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The Unfinished Woman: Images of Single Women in Wharton, Parker, and Paley

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THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE

CERTIFICATE OF ORAL EXAMINATION

Erin Wolverton, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in Fall 1999 successfully presented the Lee Honors College Thesis on April 3, 2003.

The title of the paper is:

"The Unfinished Woman: Images of Single Women in Wharton, Parker, and Paley"

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Katherine Joslin", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Katherine Joslin, American Studies and English

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Gwen Raaberg", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Gwen Raaberg, English and Women's Studies

Is the life of a single woman really worth living?

The question permeates the culture of the post-feminist era. Women without children and without a committed relationship in their lives can be categorized in two ways: those who deliberately dismiss the idea of a spouse and those who have not found an acceptable one yet. Both categories carry their own social stigmas: a woman who can't trap a man is a failure, a woman who doesn't want one is unnatural. These prejudices have been a part of women's unconscious behavior since the earliest days of feminism.

Women's literature is produced under the shadow of men's expectations and standards of womanhood. Female characters are supposed to have reached their happy, inevitable conclusion when they marry and establish a home for the purpose of producing children. Why, when male characters might meander through their lives as constantly evolving, growing individuals, must women unfailingly hit a dead end? Is marriage really the height of ambition for a female character? If a man's story need not end with a wedding, why must hers? Does marriage complete the identity of a woman?

Portrayals of single women in literature or popular media have always walked a tightrope of contradictions. Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) brazenly declared that she had no wish to marry for any reason other than love; such an intelligent, idealistic woman as Elizabeth certainly deserves more expansive a future than the wife-of-the-manor post she adopts at the novel's finish, however charming a husband Mr. Darcy might be. That such a similarly intelligent, idealistic woman as the novel's author, Jane Austen, could find no other conclusion for Elizabeth speaks volumes about the restrictions of the time period.

Yet the question remains today. Elizabeth's modern-day counterpart, Bridget Jones of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) has a job, her own apartment, and an intimate urban family composed of fellow 'singletons': a full, involving life. So why is all her mental and physical energy concentrated on the pursuit of a man? For Bridget and millions of other women in her situation, the single life is temporary. Why do they uphold this cultural negation of the single woman? Is it because they are truly dissatisfied with what they have? Or is it because everyone else they know assumes that they are?

Women are producing, in mass numbers, stories of women who search for their identities. However, historically and socially, a woman's identity is tougher to unearth. Oppressed for centuries by men, women write in the company of those who are disenfranchised, whether by

race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or personal philosophy. Men established language and created the classical works, accepted as great, from which women learn about life and literature. This adds a new layer of discovery to women's study: how does the identity of a woman develop as it contends with the oppressive social structures that exist even today? In a male-defined culture, a woman must consider womanhood before she may consider personhood, or attempt to synthesize the two. Fortunately, great female authors Edith Wharton, Dorothy Parker, and Grace Paley have all written extensively on the subject.

By sometimes closely examining the learned feminine insecurities which compel a woman to seek out male companionship, sometimes satirizing it, sometimes dissecting how men and women react to each other and sometimes taking men out of the equation all together, Wharton, Parker, and Paley, in their writings, have always incited discussion. By flatly denouncing the easy answers society has ready-made for women in literature (few, if any, of these women's works end with a wedding), these authors allow potential for ambiguity in the lives of their characters and women in general. All three write of women as subjects worthy of study in their own right; no doubt, authors such as these, by creating well-rounded, intriguing characters, inspire the women who read their works to consider their own natures. Grace Paley suggested she was inspired herself when she said, "In writing poetry I wanted to talk to the world, I wanted to address the world, so to speak. But writing stories, I wanted to get the world to explain itself to me, so to speak."

Though these women lived in different historical periods, in dramatically different social and economic circumstances, with different personal and political affiliations, all three were concerned with the issue of being a woman, and wrote as a means of exploring cultural expectations and the consequences of such. To speculate about the experience of the single woman is to perpetuate the same stereotypes writers like Parker, Paley, and Wharton avoid (or exploit), and so their examinations are as diverse as their backgrounds; however, frequent similarities do occur throughout. All are concerned with the double standards of behavior that hold women responsible for actions that men commit without penalty, particularly as they impact romantic or sexual relationships. All note the desire of women for self-determination, or at least, a strong sense of individuality, and how these desires may be stifled by relationships with men. Most continuously, all three women explore the question of marriage and the attendant issues. What does a woman sacrifice to be a wife? What does a woman sacrifice by not being one?

Does marriage chart the course for a woman's future, and to what extent? How does a woman set her own standards for her marriage, or can she? Who makes and enforces the unwritten rules? Most of all, how does marriage, as a cultural institution, affect a woman, married or single, in her social and personal lives?

The explorations given by Parker, Paley, and Wharton throughout their short stories point to both cultural imperatives and individual anxieties as significant factors in "the marriage question". They examine how a single woman can experience freedom and constraint, mingle self-importance and loneliness, and how she may feel a great responsibility to those around her, despite being self-sufficient. The varied findings of these three authors suggests that none of them found a hard-and-fast answer to their questions about single female life, unearthing any number of contradictions in the psyches of single women, and no constancies.

Even in the current social environment, it is arguable that a double standard of behavior exists for men and women. Cultural standards dictate that certain acts, thoughts, or ambitions are 'unwomanly' and to be avoided at all costs. Author Grace Paley explores the male-female double standard particularly as it relates to marriage and parenthood. She shows in her works how a woman is saddled with the responsibility of raising the children, and of maintaining the marriage, as though it may be maintained entirely through the energies of just one partner. Further, she examines the pressure for young women, no matter how well educated, independent, or ambitious they may be, to marry. She writes humorously of the subject with characters like man-hungry Dotty Wasserman in "The Contest" and self-sufficient social worker Alexandra in "Enormous Changes at the Last Minute", and with stories like the aptly titled "In This Country, But in Another Language, My Aunt Refuses to Marry the Men Everyone Wants Her To".

Paley, in interviews about her personal life, recounts how her parents encouraged her to pursue a career in law or medicine while endlessly urging her not to forget about boys. (Satz 195) While they saw a career as a perfectly valid choice for a woman to make, they questioned a woman who would sacrifice a husband to that end; in keeping with this mindset, Paley became a wife long before she became serious about writing.

In the world of courtship, double standard rules abound; for generations, women were taught that they must allow men to pursue them without appearing willing or eager. Dorothy Parker plays off this idea in the early story, "A Telephone Call", which gives an account of a

woman waiting for a call she expected to receive from a man. The call nearly two hours late, the woman obsesses about his inattention but finds herself unable to break the unwritten rules of male-female relations by calling him herself.

Told exclusively through a monologue of the narrator's thoughts, the characters retain the anonymity of the "I" and "he" pronouns, and the only background information must be culled from those remarks of the narrator that relate specific incidents. "He couldn't have minded my calling him up," she assures herself, speaking evidently of something that happened earlier in the day. "He couldn't have thought I was bothering him." (Parker 119) Through the mentally spoken worries of the main character, the reader comes to understand the dynamic of the characters' relationship as well as the narrator's personal struggles with it.

This technique, often employed by Parker in her "he said-she said" stories, lends a sense of universality to the plot. In fact, the narrator's usage of "he" often changes in mid-thought to become "they": "I know you shouldn't keep telephoning them—I know they don't like that." (Parker 119) She refers, of course, to men as a general group; she has received a cultural education that informs her what men expect from women, what they like and what drives them away. Writes Sondra Melzer in *The Rhetoric of Rage: Women in Dorothy Parker*, "the entire monologue is structured as a female response to the demands of a male-identified social context; the speaker's passivity, accommodation, and frustration are the expected characteristics of her role." (53)

The main character shows the "female response" in a number of ways, often sliding imperceptibly from one emotion to the next. Running the gamut of intense emotions, she is by turns angered, desperate, or distraught. "They don't like you to cry," she worries, moving without a beat on to, "He doesn't cry. I wish I could make him cry. I wish I could make him cry and tread the floor and feel his heart heavy and big and festering in him. I wish I could hurt him like hell." (Parker 121) The narrator experiences nearly blind (not to mention unladylike) rage at the male antagonist's expense.

She likewise shows anger with another figure that might be considered the third character in the story: God. Addressing her pleas to "God" and getting no answer in return, she speaks with increasing ire. "You think You're frightening me with Your hell, don't You?" she asks. "You think Your hell is worse than mine." (Parker 121) When she declares, "Nothing can touch You; no one can twist Your heart in his hands," (Parker 120) she seems almost jealous of God's

omnipotence. There is an easy correspondence between the man whose call she awaits and the God she accuses of indifference. Both figures know why he hasn't called and neither stir to inform her of this fact. Their control of the situation stands in direct contrast to the narrator's tortuous ignorance: "Make me know, please make me know," (Parker 123) she pleads, late in the story.

The narrator's ambivalent feelings towards God recall in other ways her feelings towards the man for whom she waits. Though she feels the sting of his rejection, letting his inattention weaken her self-esteem, she also experiences moments of frustration at the social system that has conspired to place her next to the phone with no clear course of action rather than to wait. She makes the point several times where her lover was when she called: the office. Meanwhile, her idleness is palpable. "I'll put the clock in the other room. Then I can't look at it. If I do have to look at it, then I'll have to walk into the bedroom, and that will be something to do." (Parker 120) His employment, however simple it may be, wields his importance over the narrator, who appears to never feel busy, or, by extension, sought-after. The relationship is subject to the man's time, effort, and whims, because she is culturally bound not to make any decisive moves or appear too easily won.

Besides the call she has placed before the span of the story begins, the protagonist shows one very specific way in which she has overstepped the expectations of the female. Amid her pleas to God, she professes both guilt and shamelessness when she admits that she and her absent caller have had a physical relationship. Though there is nothing to suggest that the act happened without her consent, it's evident that she has felt remorse about 'giving in'. "The emerging view of women revolves around the notion that, as a woman, the protagonist is forced to walk the delicate line between the expectations of her social role and the desires of her inner self." (Melzer 60) In this case, she has let the one overtake the other and found that the social consequences are more serious than she realized. The entire narrative carries an unspoken suggestion that since the relationship has been consummated, her boyfriend has cut all ties and moved on.

A later Parker story, "The Waltz", humorously examines the opposite predicament: an unworthy, unwanted man whose attentions cannot be discarded. Not wanting to appear disagreeable, she follows the unwritten laws of female comportment, with the end result of her own discomfort and pain.

Like “A Telephone Call”, the story follows the inner workings of one woman’s mind, though, in this case, the monologue is broken up sporadically by words actually spoken by the main character to her dancing partner. A hilarious juxtaposition ensues as the protagonist repeatedly contradicts herself, saying, “I’d love to waltz with you,” and thinking immediately afterwards, “I’d love to have my tonsils out.” (Parker 48) She pulls off a series of poisonous insults, all the while playing the part of the obliging female, pretending to be grateful for the young man’s attention and pandering to his ego: “Why, I think it’s more of a waltz, really.” (Parker 48)

Her choice of words and inflections are ardently feminine when she speaks to her suitor, and much rougher when she thinks without speaking. Additionally, she is forced by her circumstances to be enthusiastic and pleasant with a man for whom she has no respect. As a single woman, she is immediately faced with the responsibility of entertaining any man who deigns to show her attention. Says Sondra Melzer, “Just as she is verbally trapped and physically trapped, she is socially trapped by male cultural imperatives that complete her purgatory.” (106) Again, the reader gets a picture of a system by which male desires prescribe a woman’s behavior.

Throughout the story, Parker exploits extremely unusual imagery, that of pain, illness, eternity, and death. “Being struck dead would look like a day in the country, compared to struggling out a dance with this boy,” (Parker 47) the main character declares, and later, “I suppose I ought to think myself lucky if he brings me back alive.” (Parker 49) She refers to their “*danse macabre*” and the brief stopping of the orchestra as “silence like the sound of angel voices.” (Parker 51) She jokes about contagious diseases and broken bones, and the possible mental retardation of her partner.

And yet, says Melzer, “The cloak of comedy [does] little to disguise the realities of female rage engendered by accommodations to please men.” (108) Melzer goes on to suggest that the images of physical pain being perpetrated upon the narrator’s body are less symbolic than the casual reader imagines. Parker’s choice words “all invoke a note of feminine violation as the waltz becomes a metaphor for rape.” (105) Indeed, the lack of specific context in the story leaves the actual meanings open to interpretation. Lines in which she ponders “kill[ing] him this instant, with my naked hands” (Parker 48) and asserting, “Die he must, and die he shall, for what he did to me,” (Parker 48) appear as humorous hyperbole but could also carry just the kind of irony Dorothy Parker was known for producing in her fiction.

Paula A. Treichler concurs with this theory in her article, "Verbal Subversions in Dorothy Parker: 'Trapped Like a Trap in a Trap'". Parker's usage of language, she states, "is unmistakably sexual, and reveals the waltz as a metaphor for sexual intercourse, with its familiar contrasts between elegant ideals and clumsy, painful realities." (54) Whatever the interpretation, it's clear that the protagonist has a great deal of anger against woman's position in society as it is symbolized by the endless, awkward waltz. With this dance, "the speaker squarely faces the grim reality of the male-empowered hierarchy she has so maligned. She adopts the self-effacing female language of survival and clings to her male partner, as she knows she must, affirming in the last analysis that the dance is life." (Melzer 108)

The character's position as the last woman at her table forces her to consent to the dance with her dream man. "There was I, trapped," she asserts. "Trapped like a trap in a trap." (Parker 47) As usual, Parker's quick wit underlies a social context. Her narrator is quite literally trapped (by the dance) which resembles a trap (the marriage contract) within a trap (the male-dominated society). A number of throwaway lines clarify the dance as a metaphor both for a marriage and for a life sentence. She guesses wryly that the dance has lasted "thirty-five years" (Parker 50), a loaded choice of number which suggests both the age of a woman past her social prime and the duration of a rock-solid marriage. "We're going on like this, Double-Time Charlie and I, throughout eternity," continues the protagonist. "I suppose I won't care any more, after the first hundred thousand years." (Parker 50) Her message is abundantly clear. As the story finishes, the narrator's inept partner secures her for another dance; for the rest of her life, she is locked into this waltz, bound by society to fake interest in boring men, sacrifice her own needs, and accept their abuse without outspoken complaint. The final line is funny, ironic, and ultimately chilling: "I'd simply adore to go on waltzing." (Parker 51)

The waltzing woman finds herself forced to uphold a recognized law of the single woman: she must never resist the advances of a willing man. As the narrator of "A Telephone Call" finds out, seeking out a man on her own is likewise detrimental. These facts place the entire responsibility of courtship on the man. However, once the relationship has been established, particularly within in a sexual context, social restrictions and biology conspire to place the whole of the responsibility on the woman.

One of Dorothy Parker's most interesting and obscure stories, "Lady With a Lamp" stands years ahead of its time in its treatment of a topic controversial even today: abortion.

Obviously an illegal act at the time Parker was writing, the story casually asserts several truths: that despite their illegality, abortions occurred frequently, that they often occurred among unmarried women, and most surprisingly, that the act could represent the selfishness of the man involved rather than the woman. By writing sympathetically of Mona, a woman who has defied the standards of her day, Parker defies it doubly.

In “Lady With a Lamp”, a young but rapidly aging woman named Mona is visited on her sickbed by an older, married woman acquaintance. The older woman has guessed the reason for Mona’s sudden “illness” and makes frequent mention of it; however, Mona’s protests speak of her embarrassment and Parker’s loaded pauses and unceremoniously slashing of dialogue (“you might have let me know that you had—well, that you were so *tired*”(Parker 246)) remind the reader of the censorious restrictions of the period. With this in mind, the principles of the story seem all the more surprising.

Discussion of the issue of abortion leads immediately to the question of who, in the event of an unplanned pregnancy, is the responsible party? In this case, the pressure falls entirely on Mona, who is revealed to have made the decision without the intervention of her boyfriend, Garry. She claims to have never considered marrying him (Parker 249) but recognizes that single motherhood in her time and society are not an option, an idea which is backed up by her friend: “You’d have had to go live abroad and never see anybody, and—And even then, somebody would have been sure to have told it sometime.” (Parker 250) Her future as a pariah too bleak to consider, Mona opts to have the abortion.

What makes the story so unique for its time is the pains Parker takes to keep Mona from being the villain of the tale. She is portrayed as “little and white” (Parker 246), or diminutive and pure, and ultimately blameless in her relationship with Garry, who is revealed over the course of the story to be a cheater and a liar. If there is a victim involved in “Lady With a Lamp”, it’s the perceived ‘sinner’, Mona. Her actions seem simply a reaction to the horrible treatment she’s experienced at the hands of others.

Equally surprising is the portrayal of Mona’s older friend. Garry, who heartlessly impregnates Mona and then drops her, is an acknowledged evil in the story; only the tone and the subtext can identify Mona’s friend as another. As she cheerfully ruminates on her dream life as a wife and mother, chides Mona for her independence (“now, Mona, there *is* such a thing as being too much of a heroine” (Parker 249)), and informs Mona of Garry’s infidelity, the older woman

exposes herself as an antagonist. She unkindly patronizes Mona, comparing her in her state of recuperation to a “wounded animal” (Parker 247) and upsets her with judgment of Mona’s conduct. She suggests that though getting herself pregnant was idiotic enough, her acceptance of Garry as a worthy lover despite his infidelities is completely pathetic. “Really, Mona! I’d have more pride.” (Parker 252) Her indictment of Mona for Garry’s behavior suggests that he, as a man, can’t help but be selfish and unkind to her, and that the fault truly lies with Mona for allowing it. The irony of this view is that by accepting Garry’s behavior as that of the average man, the older woman herself enables the cultural double standard which blames the woman for the man’s conduct.

This view of the older woman is furthered by her comments on the idea of a marriage between Garry and Mona. “I can frankly and honestly say,” she assures Mona, “if he married you, I’d absolutely let bygones be bygones” (Parker 249). The comportment of a husband, unlike that of a woman, has no judge, and, for Mona’s friend, marriage carries an automatic legitimacy.

Though it seems that Mona has won the day for the single woman by carrying the commiseration of the reading audience, legendary cynic Parker does not allow “Lady With a Lamp” to be a ray of hope for the future. Through a shrewd manipulation of the narrative structure, Dorothy Parker adopts the older woman’s view as that of the majority of society. The story, like many of Parker’s, consists of a spoken monologue by the older friend. Mona’s reactions to what she says and answers to her questions are only portrayed through the spoken words of the older friend. As such, Mona represents the unheard cries of a woman struggling against the cultural expectations of her role, and her older friend, the narrator, represents the voice of said culture, allowing no protest, drowning her out.

Another avowed social critic, Edith Wharton, looks at the cultural double standards for women from a variety of angles in the late story, “Atrophy”. Like “Lady With a Lamp”, this story shows how a woman can be just as devoted to cultural stereotypes as the men who defined them. Pitting against one another a married, adulterous woman and an irreproachable spinster, Wharton creates one of the most unflattering, and, somehow, saddest portraits of a single woman. Likewise, the story makes a mockery of social values and explores the power struggle between female rivals as they vie for the attention of a man, both topics well trod by Wharton.

In “Atrophy”, a well-bred and well-behaved society wife, Nora Frenway, takes a giant risk by voyaging into the country unaccompanied to visit her former lover. Having heard that he may be at death’s door, Nora pays no more heed to appearances; she doesn’t care whether or not the other travelers know where she is going and why. However, once at her lover Christopher’s home, she finds herself locked into small talk with his caretaker sister, Jane. An ‘old maid’ who has devoted her entire existence to looking after her brother, Jane politely refuses entrance to the young man’s sickroom and turns a speechless Nora away. Jane gets the ‘last word’ quite literally as she calls out to Nora’s retreating taxi a message regarding Nora’s husband.

As the two women face one another in the dying man’s sitting room, they hide their loathing for one another under a guise of politeness. Nora thinks unkindly, and at length, of Jane’s simple life: calling her a “dowdy and insignificant old maid” (Wharton 508) whose “life [is] filled to the brim by looking after the Westover place for her brother” (Wharton 503). She wonders why she feels so helpless against someone who is so “weak” (Wharton 508). Unable to invent an excuse for seeing Christopher, and unwilling to admit to Jane her true reason for being there, Nora is ushered unceremoniously out, probably missing her final chance to see her lover in life.

And so the question becomes, why has Jane acted in this manner? The point of view, third person limited, provides only Nora’s unflattering portrait of Jane, but the circumstances elucidate what are most likely Jane’s preoccupations. She has spent years of her life receiving visitors, supervising the housekeeping, and doing the other numerous chores of a wife without the rewards or respect of that position. Her entire life has been a shabby imitation of society wifehood, as is illustrated in the descriptions of the drawing room where Jane receives the visitors: “stiff”, “lifeless”, “unfrequented”, “useless” (Wharton 505). The appearance of wifely contentment is something Nora quite naturally takes for granted—indeed, her entire purpose in visiting Christopher blazes with her dissatisfaction.

Nora is quick to judge Jane Aldis, labeling her a dried-up spinster who has never had a care beyond her brother’s wishes in all her wasted little life. She pays for her selfishness in ignoring Jane, her failure to have been “more cordial” (Wharton 505) when she had the chance. Jane, who sees an opportunity to wield her limited power, acts on it. According to Barbara White in *Edith Wharton – A Study of the Short Fiction*, Jane plays a common role: “the old

maid...is the prototype of the avenger in the late stories because she represents for Wharton what the revenge is truly for—exclusion.” (100)

Because the man the women compete over is Jane’s brother, the root of the argument is not sexual; rather, ideological. Christopher Aldis has experienced a happy bachelorhood with a large beautiful house, and most likely a successful career; and thanks to Nora, he has not been without sexual companionship. Jane, however, is a superfluous specimen because she has not fulfilled her feminine destiny by marrying. Nora, despite the obvious insignificance of her marriage, truly believes that she exists on a higher plane of emotional development than Jane.

“Atrophy”, on the surface one of Wharton’s simplest narratives, holds up its own theme of deceiving appearances by being quite complex. The reader’s sympathies move back and forth between characters Nora and Jane, and there is no clear protagonist-antagonist relationship. There is also no linear way to determine who the “Atrophy” of the title refers to; the early suggestion is that Nora’s own heart has felt the atrophy at being separated from Christopher. Waiting for news on his condition, Wharton writes that she “looked out at the budding shrubs and the bulbs pushing up through the swollen earth.” (505) These images of rebirth seem to refer to a reawakening of Nora’s passion for Christopher. Yet as the story begins to revolve around Jane’s hard-nosed behavior, it seems to mean more for her. A final (unfair?) judgment on Jane, “Atrophy” may refer to the shriveling of her own heart, the coldness that has befallen her in her position of drudgery and self-sacrifice. In this case, who is to blame? Jane, for failing to be cheerfully subservient to her appointed duties, or Nora and those she represents, for failing to recognize Jane’s importance in these duties? As is usual with Wharton, there is no clear answer.

One of the greatest double standards separating women and men, both historically and currently, and a major issue explored in depth by all three authors, is the great divergence between bachelor and spinster. As Jane Aldis and her much luckier brother illustrate, the life path for a man who chooses to be single is less strewn with disapproval than that of a woman who puts her own desires first. After centuries of self-sacrifice to motherhood and wifely duties, women began to come into recognition of their own identities, culminating in the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and beyond. For Grace Paley, who is contemporary with the movement, the struggle to overcome generations of self-effacing behavior is treacherous and difficult, and a subject she has mined continuously in exploration.

The story “Faith in a Tree” is extremely representative of Grace Paley’s work; it makes clear use of many of the storytelling conventions Paley has established over the course of her three story collections. To start, it employs as its narrator Faith Asbury, Paley’s most recognized character, and casually establishes the elements that make up Faith’s life: her sons, Richard and Tonto, her relationship with their absentee father, Ricardo, her menial work, her politics, and the community of women with whom she spends her time. Many of the characters in “Faith in a Tree” appear in a number of other stories: Kitty, Mrs. Raftery, Anna, Dotty Wasserman.

Secondly, the story toys with a traditional sense of narrative structure, letting words flow unrestrained by concrete designations like “dialogue” or “description”. The titular narrator Faith claims to answer a simple question “in lecture form” (Paley 179); and included in the story are two ironic footnotes, though whether they are meant to be considered additions by Paley or by Faith is debatable.

Though the story first appears to be in the first-person point of view, Faith receives responses to both orally and mentally expressed statements: for example, Faith’s son, Richard, answers what seems to be Faith’s unspoken thought about another boy in Richard’s class with, “That’s a typical yak yak out of you, Faith.” (Paley 181) Other than Richard, Faith’s fellow mothers, including Kitty and Mrs. Finn, seem to read Faith’s mind throughout the story. Thus, though the point of view is first person, the world at large seems to be aware of Faith’s perceptions of things, which suggests that her consciousness extends to everyone. This idea merges ironically with the opening passage, which compares Faith to an omniscient being as she views her friends, her children, and her environment from a vantage point high above, on the branch of a sycamore tree.

Faith professes to be all-seeing, even describing the actions of acquaintances that she cannot perceive visually (“I know that on the other side of the dry pool...” (Paley 176)). Faith seems to be drawing from a collective unconscious that extends around all of her acquaintances. These women have similar lives with similar problems, and Paley’s unusual narrative certainly evokes a theme of universality among the women. Faith recognizes their similar roles when she introduces Anna as a “colleague” and Kitty as a “co-worker in the mother trade” (Paley 176). These women are revolutionary in believing that their unpaid labor as single mothers “performed in a context of collaboration with a community of workers” (Taylor 29) earns them the terminology of the workforce.

However, as unmarried women with children, they find themselves constantly deprived by a pitiless society. “We’re really a problem for you, Faith, we keep you not free” (Paley 180) Faith’s son Richard observes. This is in stark contrast to his father, Ricardo, whom Faith explains is a gallivanting explorer hardly ever present in the lives of her sons. She seems to exhibit guilt for her sons’ fatherless state, grouping them in with “the deprived children of working mothers” (Paley 183) and watching jealously the strange men who walk their children through the park. Says Janet Handler Burstein, “when [Faith] can perceive the disparity between her own and her children’s vulnerability, she can laugh ironically at the difference between her need for sex or solitude and their need for protection and comfort.” (103) Faith seeks companionship for a number of reasons, a pursuit in which she is not alone.

There are many suggestions that these women are in the park both for their children’s benefit and for their own; they stay there to make themselves available to the men who regularly cruise through, or “the squint-eyed speculators who come by to size up the stock” (Paley 184). Neil D. Isaacs notes the “brilliant evocation of the young-single-mother-in-the-park scene, in which ongoing concerns with child-raising and PTA-related politics are constantly being undercut or conflicted by ongoing sexual urges.” (47)

The story takes an interesting turn with the entrance of Philip, a man who attracts the appreciative eyes of the women. Charming, intelligent, and friendly with her children, Philip makes enough of an impression upon Faith to entice her to climb out of her tree and meet him at an earthbound level (Paley 187). Faith’s tenderness is roused when she sees Philip holding her son’s hand “which made Richard look like a little boy with a daddy” (Paley 189) and she imagines herself in an erotic situation with Philip. (Paley 192)

Faith has earlier ravaged her own attractiveness, suggesting that “Bargains Galore!” is written on her face (Paley 177), and repeated less-than-complimentary assessments about herself from Ricardo; she soon assumes that Philip’s interest has been piqued by her more surly friend Anna, whose “character is terrible, but she’s beautiful.” (Paley 191) When Paley originally published the story in the *New American Review* in 1967, it came to rest with Faith’s grudging acceptance that Philip as a potential mate and head-of-household had been lost to Anna. Interestingly enough, by the time it came to print in Paley’s second collection of short stories, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, in 1974, she had added a new segment to the story: an aborted political rally and Faith’s son Richard’s impassioned reaction to it.

The changes wrought by this new section dramatically change the characterization of Faith. As Faith watches her son stand up to the officer, taking action where she has neglected to do so, she feels suddenly sorry for her more shallow preoccupations and declares famously: “And I think that is exactly when events turned me around...directed out of that sexy playground by my children’s heartfelt brains, I thought more and more and every day about the world.” (Paley 194) This newfound political conscience will stay with Faith throughout Paley’s writing and it signals a sudden commitment to her own personal growth. Says Judith Arcana, in *Grace Paley’s Life Stories*, “Her [Faith’s] own enormous change at the last minute lessens—even discards—the effect of her emotional dependence on men.” (133)

Indeed, a woman who has earlier declared, “I have always required a man to be dependent on...” (Paley 177) and considers said fact to be directly related to her attachment to her sons, perceives, through Richard’s behavior, that she has as much to learn from them. One politically motivated act initiates a devotion to individual desires that, for a woman in this time period, is just as political. For the first time, Faith sees herself, not as she appears in relation to a man, but as she is.

In Faith’s story, her children are at the heart of her desire to improve herself; it illustrates beautifully the divergent pulls of motherhood and a woman’s personal identity, and how they, in geometrically impossible ways, may intersect. The same issue is looked at from a slightly different angle in an earlier story also from Paley.

One of her least self-conscious stories, “An Interest in Life”, takes few bold chances in narrative structure or characterization. Unlike “Faith in a Tree”, the characters’ unspoken thoughts remain secret, and the lines of reality are not blurred. Grace Paley the author makes no unauthorized visits in the lives of Ginny and John, and, somehow, “An Interest” is one of the most poignant and real stories in her collected works.

Additionally, the story covers an extremely specific time frame and a mass of concrete events. Opening on the day that Virginia’s husband leaves her and their children ostensibly to join the army, the story continues through Ginny’s troubles with welfare, nosy neighbors, and the attentions of her old acquaintance, John. He visits once a week, bringing joy to her children, who, Ginny observes, crave a father, and forcing her to reevaluate her role as a woman and as their mother.

When her anonymous husband walks out the door, Virginia is not fooled by the profession that he has joined the army. “He’s probably deserting me,” she blithely tells her neighbor, Mrs. Raftery (Paley 52), and she is immediately barraged with advice about dealing with welfare and the grocer. Though Ginny may have hoped for at least a few minutes to enjoy the delusion that her husband is not gone for good, Mrs. Raftery presses the gravity of the situation upon her. She is alone now, a single mother in times when such a thing is scarcely recognized by society as composing a legitimate family, though, as Paley will attest, it happened all the time. “I began to feel a great deal of pressure on my soul about women’s lives. A lot of them, even then [the fifties] were women alone with kids.” (Wachtel 205)

Ginny deals with social services, who insist on verification of her husband’s flight before they can offer her anything. Not knowing where he has gone, Ginny cannot provide it and Ginny’s husband seems to be pushing his absence doubly when welfare cannot help with her financial situation. Her children ask constantly when their father will return, and unwilling to admit to them the stark truth that she doesn’t know, Ginny avoids the question. Despite the unappreciative presence he represented in their household before leaving (“This place stinks like the men’s room in the BMT. It’s a fucking *pissoir*” (Paley 61)) she can’t face his absence in the lives of her children. “Present or past, a child should have a father.” (Paley 53)

Her husband’s disappearance is even emphasized by the man himself as he leaves. “He took hold of me with his two arms as though in love,” Ginny narrates, “and pressed his body hard against mine so that I could feel him for the last time and suffer my loss.” (Paley 52) In this case, the loss is entirely Ginny’s; her husband’s sexual companionship is an element of her life she is fully conscious of missing. Long before he shows any physical interest in her, Ginny jokes with John, “Tell me I’m the most gorgeous thing.” (Paley 57) Though Ginny gets advice from other women about how to keep her children fed, Mrs. Raftery assures her that her personal need for security and closeness with a man is unattainable. “Don’t be disappointed, Virginia. I don’t know a man living’d last you a lifetime.” (Paley 53) These words become all the more ironic when Mrs. Raftery’s son, John, ultimately provides the stabilizing presence in Ginny’s household.

John first visits Ginny as a favor; when he is made aware of the dire circumstances in which she’s been living, he “[wants] to do something” (Paley 57). She denies his offer of physical companionship, but her resolve does not last; after a few weeks of John’s inattention,

she considers things from “his man point of view” (Paley 63) and decides he needs a reason to keep coming back. “I thought about my life,” she narrates, “and I gave strongest consideration to my children. If given the choice, I decided to choose not to live without him.” (Paley 63-4) Though some readers prefer to see Ginny’s decision as a sell-out, an admittance of her own dependence on men, Burstein notes that, “Paley revalues the mother by allowing her to choose her own commitments to others [sons, husbands] without idealizing them and without silencing the voice of her own needs.” (105) Paley herself declares that, “I don’t even think Ginny’s a victim. She really likes the guy; and she refuses to be a victim.” (Hulley 45)

Ginny’s entire existence is thrown into chaos when her husband departs. She recognizes quite rationally (in list form, no less) that she has a number of personal troubles with which to contend. But with classic Paley optimism, Ginny declares, “All that is really necessary for survival of the fittest, it seems, is an interest in life, good, bad, or peculiar.” (Paley 63) John represents an interest for her; a method of survival. Without being an economic or psychological rescuer for Ginny, he keeps her life from settling into the drudgery of child rearing and welfare baiting. He stays in Ginny’s life according to her value system, rather than that of the rest of the world.

Indeed, unlike the women of Wharton and Parker, Paley’s women usually seem more than happy to forge ahead on their own paths rather than obsessing about what society determines they should do. This, no doubt, is a result of the time that passed between the first two writers, who were quite nearly contemporaries, and Paley, who wrote, at earliest, thirty years later. The modern edge of Paley’s stories provides a more defiant, alternative point of view, with a political twinge. Paley plays off the idea of subcultures within a political structure when she explores, quite particularly, the incidence of single motherhood in the short, striking “Northeast Playground”.

In the story, an unnamed narrator, presumed by some critics to be Faith, and by others to be Paley’s writer-persona, talks to young women in the park, remembered from “Faith in a Tree” as the “sexy playground” (Paley 194). Though the women of Faith’s acquaintance were always aware of the men passing by and hoping to catch the interest of one of them, the women of “Northeast Playground” are tougher, more independent. The few men mentioned in the story, all unnamed beyond the appellations, “some creep” (Paley 223) and “some dude” (Paley 224) are

characterized entirely by their absence. They have meant as little to the lives of their women and children as they mean to the narrative.

Indeed, all of the women whose stories are told here are unmarried. Almost immediately providing the statistics behind this information, the narrator declares, “four of them were whores, the rest of them were unwed on principle or because some creep had ditched them.” (Paley 223) She speaks, according to Neil Isaacs in *A Study of the Short Fiction*, like “a field-worker in cultural anthropology” (57). Subtly, she identifies these single mothers as a marginalized part of the dominant culture; but, because they all receive welfare (“I just stay home now like a mama bear and look at TV,” (Paley 224) boasts one mother) and four work as prostitutes, they are on the periphery of woman’s movement as well. “We’re like a special-interest group,” (Paley 223) one mother declares.

Though they are on the fringes of reputable society, they are perfectly comfortable together and the narrator comments, “What a wonderful calm unity in this group!” (Paley 223) Their self-reliance brings up some interesting questions. Where do they find this indifference to men that Faith and her cohorts never seem to achieve? The idea that they are lesbians is toyed with when the narrator describes two of them as “handsome dykey women” (Paley 224) but nothing else backs up that claim. Because author Paley is so well versed in irony, the most likely explanation is that the narrator applies cultural stereotypes to these women based solely on their single status. That the narrator is confirmed to be a woman (“when I was a mother of babies...” (Paley 223)) makes the statement extremely ironic.

Certainly the playground mothers have experienced a great deal of hardship. Two in particular are marked by the narrator as being “depressed” (Paley 224). They have been deserted by the men who gave them their babies and they subsequently hover around their children, sublimating their pain into manic watchfulness. They look back on their failed relationships with wry detachment, but find the greatest distress in being unable to pay for themselves and their children. “These two didn’t like to be on relief at all,” confides the narrator. “They were embarrassed but not to the point of rudeness to their friends who weren’t ashamed.” (Paley 225) Though these women are injured enough to recognize their status at the edge of respectability, they do not mind it when they are with the assemblage. Like a support group, the single mothers find relief in their sense of community.

The narrator can't help comparing the crowd to that of her own past playground experiences; she remembers how mothers in her day were protective of their children against all others. "We...often quarreled, accusing other children of unhealthy aggression or excessive timidity," (Paley 224) she recalls, following up immediately with a present-day comparison, as single mom Janice "who had a perfectly good baby of her own in a sling across her chest" (Paley 224) praises the beauty of Leni's little boy. She also muses on how political alliances separated the mothers of her past. The ladies' unimpressed reaction to this information suggests that politics, in its most generally accepted form, have nothing to do with their state as pariahs. Paley, and the narrator, who may very well represent Paley, by bringing up the ideologies of the past, subtly imply that politics *do* have quite a bit to do with them, whether they are aware or not.

The narrator finally asks whether or not the women have considered trying to join the groups of other mothers, presumably the more mainstream wives who have a man in the house every night of the week. They deny having any wish to do so, smiling at what the narrator labels "ghettoization" (Paley 225), again marking herself as a cultural analyst. The story ultimately closes as the most verbal of the mothers, Janice, ends the narrator's prying: "Beat it, said Janice." (Paley 225) The words stand alone, occupying their own paragraph and the abrupt end of the story; in this way, they carry a finality, which suggests that the tribe of unmarried mothers has spoken, and their good-natured critic may depart.

As single women, the mothers of the playground feel strongly their disenfranchisement, yet together they form a unit, collaborating as a means of distancing themselves from the tide of urban values. Over time, these women have improved upon the uneasy alliances formed by Faith and her friends. They have effectively taken their position as the "other", biologically (as women), socially (as welfare recipients), and psychologically (as a crowd of used and abandoned people), and subverted the standards of their public to make themselves the standard. Though each is maritally single, none of them are alone.

Paley's women find their societal acceptance with each other; their presumed need of the support of men is supplanted by their support of one another. In an obscure, early story, Edith Wharton breaks from her usual portrayals of women as bitter enemies or wary collaborators and shows, like Paley has done, that sincere relations between women can benefit them when men have failed them.

For a single woman in Edith Wharton's time, the pressure to marry was immense; especially if the woman, unlike most of Wharton's heroines, had a financial need of support. In "Friends", one of Wharton's early stories, she presents a rare portrait of a pink-collar worker, Penelope Bent. Supplying the income for her intermittently sick mother, Penelope has the necessity of teaching at a girls' school in the inconsequential New England town of Sailsport—until she accepts the proposal of a businessman, Mr. Dayton. Happily packing up her possessions, letting go of her job, and kissing her mundane town goodbye, Penelope travels to Louisville to be married.

The story opens as Penelope is returning from what has turned out to be a useless errand. The fairy tale life as a rich man's wife she expected to find has eluded her; her fiancé, for reasons entirely unknown to the reader, has married another woman and taken off for Texas without so much as a courtesy letter to Penelope. She makes the humiliating journey back from Louisville, only aggrieved by the familiarity of Sailsport, which is reminiscent of "the homely lovable ugliness of a face that has bent above one's first awakenings." (Wharton 198) Even the job she assumed would be kept for her has been filled, by her dearest female friend, Vexilla. Penelope finds that her life has been wretchedly disorganized by the ill treatment of a man: "No, she was not the Penelope Bent who had lived there through so many happy, monotonous years; she was a stranger who had never been in the room before, and who knew as little of its history as it knew of hers." (Wharton 205) This Mr. Dayton, who exists only as he is spoken of by other characters, is a great distance away from her physically (symbolically, emotionally) and gives an impression of being entirely unconcerned. Penelope has had her life casually ruined by a man who has manipulated her status as a single woman.

The extreme vulnerability Penelope feels upon return is illustrated by the distress she feels at her mother's "merciless tenderness" and "unwonted acquiescences" (Wharton 205) as well as her unconscious gripping of the handle of her suitcase (Wharton 201). Yet she finds unexpected reassurance in Vexilla—Penelope's relationship with her friend has the capacity to pull her out of her despair and rejuvenate her desire to roam. Though Penelope is at first upset with Vexilla, her name, derived from "vexation" suggesting as much, Penelope draws strength from Vexilla's unselfish willingness to vacate the teaching position. Writes Susan Goodman, in *Edith Wharton's Women –Friends and Rivals*, "the example of Vexilla's loyalty has once again made 'life comprehensible and duty a joyful impulse'." (8, Wharton quote 214)

Though Wharton has shown ambivalence for women throughout her short stories and novels, “Friends” is refreshingly earnest in its portrayal of Penelope and Vexilla. Though Penelope conceals from Vexilla the circumstances of her canceled marriage, she does so for the benefit of both: by presenting herself as someone who still has a hope of a different life elsewhere, she erases Vexilla’s guilt in taking over the job they both secretly want, but for which Vexilla has the stronger need. Further, her anguish at the dreadful conduct of Mr. Dayton is somewhat relieved by the companionship of Vexilla. Writes Wharton, “She [Penelope] had escaped from the falling ruins and stood safe, outside of herself, in touch once more with the common troubles of her kind, enfranchised forever from the bondage of a lonely grief.” (Wharton 214) Penelope and Vexilla share something, as women, that cannot be touched by men. As Goodman interprets, they “become the means for each other’s moral growth, as they realize that being true to another woman means being true to oneself.” (7)

This is confirmed by Penelope, who finds the courage in Vexilla’s kindness to start a new life. As Barbara A. White notes in *Edith Wharton – A Study of the Short Fiction*, Wharton’s view of female friendship is disengaged from the other writers of her day by the unsentimental twist she attaches to her ending. (33) As Penelope leaves Vexilla’s home, she pauses for a moment on the sidewalk, “as if awaiting the subsidence of some strong wave of emotion” but then begins to “move forward” (Wharton 213). The ‘wave of emotion’, though it might refer to her pain at being rejected, could also refer to the gratitude she feels for Vexilla’s solace. Because of the encouragement she receives through her friendship, Penelope may make a bold decision and move forward into a life that she has fashioned for herself—a new start in New York. For the two women, their unmarried status is less of an affliction because they can count on the support of each other.

Though both Paley and Wharton have given optimistic accounts of women finding their own way in the world, neither seek to overgeneralize about the great advances women’s rights have wrought. Readers have no idea how Penelope will last in New York, and whether or not she’ll fall into the same pattern she followed with Mr. Dayton. And Paley, always political-minded, gives an example in her most recent short story collection, *Later the Same Day*, of how the oppression of women differs across different segments of society. In “Lavinia: an Old Story”, Paley reminds her readers that ethnicity (her characters are presumed by their

pronounced dialect to be African-American) and socioeconomic status can be huge factors in the opportunities of women.

“What men got to do on earth don’t take more time than sneezing. Now a woman walk away from a man, she just know she loaded down in her body nine months. She got that responsibility on her soul forever,” (Paley 298) says Mrs. Grimble, quite early in “Lavinia”. In the four pages in which her monologue lasts, she speaks with heartbreaking frankness about the sacrifices a marriage and the attendant wifely duties will demand of a woman. The story of Mrs. Grimble and her bright and charming daughter, Lavinia, shows an extremely different side of woman’s marriage debate. While Paley’s Faith Asbury may hope for a man to keep her company, the freedoms she experiences as a single woman (her children notwithstanding) are sought, with futility, by Mrs. Grimble, first for herself, and then for her daughter.

The story opens as Mrs. Grimble questions a man named Robert Fenner about his wish to marry her daughter, Lavinia. She alternately demands answers to questions about his family, his job, and his expectations for Lavinia, and assaults him with sad facts about her own marriage and widowhood. She reveals that, as a young girl, she had great hopes for herself: “To be a teacher and purchase my own grits and not depend on any man.” (Paley 299) However, she had succumbed to the empty promises of a young Mr. Grimble, and during her marriage she was forced to reevaluate those dreams to fit within her life of constantly having babies and struggling to feed them during an economic crisis. She took as her obligation the entirety of the upkeep of her family when her husband was stupidly and suddenly killed.

Her own visions of personal success having eluded her, so it would seem, for good, Mrs. Grimble transfers her hopes of a better life to Lavinia. The most spirited of Mrs. Grimble’s several daughters, Lavinia brings cheeriness wherever she goes. Though Mrs. Grimble willingly marries off other girls to undeserving men (“who take Elsie is welcome to her...she never put her mind to nothing large and ain’t going to soon” (Paley 299)), she is reluctant to give up Lavinia to a man. Lavinia goes, however, and, visiting her some years later, Mrs. Grimble has the crushing realization that her worst fears have been realized. Seeing Lavinia “near scalded, deep in the washtub” (Paley 301), slaving after her children, her husband, and her household, Mrs. Grimble concedes, with great pain, “damn you, Lavinia, ain’t nothing gonna come of you neither.” (Paley 301)

Mrs. Grimble first describes the lure of the single life as she wanted it for herself. In the days before she knew Mr. Grimble, she explains how “All [women] in every way I look was on their back providing for men or on their knees cleaning up after them.” (Paley 299) This kind of sexual and domestic servitude is not what she wants for herself. “I just determined not to set myself drifting in this animal way [to be constantly reproducing]. I just as well live out a spinster’s peevish time as be consumed by boiling wash water.” (Paley 300) For Mrs. Grimble, the single life is less of a stigma that will affect how she is viewed, but rather a guarantee that she will not have to defer to a man’s judgment, accept their sexual advances, and devote her life to giving birth to their babies. The promises she gets from Mr. Grimble are not satisfactory; the truth she comes to realize is that “When they warm, they got to cool off.” (Paley 300)

She starts over with her daughter, Lavinia, whom she sees as the most special of her many children. She pretends to be surprised that Robert is interested in Lavinia though she favors the girl herself. Expounding on her plans for Lavinia to Robert, she declares, “Don’t know what you see Robert, but I got in mind to be astonished.” (Paley 301) Robert’s promises, like those of her husband, fail her daughter, who succumbs to the same patterns of child-rearing and domestic chores her mother had fallen into. As the title suggests, it’s the same “old story”; the man breaks his promise and ruins the hope of the woman.

Grace Paley exhibits a strong conscience, as a writer and otherwise. In “Lavinia” she alerts her bourgeois readers to the plight of the poor and the racially disenfranchised. She clarifies that while journeys of self-discovery are a priority for Faith, or for Parker’s women, a woman like Mrs. Grimble might be trampled by her society despite having never experienced self-doubt.

This attitude presents less a reversal of the themes of the Dorothy Parker stories than the same idea viewed from a different angle. Mrs. Grimble of “Lavinia: An Old Story” is completely free of the inward pressure to marry and settle down, which makes her eventual end seem even more shattering. Like Mrs. Grimble and her daughter, Parker’s characters find themselves constantly censured for not having men to take care of them; and, she notes, in stories like “The Waltz”, that once the man is caught he doesn’t behave any better than before. Yet they generally crave companionship and the praise that follows with being married.

Parker writes of women whose desperation to be paired off with an eligible man has little to do with her own personal insecurities and is rather a reaction to social demands. The drive to

marry becomes ingrained and Parker indicates how these social demands may breed the jealous and hypercritical behavior that constitutes the stereotype of women in relationships. She shows formulaic women particularly in the newlywed comedy "Here We Are", the similar dissections of a quarrel, "The Sexes" and "The Last Tea", and with her characters in "A Telephone Call" and "Big Blonde".

As for Wharton, her examinations of marriage and the women who seek it are legendary. Every analysis of Wharton's work probes for some kind of ideological consistency in her portrayal of marriage; her work constantly defies that wish. Whereas some critics have tried to define her particular view on 'the marriage question', saying that she was entirely devoted to the institution or, conversely, that she had no faith in it, she has characters that have reflected both ideas. The most straightforward reading that can be made of Wharton's conception of marriage is that her stories explore both sides of the debate and that neither makes a greater case than the other.

Wharton deals with her most famous subject in one of her most famous stories, "Souls Belated". The protagonist is Lydia, a woman who has abandoned her marriage to the dull and reliable Tillotson for the passionate connection she feels with Gannett, an unmarried writer. Flying in the face of their acquaintances in New York, who adhere to rigorous standards of behavior, Lydia and Gannett escape abroad. The story picks up just as the strain of being outlaws has begun to wear on the two.

The divorce papers have reached Lydia and suddenly the possibility of marriage has come up for her and Gannett. Lydia is, despite her cultural training as a woman, completely against the idea of taking the same step with Gannett that she did with her husband, Tillotson. She declares that "the one way of maintaining the dignity of their relation" (Wharton 107-108) is *not* to get married; if the entire nature of their courtship was based on disdain for such institutions, she reasons, how could they belittle what they have by submitting to those institutions? Gannett disagrees. "I didn't know that we ran away to found a new system of ethics," (Wharton 110) he declares, and their debate continues for the duration of the story.

The enigmatic component of their opposition is Mrs. Tillotson, who defies all feminine expectations by battling against the idea of marriage. For a woman at the turn of the century, especially an affluent one like Lydia, being wed to a socially acceptable man is the height of

ambition; Gannett is a good-natured intellectual and there's no indication that he is anything but respected in society. But more than that, being a divorcée and adulteress, she has to contend with the double standards of moral behavior. Because Gannett is a single man, his relationship with Lydia is considered quite average; dating a married woman does not reflect badly on him in any way. Yet Lydia must deal with a Victorian value system which sees her as a brazen slut; or, at the very least, a woman who has erred against decorum.

By choosing to remain unmarried to Gannett, Lydia ignores the rules of her society. "It's none of their business," she snaps, when Gannett questions what the other ladies of the hotel will think of her. "They may think what they please." (Wharton 112) Author Wharton ridicules the social system herself by exposing the tautology the society gossips follow: "If Lady Susan owed it to the others not to speak to the Lintons, the others clearly owed it to Lady Susan to back her up." (Wharton 115) But as the title suggests, it's too late for Lydia and Gannett to escape the impediments of her past. "If I were your wife you'd have to go on pretending. You'd have to pretend that I'd never been—anything else." (Wharton 123)

All through the narrative, Lydia avoids light: closing the shade in the train (Wharton 104), sitting "beyond the radius of the lamp" (Wharton 120) as she discusses marriage with Gannett, and finally waiting for her boat "under the trees" (Wharton 126). She is effectively drawing a veil over what she knows to be true; that her situation with Gannett has only one possible outcome. At the finish of "Souls Belated", Lydia abandons the idea of leaving Gannett, and attempting to flesh out an existence on her own. She races off the boat that will separate them, not because of an overabundance of passion for Gannett, but because she has rationally concluded that no other way of life is possible. She has failed in her attempt to elude the inevitability of marriage.

For White, the story illustrates two feuding concepts that reflected Wharton's views on marriage: "When people fail in large numbers, there must be something wrong with the institution," she writes, as Lydia and numerous other characters show. "Of course, [Wharton] could not completely accept the converse, either, for an attempt to found a 'new ethics'...might be based on personal selfishness." (White 80) Adds Goodman, "'Souls Belated' shows how Wharton challenged the concept of marriage but was never able to escape the imperative that women must marry." (7) If any conclusions are reached in the story, this is it. Though Lydia

and has lost her faith in the idea wedded bliss, no alternatives within civilization present themselves.

Lydia's helplessness is further illustrated by the switch in point of view that occurs in the fifth and final section. Originally limited to Lydia's point of view, the narration attaches itself to Gannett here and the reader perceives Lydia's flight only as Gannett sees it. Not being attuned to the dispute surely going on in Lydia's head before she jumps ship makes it clear to the reader that ultimately there is no contest. Additionally, Lydia's actions are subject entirely to Gannett's interpretations. "The woman...is revealed to the reader only through the man's experiences of her... Wharton often used this technique to reveal the power imbalances between men and women." (Benstock 98) Clearly Lydia has lost control of this situation; everything she set out to do has been denied to her. Her final chance for survival is that Gannett might accept her as his wife, her craving for independence muted, her hope for a life less phony than the one she formerly knew dead and buried.

Gannett and Lydia find that they are unable to escape the judgment of the world they tried to leave behind; they abandon their dream of a new society with a new set of rules. Many of the single women in these stories attach to marriage an idealized capacity for erasing all other difficulties. Though their idea of marriage as the utopia is opposed to Lydia's, their pursuit of a revised society is the same.

One of the most indelible portraits of a woman following these patterns occurs in Dorothy Parker's most famous story, "Big Blonde". Its main character imagines marriage to be the answer to her prayers, a state of being in which she may finally grow comfortable, though her quest is arduous and her lofty goals fail her. Spanning almost twenty years in the empty existence of one Hazel Morse, the story depicts the growth of alcoholism, the ache of loneliness, and the misfortune of a woman who cannot adapt to her cultural role.

The character of Hazel is an enigma to categorize from the start. The opening line of the story reads: "Hazel Morse was a large, fair woman of the type that incites some men when they use the word 'blonde' to click their tongues and wag their heads roguishly." (Parker 187) Immediately, the reader gets the impression of a woman whose appearance and whose actual personality are often at odds with one another. As it happens, Hazel makes a virtual career out of denial, both inwardly and outwardly, until her life spirals helplessly out of her control.

As the story begins, Hazel is a semi-successful dress model with an active social life. She is popular among her friends because of her excessive agreeability; she flatters and feigns interest in others, disfavoring herself to gain their respect. Though she finds it difficult to be so congenial, she recognizes that “Popularity seemed...to be worth all the work that had to be put into its achievement.” (Parker 187) She enjoys the company of others, especially men, because she has never considered a world without it.

Like her unnaturally blonde hair color, Hazel finds the requisite constant good humor something she must fake as best she can. She becomes locked into a paradoxical truth: because she wants the security, both emotional and financial, of a husband, she must attempt to procure a willing man. To attract the man’s attention, she has to dam her feelings and play the role of a merry divorcée. Though Hazel is wasted by the effort of appearing eager and cheerful, she cannot comfortably drop the farce until she has obtained the man. Writes Melzer in *The Rhetoric of Rage*, “Male-dependent and limited in her sensibilities, she had no further wish than to fit into a prescribed role, rather than to create one.” (75)

Hazel’s personal adjustments to her prescribed role find their most apt illustration in the painful shoes Hazel regularly wears. “She...suffered for her vanity,” the story declares almost immediately, “boxing [her feet] in snub-toed, high-heeled slippers of the shortest bearable size.” (Parker 187) The shoes are referenced repeatedly throughout the story, as “her arches throbbed” (Parker 189), when “she dreamed by day of never again putting on tight shoes” (Parker 201) and finally, after her suicide attempt fails, when “her feet throbbed as if she had crammed them into the stubby champagne-colored slippers.” (Parker 209) The shoes pinch, but they are attractive; they give her discomfort but they keep her on the track of high spirits-for-hire. She does not recognize any other method of existence; she cannot imagine another way to get by.

This resistance to new ideas works hand-in-hand with Hazel’s desire for stability. Hazel knows that marriage is the culturally determined highest ambition for women, and that without a man to fill the place of the husband, she will be forced to come up with a different way of life. Unfortunately, she is entirely without imagination. “Her ideas,” runs the story, “or better, her acceptances, run right along with those of the other substantially built blondes in whom she found her friends.” (Parker 187) With no sense of insight into her own existence, Hazel subconsciously follows the lead of friends and acquaintances, modeling her outward appearance and inward motivations on what they say and do. In the early days of her marriage to Herbie,

Hazel assumes, "This was marriage. This was peace" (Parker 189); however, she has committed to an image of Herbie rather than to Herbie himself, as the picture of him on her dressing table (Parker 188) suggests.

Hazel exhibits a desperate dependence on the men in her life. Emotionally, she craves comfort, as is indicated by her early rapport with Herbie: "he kissed her neck and patted her shoulder and begged her to tell Herbie what was wrong. She loved that." (Parker 190) Psychologically, her abandonment by Herbie develops into a tautological relationship of loneliness and depression. "You could be by yourself when things were all right, but when you were blue you got the howling horrors." (Parker 193) Hazel's isolation both causes and augments her despondence. Her most concrete form of dependence is a simple matter of economics. Hazel has no job, and no skills for finding one; the idea of working has probably never entered her sphere anyhow. With this in mind, she plods to the saloon each night, securing a series of generous male benefactors. She finds that her partiality is "unexacting, tranquil, and easily arranged" (Parker 199); and Hazel is not alone in this state of emotional prostitution. She follows the lead of the other barroom women, again demonstrating an inability to think for herself.

Ultimately, Hazel finds her greatest reassurance in alcohol, which provides her with the comfortably gauzy haze that most likely inspired her name. "She was almost peaceful, in her mist" (Parker 197) she finds, early on, and yet, alcohol, like everything else in her life, proves to be a temporary fix. Death, in its permanence, begins to entice her. "It would be nice, nice and restful, to be dead," (Parker 201) Hazel decides, and sets out with that purpose, the first true resolute move she has made. In this sense, her painful return to life carries with it a number of failures. She has failed in her plan for long-term security, and must now return to the uncertainties of pseudo-solicitation. Also, she has been foiled in her first attempt at decisive action, or womanly self-determination. She has been deprived of the right to end her own life; having been saved by the combined efforts of Nettie and the doctor, she finds herself again in cosmic debt, owing other people. Hazel Morse illustrates, more poignantly than any of Parker's other characters, how a woman may be virtually alone in the world and still carry the weight of that world's influence.

Another woman who finds herself extremely put-upon by the world occurs in Wharton's "Autres Temps...", first published in 1911. The story reflects the preoccupation Wharton had

with social mores and how they may change over time, specifically, in this case, as they had to do with women and marriage. The story presents a dual picture of runaway wives through a woman and her daughter who have committed the same impulsive act, a generation apart, and how the reactions they get are strikingly different.

“Autres Temps...” deals with marriage, one of the great preoccupations of Wharton, not to mention her critics. Whereas in some stories, Wharton upholds the beliefs of her time period by showing marriage to be the wonderful attainable goal of her female characters, in other stories, she symbolizes the institution with enclosed spaces and suffocation, or cavernous emptiness.

She is equally ambivalent in her portrayal of divorce. For Mrs. Lidcote, who has spent nearly twenty years in a self-imposed exile, avoiding the disapproval of her former friends, her suddenly single status is something of which she must be ashamed. She deliberately renounced the marriage she shared with her first husband, and lost the support of all their mutual friends. Her humiliation was ensured when her second husband, the man for whom she escaped the first marriage, realized her station as a branded woman and lost interest in her. Her entire life has been centered around her decision to leave her husband, what she sees as the greatest mistake of her life. “It would always be there, huge, obstructing, encumbering, bigger and more dominant than anything the future could ever conjure up.” (Wharton 257) Mrs. Lidcote is defined, both by her society and for herself, by a decision she once made that favored her own independence over her marriage.

She is amazed, then, to observe that Leila, who has left her old husband in much the same manner, has actually set up housekeeping with her new one, retaining the goodwill of everyone she knows. Leila’s lifestyle, as Mrs. Lidcote’s cousin Susy describes it, reinforces the belief that “every woman [has] a right to happiness, and that self-expression [is] the highest duty.” (Wharton 263) Mrs. Lidcote, having spent the last twenty years of her life in seclusion from society, is overwhelmed by the new deal that seems to have been made— “if the old processes were changed, her case was changed with them; she, too, was a part of the general readjustment, a tiny fragment of the new pattern worked out in bolder freer harmonies.” (Wharton 267) She imagines that possibly society has rewoven itself into something so perfect that even she may take a part; after all, the boat that brought her back was the *Utopia*.

Where, then, does this new deal turn sour? Over the course of the story, Mrs. Lidcote becomes overwhelmingly aware that her past perceptions of the contempt of others is entirely true as her daughter and then her male companion, Franklin Ide, shield her from her former friends. Wherein lies the difference between Leila's conduct and that of Mrs. Lidcote? One possible theory is put forth by Ide, who suggests to Mrs. Lidcote that her own retreat from her acquaintances alienated her to them. His strong assurance is undermined, however, when she pretends to try to improve relations with some old friends and he hastily, clumsily stops her. (Wharton 280-81)

Clearly, Mrs. Lidcote is not a part of the new, seemingly perfect society that she has witnessed in her daughter's home. But other than the passage of time, the situations are identical: Mrs. Lidcote herself notes ruefully "that the success or failure of the deepest human experiences may hang on a matter of chronology" (Wharton 268) That new cultural standards should allow Leila the status of a respectable society wife while unconditionally shelving Mrs. Lidcote seems arbitrary and unreasonable—a reader can only assume that Wharton hoped it would be so.

Edith Wharton wrote, at length, about marriage, often taking on both sides of the debate. Throughout her expansive writings she came to no obvious conclusions, and this late story illustrates quite plainly her unwillingness to submit to one school of thought. For Leila, divorce has been a lifesaving measure, bringing her joy and resulting in peace all around, with even her former husband happy to oblige her and her new one. For Mrs. Lidcote, divorce was where she made a wrong turn and she has never, even twenty years later, been able to get back on the right track. The story includes contradictory resolutions that both seem entirely believable; Wharton deliberately withholds any suggestion of why one woman succeeded in her bid for personal improvement and one lost everything. It was just the nature of marriage and divorce for women at the time: risky bids with all-or-nothing stakes.

Culturally speaking, single women have experienced great indignities as these three authors represent them. Across an entire century, women have asked themselves what they have to gain, or to lose, by marrying; they have discovered that, in marriage, they felt oppressed by the weight of a male influence in their lives, and in single life, they were pressed by unfulfilled desires, sexual and emotional, as well as a society that will not accept them as 'complete'.

Parker, Paley, and Wharton, by avoiding the well-packaged answers people have come to expect for women, by withholding judgment and precise conclusions, illustrate the great ambiguities of literature and of life, and brazenly declare that these ambiguities hold true for women as well as for men. In their often clever, incisive, and always entertaining stories, they show how 'single' and 'woman' are just two designations on a unique individual—proof that in the ongoing literary exploration of the self, as long as women like these continue to write, women of all categories will have an expression for their own wide-reaching experiences as human beings.

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