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By Diana L. Matusewic

About Me

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I graduated from St. Cloud State with a B.A. in Creative Writing and a minor in Print Journalism in Fall of 2005. While in college I have written for two college news papers, and was an assistant writer for a newsletter. After graduation, I was a web content writer.

I also have a strong interests in the arts. In fall of 2005, I studied art (b&white photography, painting and art history) in Czech Republic. Before that, I took a b&white photography class at Hibbing Community College. Some of my art work has been published in college journals.

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SATURDAY, AUGUST 26, 2006

Dorothy Parker's Satire

Satire is a form of art that is meant to ridicule through irony and wit, which is usually directed toward an ideology within a culture. Dorothy Parker (Maiden name, Rothschild) had a reputation for her sardonic tone in her short stories, as well as her poetry. One of the subjects of ridicule in her narratives was gender roles. Her stories, such as, "The Waltz" and "The Sexes" are tongue-in-cheek anecdotes about the relationship between a man and a woman. The format of Parker's stories is a simple, yet humorous, interaction between a man and a woman, but upon further reading there is evidence of a deeper meaning.

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"The Waltz," is a short story, spoken from the perspective of a woman asked to dance. Technically, there is only one character, but the female's focus is on the male she's dancing with. The story begins with the narrator graciously obliging the gentleman to dance, with repressed resentment. Evidence of a deeper meaning is withheld until the end; however, the relationship throughout the waltz can still be analyzed. The obvious theme, besides dancing, is the suppressed dialogue, versus what is actually said, thus the waltz can be interpreted as a satire on the oppression of women. More specifically, the story is an allegory of how women were expected to portray a façade of submissiveness and perpetual bliss, while hiding any deep emotions or thoughts.

What the narrator actually says is in italics and they're short, superficial, polite, sentiments, which greatly contrast what she's thinking; these thoughts are sardonic, intelligent and in-depth. The story starts with the narrator graciously accepting the dance, "Why, Thank you so much. I'd

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adore to.” What she’s thinking, however, goes into detail about the way he dances, (she compares it with Saint Walpurgis Night) and she compares him with the Jukes, a family who have a history of retardation and crimes (Baym 1615).

The immediate question a reader would have is: why didn’t she refuse? This inquiry is answered, however, not in detail: “There was nothing for me to do, but say I’d adore to (Baym 1616).” This is her way of saying that this behavior is just what society expects. As the story develops, more information is exposed.

More support of the underlying premise is revealed on the next page when Parker parallels this dance with America, “Why does he always want to be somewhere that he isn’t? Why can’t we stay in one place just long enough to get acclimated? It’s this constant rush, rush, rush, that’s the curse of American life (Baym 1616).” If this is only a dance, then why make a statement about the culture? And how exactly is the narrator rushed? Perhaps this dance is a metaphor for the relationship; the man wants to rush to the altar, or maybe that’s what the culture would expect them to do.

After this internal remark, her dance partner kicks her in the shin, and she takes the blame for it. But internally she basically calls him an idiot, in great length, and thinks about the famous psychologist, Sigmund Freud, and his theory that accidents are really suppressed desires rising to the surface. Ironically, the narrator’s suppressed thoughts are never exposed throughout the waltz. Perhaps Parker is implying that women are much better at stifling their aspirations because they have been oppressed for so long. Parker continues the theme of oppression and suppression, “I’ve led no cloistered life, I’ve known dancing partners who have spoiled my slippers and torn my dress; but when it comes to kicking, I am Outraged Womanhood. When you kick me in the shin, smile.” The spoiled slippers and torn dresses represent the hardships throughout all her relationships. And no matter how bad the relationship is, even when she’s Outraged Womanhood, she has to bare it all with a smile (Baym 1617).

In the following paragraph she uses football analogies to describe his mannerisms and compares his muscles to a buffalo’s, which is ironic because this story is about a waltz; a simple, graceful dance. The narrator explains that he never thinks about the consequences, and how she is charged by this brute. This aggressive analogy could be interpreted as a hyperbole for his masculinity, or it could be a metaphor for domestic violence. Furthermore, she tells him that his kick didn’t hurt her a bit, while internally she terms his punt a “degenerate cunning (Baym 1617).” Either way, the analogy implies that there is more to endure than just a wounded shin.

Upon further reading, more clues are revealed as to what the real story is, "and here I've been locked in his noxious embrace for the thirty-five years this waltz has lasted." So now it's revealed that this dance is an allegory for a marriage, analyzing further, the waltz represents the gender roles in society between the nineteen twenties and thirties. She continues to insult him internally until she hears the music slowly dieing, that's when she speaks again. Ironically, she tells her dance partner that she would like to go on dancing and asks him to pay the orchestra twenty dollars to continue (Baym1618).

"The Sexes" is similar to "The Waltz," but there are also many differences. First, this story is about a man and a woman; however, it has the perspective from both sides. Also, the female is sarcastic, but she is argumentative in "The Sexes," where as the woman in the previous story represses her sarcasm. Third, both stories are allegorical, but "The Sexes" lacks cultural references, as well as, analogies; "The Waltz" uses both symbolic methods. And finally, "The Waltz" does not describe the setting at any point in the story, but "The Sexes" has a brief introduction of the place before initiating the dialogue.

The dialogue in "The Sexes" begins with the male offering a female a cigarette, she declines, apologetically in a sardonic manner. He then offers to go to the store to buy her a pack of smokes. She refuses this offer, again in the same tone. Also, she's unusually quiet (Gill 25). These mannerisms initiate an argument. Just like "The Waltz," support of the real reason behind this argument is not revealed until much later in the story.

After he offers to buy her cigarettes, she makes a curious remark, "For goodness' sakes, don't feel you have to stay here and be bored. I'm sure there are millions of places you could be having a lot more fun," (Gill 25). What has sparked her sarcasm? And why would she make the assumption that he would rather be somewhere else? After the male exclaims that he is not bored and there is no other place he would rather be, she suggests that he should visit Florence Leaming (Gill 26-27). The big picture is slowly being pieced together. The focus shifts to a party that they had attended.

The reason for the sarcasm becomes clear: the female felt neglected by her boyfriend (or husband) who was paying attention to Leaming. But his side of the story is that she didn't say much to him, and that Leaming initiated a conversation with him (Gill 27). At this point, the focus of the argument shifts again. This time the spotlight is on beauty, "why I suppose you think she's attractive...I suppose some people do. It's perfectly natural. Some people think she's quite pretty," So the female believes that she was

neglected because of the beauty of another woman. He argues that he only talked to Fleming out of politeness; otherwise, he dislikes her (Gill 27).

The male begins using flattery and the female searches for a flaw in Fleaming, as if physical appearance is the only aspect that would be insulting. After the female insults Fleaming's nose, the male tells her how beautiful her nose is in comparison, and continues to patronize her, "who's the sweetest girl in the world?" And her answer is, Florence Lemming. Of course he's annoyed with her response (Gill 28). The story has an interesting, as well as abrupt, ending; she takes off her pearl beads with relief. This is a symbolic defiance of superficiality. Both male and female argue until the sole focus is on physical appearance of females.

Because the title sounds more like a social observation than an introduction to a short story, the assumption is immediately that this narrative is an allegory of gender roles. Without the title, this story would just be a simple, yet humorous, argument between a man and a woman, without hidden connotations. Also, the end would be meaningless because it would have no symbolic significance.

There is a trend in Parker's allegorical stories that ridicule gender roles, there are two nameless characters: a male and a female; the woman is sarcastic; there's little or no narration; no description of setting, and no resolution at the end. The focus in "The Waltz" is the act of submissiveness and feeble mindedness a woman is expected to portray, and "The Sexes" ridicules the obsession of a woman's physical appearance. Parker's short stories make a bold statement through humor, and keep the reader in a constant state of intrigue by leaving a trail of clues rather than making the point obvious from the beginning.

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