has a habit of using her body and looks to get what she wants from men, and by doing so, she often hurts Celia's feelings. Evelyn's behavior and Celia's trust issues are the reason for their breakups.

Taking the societal situation in consideration, it is understandable why Evelyn and Celia's relationship is kept hidden. As mentioned previously, the novel was analyzed with the assumption that it is based on the actual historical times and places. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the society was homophobic, and as explained previously, coming out as non-heterosexual could have been dangerous. Evelyn and Celia's relationship was not very equal in terms of loyalty. Evelyn claims that all her actions were made to keep their relationship hidden and safe. As previously discussed, some beliefs say that bisexuality means disloyalty. Celia's reactions and feelings towards Evelyn's behavior are understandable and justified, as she never did anything similar. She only married a man in order to have a cover up for their relationship, and that man was gay who needed a cover for his relationship as well.

Although being in love with one another, the difference in their sexual orientation put a weight on their relationship. Celia can come out as possessive, but Evelyn's behavior did not assure Celia of her loyalty, quite the opposite. Celia's unwavering opinion on Evelyn's bisexuality did not enhance their relationship as it left Evelyn feeling unaccepted.

*The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* is an enchanting story about forbidden love and unjust society. Even though the story is wrapped with Hollywood glamour, it also talks about difficult topics such as domestic violence, loss of loved ones and suicide. Evelyn had to face a lot of bad things in her life, but she was able to get her happy ending with Celia and have the kind of end she wants. The story also presents an unconventional family, when Evelyn has a child with her best friend Harry. In the previous research section, typical characterization of lesbians in literature was presented, and comparing Jenkin Reid's novel, society has come a long way. Lesbian women don't need to choose a man in order to have a child, Evelyn and Harry had



their own way of having a family, but it accommodated their needs, and they were able to have a family despite being in relationships with the same sex.

Jenkins Reid's way of writing gets the reader addicted and craving for more, as the story has many turns. As the novel is about a strong female character, written by a female author, most likely aimed at young female audience, it radiates feminism. The protagonist comes out as a femme fatale who can do almost anything she wants, but it also presents her as disloyal, unfaithful, and selfish. Celia is described as possessive, but it is not surprising that someone would react like that after being lied to. The story also shows forgiveness as they end up forgiving each other. Even though Evelyn is part of a minority due to her heritage, that does not seem to be an issue. Considering intersectionality, gender and young age seemed to be the only aspects affecting her. Analyzing through feminist discourse analysis, Evelyn seems like a strongly feminist character. When needing something from men, she is always in charge and has the whole thing planned out. On the contrary, one can wonder if it is very feminist of her to use her body as a negotiation tool.

The scope of this study is very limited, but it offers an insight to the studied relationship. Comparing each of Evelyn's seven marriages with one another could be studied further, or just focusing on one of them. There are a lot more to study in this novel, for example the surprising relationship between Evelyn and the interviewer Monique, that is revealed towards the end of the novel.

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