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# The Transparent Mask: American Women's Satire 1900-1933

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**THE TRANSPARENT MASK:  
AMERICAN WOMEN'S SATIRE 1900-1933**

A Dissertation Presented

by

JULIA BOISSONEAU HANS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
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**ABSTRACT**

**THE TRANSPARENT MASK:  
AMERICAN WOMEN'S SATIRE 1900-1940**

MAY 2011

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An interdisciplinary study of women satirists of the Progressive and Jazz eras, the dissertation investigates the ways in which early modernist writers use the satiric mode either as an elitist mask or as a site of resistance, confronts the theoretical limitations that have marginalized women satirists in the academic arena, and points to the destabilizing, democratic potential inherent in satiric discourse. In the first chapter, I introduce the concept of signifying caricature, an exaggerated characterization that carries with it broad social, political, and cultural critique. Edith Wharton uses a signifying caricature in *The Custom of the Country* where the popular press, middlebrow literature, and the democratization of language is under attack. Several of Wharton's satiric stories also ridicule the New Woman, revealing Wharton's anxiety over women functioning in the public arena. The second chapter features recovery work of May Isabel Fisk, an internationally known comic monologist whose work has been lost to scholars. This chapter examines Fisk's monologues, paying particular attention to her use of the *ieron* and *alazon* comic figures. The dissertation then moves on to Dorothy Parker's biting satires of Jazz era decadence, the sexual double standard, and the oppressive norms of

feminine beauty promoted in mass culture. The study concludes with an analysis of Jessie Fauset's *Comedy: American Style*, a novel using a signifying caricature to chastise America's failed racial policies and an essentialist theory of race. *Comedy: American Style* is an overlooked Depression era satire that challenges notions of a fixed American cultural nationalism even as it presages the idea of race as a floating signifier.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is the spring of 2004, and I am sitting at a large oak table in the oppressively silent but architecturally impressive John Hay Library at Brown University, blithely thumbing through stacks of World War II joke books, nineteenth century humor magazines, and oversized comic broadsides from the 1820s. I am here to see the Dorothy Parker collection for work on my master's thesis, but I also want to take advantage of the gold mine that is the Miller Collection of Wit and Humor, the largest collect of its kind in the world. I look through the World War II joke books first because they are in good shape and there are a lot of them. The yellowed covers feature curvaceous women wearing red lipstick and red platform heels, so I am not surprised to find that the jokes are about dumb blondes, libidinous privates, dim-witted sergeants. I turn next to copies of old humor magazines, hoping that the librarian doesn't notice that some of the frayed edges crumble in my hand as I turn the pages. Hours pass. I take notes, trying to record three centuries' worth of American humor before the library closes. After leafing through dozens of magazines, pamphlets, cartoons, and broadsides, I am struck by two things: here exists a vast collection of American culture that has been virtually untouched by scholars, a populist view of history told from its pundits and wits; and, sitting in a well-lit library reading joke books is a fine and noble way to spend an afternoon.

In his seminal book, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*, Mahadev Apte states that humor is an ideal methodological framework with which to study society. Humor is a cultural barometer, a reflection of codes and hierarchies at work within a civilization. It didn't take me long to discover, however, that in the grand

pantheon of American humorists, the women had somehow gone missing. Periodicals, books, anthologies, critical studies, and theoretical works on American humor represented only a narrow body of the citizenry. Books with titles like *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931), *The Comic Tradition in America: An Anthology* (1958), and *America's Humor From Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (1978) did not include any work by women. Even recent collections, like *Punchlines: The Violence in American Humor* (1990), ignore women's contributions. Darryl Cumber Dance wryly sums up the situation: "It's not too much of an exaggeration to play on a previous observation and argue that insofar as treatments of humor are concerned, all the Americans are male WASPs, all the women are white, and all the African Americans are male" (xxix).

Starting in the 1970s and 80s, feminist scholars begin to correct the imbalance. Books like Kate Sanborn's *The Wit of Wisdom* (1885), Gloria Kaufman's *In Stitches: A Patchwork of Feminist Humor and Satire* (1980), Nancy A. Walker's *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s* (1988), and others are published. Still, when women writers are considered, they typically are spoken of as humorists and not satirists. While there have been at least five anthologies of American women's humor, there are no anthologies, no collection of essays, no monographs dealing with women's satire. Writing about this lack in critical scholarship, Brian Connery argues that "feminist critics have most often referred to the power of women's 'humor'—rather than satire—implying that satire is indeed gendered" (12). Connery may have a point. Darryl Dance Cumber's anthology is of African American women's humor, Nancy A. Walker's books cover women's humor, Regina Barecca



writes about women's strategic use of humor, and Linda Morris's collection of essays has "American women humorists" in its title. Even Kaufman's *Feminist Humor and Satire* does not treat satire specifically, and Kaufman conflates humor and satire in the introductory essay. Why are women ignored in this field? Christopher Hitchens couldn't possibly be right; women are funny enough, so why the discrepancy?

Rather than theorize about why women have been marginalized in this field--that is another project for another time--I chose instead to look for tools that might make the study of satire more inclusive. I learned that where literary satire was concerned, most theoretical texts and critical essays focus on England's so-called golden age of satire, the eighteenth century, when Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift reigned supreme. This narrow focus yields a narrow theory. According to this perspective, satire is a hostile form of writing, filled with animus, scatology, dystopic societies, and the grotesque. Because satire has been associated with this body of literature, the consensus is that it is an angry mode of writing used by those in power to maintain control through ridicule, invective, and mockery.

Recognizing that such a limiting theory would not accommodate all satiric writing, I looked beyond Enlightenment literature and found that classical models were far more helpful. The Greeks considered satire a separate genre, situated between comedy and tragedy, taking on elements of both. Satire, then, is not comedy. It may have comic elements in it, but its purpose and conventions are markedly different. I like to think of this way: comedy makes you laugh, tragedy makes you cry, and satire makes you think while you are possibly either laughing or crying. The classical satirists also understood that there was a broad spectrum of satiric tone and style, ranging from the buoyant and

genial to the dark and bitter. Horace is known for his gentle wit, mild ridicule, and plain style; Juvenal's satire is filled with bitter wrath and a more grandiose style, while Persius was situated somewhere between the two extremes. As one critic puts it, satire runs from "the red of invective at one end to the violet of the most delicate irony at the other" (Connery 117). The notion of satire as an angry form of writing, then, originates from a narrow body of scholarship that focuses on eighteenth century satire written by men and is informed by psychological approaches to humor, especially Freudian. Satire is much more fluid and generative than that model allows.

While the classical view of satire helped me to see the variety within the genre and that it exists apart from tragedy and comedy, Northrop Frye's essay "The Mythos of Winter" helped me to devise a working definition of satire. Frye lists two requirements for satire: wit or humor founded on fantasy, the grotesque, or the absurd, and something under attack (224). I expand Frye's definition. Satire is a complex literary genre situated somewhere between comedy and tragedy that involves masking devices and something under attack. Masking devices may include wit, irony, invective, reversal, hyperbole, lampoon, parody, polyphony, and so on. Attack may be direct or indirect, so satire's critique doesn't necessarily have to come in the form of bludgeoning one over the head. In fact, some maintain that the more subtle and indirect the attack, the more powerful the satire. Frye also helped me to rethink satire's purpose. He writes, "Satire shows literature assuming a special function of analysis, breaking up the lumber of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions, and all other things that impede the free movement (not necessarily, of course, the progress) of society" (233). Rather than view satire as a punitive mode of writing, I

look at satire as a potentially generative mode that opens up space for a writer or performer to confront and thereby resist oppressive forces at work in a government, or in a society, or in his or her own conflicted thinking. In a word, satire is a safe form of protest. Satire strikes at the social order usually by means of exposing or unmasking injustice and hypocrisy, creating what Brian Connery calls “masks that are designed to be transparent” (7). Identifying the genre’s masking devices and then looking past those devices to the social and political critique is the two-part purpose of this dissertation. Hence my title, “The Transparent Mask.”

Before I move on to discuss the central problem that awaits me, I should mention that I am aware that most specialists working in women’s humor rely on a his-her dichotomous approach, focusing on how women revise an already established male tradition. Two pioneers in this field, Regina Barreca and the late Nancy A. Walker, have written influential books that set out to define women’s humor apart from the male literary tradition.<sup>1</sup> Most psychological treatises on humor also maintain a strict gender line. Ron Martin’s authoritative *Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (2007), for instance, dedicates a chapter to charting, outlining, and quantifying the differences between men and women’s humorous production and responses. The problem with this his-or-her approach is that not only are studies often based on anecdotal evidence or on empirical tests that are themselves inherently biased--joke based studies, for instance, have been shown to privilege male respondents--but also that the results tend to reaffirm gender stereotypes that feminists, sociologists, anthropologists, and others have been working for decades to refute. I wanted to avoid this approach not only because I felt it would yield nothing new but also because I believe it accedes to an outdated view that

considers male literature as representative of the human condition and women's literature as derivative.

### Caricature

Understanding that satire is situated between comedy and tragedy, that it employs masking devices, and that there is always something directly or indirectly under attack, I move on to the central problem of this study: caricature. Caricature is a humorous, often ludicrous portrayal of a person that relies on exaggeration or distortion. Usually one vice or defect--hypocrisy is a perennial favorite--is amplified. Every satire theorist writes about the important and singular function of caricature. George Test writes that "caricature is inherent in satire" (qtd. in Connery 204), while Alvin Kernan claims that we "never" find characters in satire, only caricatures (265). Robert Elliott describes caricatures as "mouthpieces of the ideas they represent" (187). But because most satire operates in the milieu of realism, the function of caricature is often mistaken, and caricatures are read as straightforward characters in a work of fiction. "We are all novel centered, I suspect, in our dealings with fiction of every kind;" Robert Elliott writes, "It is a difficult orientation to overcome" (187). Failing to understand the representative nature of caricature lands us in trouble.

Caricatures have always had a representative purpose. The literary windbag in Horace, the daft bachelor in P.G. Wodehouse, the henpecked husband in James Thurber--these are conventions designed to convey humor and critique. Caricature appears in modernist satire written by Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, Nathanael West, George Schuyler, Aldous Huxley, and these caricatures emphasize a particular human failing, a social evil, or a malefic ideology, and are not direct and specific indictments of

masculinity *per se*. Why, then, would we think that caricature appearing in Edith Wharton, May Fisk, Dorothy Parker, or Jessie Fauset somehow condemns *women*? To afford men's satiric fiction broad social and political implications but to deny the same for women's satire is to accede to misogynistic standards. In satiric fiction, caricature functions as a vehicle for humor and for critique and not necessarily to exact verisimilitude. The fashionista, the society maven, the domineering matriarch--these are caricatures found throughout literature, supplied in order to make fun of obsessions, pretensions, or human failings of one sort or another. Dorothy Parker's stories "Mrs. Carrington and Mrs. Crane," "The Custard Heart," and "From the Diary of a New York Lady" caricature narcissistic women of privilege. Does Parker imply that these women lack a social conscience because they are women, or because they are part of the insular leisure class? If these caricatures were of rich men, would we think their gender is under attack?

The problem is compounded because of the long history of misogyny in literary satire from Juvenal to Alexander Pope to Jonathan Swift. Felicity Nussbaum argues that there is "a clear line of continuous antifeminist poetic portrayal throughout the Restoration and the eighteenth century" (2); and, that while satiric literature ridicules men for corrupt behavior, the same literature derides women for their gender alone. Because women have been the brunt of many cruel jokes for centuries and because such degrading humor has done nothing to advance the status or rights of women, when an ugly or demeaning hyperbolic portrait of a woman appears in a literary work, even if a woman writes it, readers naturally respond with trepidation. And without discounting the possibility that women can and do write misogynistic works, I want to argue that women

can and do use caricature for a representative purpose. They use this convention for humorous effect and to convey larger social critique, and not necessarily as an indictment of women qua women.

Women writers of the early modernist period confront the same concerns as men: disillusionment, skepticism about progress, the dehumanizing effects of technology. They make wry observations about communist paranoia, the banality of Hollywood, Freudian psychology, and the conformity of suburbia. But women satirist tends to expose how these societal forces impact women. Satire of this time period certainly makes fun of the rush of American materialism, but women's satire might caricature a conspicuous consumer rather than an errant business tycoon. Why? Because women did not have the same opportunities in the business world that men did. There just weren't a whole lot of greedy women tycoons around to ridicule. Marriage is under aggressive attack in the satire of the 1920s and 30s. While Robert Benchley caricatures a bored husband who has affairs with women half his age, Dorothy Parker caricatures a miserable wife who retreats into an alcoholic funk. According to these satirists, marriage isn't good for anyone, but Parker tends to write about how the hallowed institution annoys women. This critique is conveyed, in part, through caricature.

In order to confront this problem, in my opening chapter I introduce two types of caricature that I think will help determine where the all-important social or political critique may be: generic caricature and signifying caricature. Most readers are familiar with generic caricature; they are characters with one or two exaggerated traits, which are distorted or amplified for comic effect. A signifying caricature, on the other hand, represents more than just an individual, a type, or a human failing but points to a social

group, or an institution, or a larger social or political condition or ideology that is under scrutiny. Gates uses the word *signifying* in a variety of ways, of course, moving past the simple understanding of signification as the relationship between the sign and the signifier and towards the concept of the signifying as a multilayered process of repetition and revision. A signifying caricature takes on a double function in literature having both a denotative and connotative significance. It conveys literal face value meaning (denotative) while also conveying an abstract, implicated meaning (connotative) where the caricature functions as a metonymy for a larger condition. I argue that women satirists often use a generic or signifying caricature not as a means of attacking women but as a way to convey broader cultural critique.

In addition to caricature, satirists also make use of direct and diffused parody. In literature, parody is a humorous type of writing that imitates the style, tone, and subject matter of another type of writing. In *The Custom of the Country*, Mrs. Feeny reads gossip columns to her employers. This is Wharton's direct parody of tabloid journalism. I argue that diffused parody, a bit harder to identify but no less effective, appears as part of the text and is interwoven into the main narrative, usually by the speech or thought patterns of a character. Jessie Fauset uses diffused parody in *Comedy: American Style*. Her protagonist, Olivia Cary, at times speaks and thinks in the unique jargon of a eugenicist, and this is Fauset's indirect parody of the language of white supremacy. Caricature and parody are two masking devices I discuss in detail in this dissertation, recognizing that there are many other strategies and conventions at work in satire.

## **Early Modernist Writers**

American women have always written satiric work, and I could have chosen any number of people to discuss, from Sarah Kemble Knight to Sarah Silverman. However, I chose to write about four writers of the Progressive and Jazz eras because it is a rowdy, chaotic period in American history when everything seemed to be in a constant state of flux. Perfect condition for the satirist. The time period 1900-1933 saw many epochal changes, including the First World War and the Great Depression. The so-called Black Migration sparked the New Negro movement in Harlem, Chicago, and Boston. Women got the vote, and the New Woman took center stage. The eugenics platform, in part, was spawned in American universities, and debates about American cultural nationalism raged in the pages of leading newspapers. With the Jazz era came decadence and urban culture, the flapper and open sexuality, Prohibition and the speak-easy. This was also the heyday of vaudeville when thousands of variety halls popped up throughout the United States, only to be made obsolete by the motion picture industry a few years later. These were the decades of mass production and consumer culture, of unprecedented affluence and equally unprecedented conspicuous consumption. With the arrival of Black Friday, however, the party came to a screeching halt. Satire took on a darker hue.

The four women I chose to write about in this dissertation represent a body of writing that is as diverse in tone and style as it is in subject matter. Because of her canonical status and the sheer volume of her writing, Edith Wharton was an obvious choice. Although little, if any critical scholarship has been done on Wharton as a satirist, Wharton wrote a large body of satiric fiction that should be considered. The only writer under discussion to come from extreme wealth and privilege, Wharton's satire reveals a



conservatism that is generally ignored by scholars; she ridicules rather than celebrates changes taking place in American culture, particularly when a populist element is involved. Moving from the well known to the unknown, I next write about May Isabel Fisk, a satiric writer and vaudeville monologist who wrote and performed in the early decades of the twentieth-century. Although Fisk was a best-selling author and was once called “the funniest woman monologist in America,” Fisk remains unknown to readers and scholars today. My recovery work on Fisk focuses on the satiric implications of her monologues, but her contribution to American literature would be of interest to those working in women studies, American studies, and performance studies. Perhaps the best-known satirist of the time period is Dorothy Parker, the topic of my third chapter. Though her literary output was small, especially compared to a powerhouse like Wharton, Parker’s innovative use of masking devices and of the satiric grotesque merits attention. I close the study with a discussion of Jessie Fauset’s satiric-tragic novel, *Comedy: American Style*. While other books, such as Zora Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain* or Nella Larsen’s *Passing* might have been included, I chose Fauset’s because it is an overlooked Depression-era novel whose satiric-tragic implications shed light on the waning years of the Harlem Renaissance.

The signifying caricature is an integral part of my dissertation, and this is the focus of the first half of chapter one. In her 1913 novel, *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton constructs a signifying caricature in the form of Undine Spragg of Apex. I argue that Undine, whose initials are U.S. of A., is a signifying caricature conveying Wharton’s extensive critique of changes taking place in American culture. Recent critics also focus on Undine but tend to view her either as a refutation or an endorsement of the New

Woman. *Custom* is alternately read as a satire of divorce or marriage rituals, a critique of a consumer culture that objectifies women, or a critique of a culture that has grown increasingly acquisitive and ignorant. Because so much has already been written about how the novel comments on corrupting forces such as materialism, consumer and corporate culture, I wish to discuss aspects of Wharton's nationalistic critique that have been overlooked. Teasing out the implications of caricature and parody, I argue that *Custom* might be viewed as Wharton's discomfort with and resistance to the necessary chaos implicit in a democratic rather than elitist society, an indication of her anxiety over a populist influence on art and literature. As Paul Ohler has argued, Wharton believed that the leisure class had the responsibility of national leadership (131), and it seems she felt that the nation was doomed if Undine and her tribe of commoners were left in charge.

Wharton's nationalist critique extends to language, and Wharton uses direct parody of Midwestern dialect and of newspaper gossip columns to convey her critique. In private and in public writings, Wharton condemns the use of slang in modern literature, and she did not consider this a sign of literary progress. Undine and other characters from the Midwest speak this type of language: a combination of slang, colloquialisms, and ungrammatical English. All of the characters that speak after this manner are portrayed as rubes or are otherwise associated with lowbrow culture. Wharton isn't very good at this type of parody because she doesn't sustain the effect long enough, quickly lapsing back into her own refined language. Wharton does better when parodying the sensationalized, over-the-top, metaphoric language of tabloid journalism. In personal letters, Wharton expressed her love of gossip columns, finding them vastly entertaining. In the novel, these gossip columns are also linked to specific characters including the

masseuse Mrs. Heeny, a “grimy” man on the subway, Undine Spragg, and Elmer Moffat. I argue that taken together, Wharton’s parody of Midwestern dialect and the tabloid press is part of Wharton’s ongoing critique of the democratization of American language.

Feminist scholarship on Wharton is an industry. There are essays about Wharton’s feminist strategies and feminist themes, her business feminism, and even the lurking feminism of her ghost stories. In the second half of the chapter, I consider traces of Wharton’s anti-feminism in three satiric short stories written between 1899 and 1916, the halcyon years of the New Woman. I argue that these three stories use a generic caricature of the New Woman but in three different iterations: circuit lecturer, reformer, and clubwoman. Wharton once said that she considered it a “man’s job” to speak in public, and it is her disapproval of women as public intellectuals that drives these vituperative satires.

Progressing chronologically, I start with “The Pelican,” an overlooked short story that makes fun of a circuit lecturer, Mrs. Amyot. Wharton’s view of this woman is summed up in one sentence: “She was sham erudition and real teeth and hair.” Wharton’s male narrator mocks Amyot in her role as public intellectual, suggesting that her popularity on the circuit is due only to her sexual appeal. The narrator also makes snide comments about a woman poet, a dean of a woman’s college, Mrs. Amyot’s all-female audience, and even Amherst, Massachusetts--a place associated with women’s education. I argue that while Wharton doesn’t mock these women simply for their gender, she does ridicule the idea of a woman functioning in any capacity as a public intellectual. “The Mission of Jane” satirizes a young reformer who tries to improve her own family by keeping a strict, scientific housekeeping regime. Jane appears to have the upper hand not

only with her parents, but also with her fiancé. As soon as she is married, however, Jane turns into a cowering, submissive wife. The patriarchal order is restored, and Jane's reformist ambitions come to naught. In this story, the reformer is portrayed as ineffectual, a threat to the nuclear family. I close the chapter with a discussion of "Xingu," a story that satirizes The Lunch Club, a group of wealthy women who meet to discuss literature not because they actually read but because they like to give the appearance of erudition. Cleverly constructed and witty throughout, "Xingu" nonetheless portrays women as duplicitous dolts, incapable of processing complex ideas or having any worthwhile judgment. In these three stories, Wharton echoes the longstanding antifeminist satiric tradition where women are portrayed as being intellectual inferiors, unsuited for the public arena.

The monologue has been associated with satire since classical times, and my second chapter discusses the satiric monologues of May Isabel Fisk. When I started recovery work on Fisk at the John Hay Library, I thought Fisk might be a society entertainer of minor importance; but as research progressed, a different picture emerged. Fisk was a humorist of national and international repute, a personal friend of Mark Twain, a vaudeville performer, and a best-selling author with audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Curiously, Fisk wrote almost exclusively in the monologue form--six of her seven books are collections of her monologues and a few duologues. And so I open the chapter theorizing about why this form might have appealed to Fisk.

The sheer number of her monologues--seventy or so--presents another challenge. For ease of discussion, I organize the chapter into three parts: marriage satires, lady satires, and dialect satires. Fisk's marriage satires reflect popular trends as divorce rates

throughout the United States were skyrocketing. Fisk's marriage satires make fun of a romanticized notion of marriage even as they celebrate a new sexual openness for women. Reversing the sexist joking patterns of vaudeville and of print media, Fisk makes dull husbands not daft housewives the brunt of her jokes. Her wives are often involved in secret trysts; most complain vociferously about traditional marriage roles.

In order to draw out the dynamic between her lady and dialect monologues, I use two caricatures from classical satire: the *alazon*, a braggart; and *eironeia*, a wise-fool. In her lady satires, Fisk uses the *alazon*, usually a high society lady or a woman of the leisure class whose snobbish observations do her in. These monologues are written in formal English, with clipped, polished diction. In her dialect satires, Fisk uses the *eironeia*, usually in the form of an uneducated, country bumpkin. These pieces are written in ungrammatical English that is filled with malapropisms, corny jokes, and garbled aphorisms. While her lady satires critique wealth and privilege, her dialect satires celebrate working class women without being patronizing. Even though she wrote relatively few monologues in vernacular English--it would be misleading to say that Fisk is a dialect humorist--Fisk nonetheless shows off her verbal dexterity by writing in both backwoods speech and in citified, slangy jargon. Her working class women may appear to be hicks or low-level employees, but they get the best of their employers and make sure the joke is on members of the leisure class or city folk, and not on themselves. While it has been impossible to determine which monologue was performed at what vaudeville house, I do know from one newspaper review that Fisk radically upends common vaudeville joking patterns, which at the time relied on ethnic slurs.

Many scholars have written about the feminist implications or lack thereof of Dorothy Parker's satiric fiction and light verse. Wishing to avoid the is-she or isn't-she a feminist dichotomy, in my third chapter I focus instead on aesthetics, particularly Parker's use of polyphony and the satiric grotesque. Even though Parker wrote relatively little fiction--no novels and only one slim volume of short stories--her satiric inventiveness is impressive. I first look at a number of her polyphonic monologues, short pieces that are spoken by one woman but that also have a number of other voices folded into the primary speech. This polyphony acts as a clever masking device: while the incongruity of the voices provides the humor, the mask permits the author to convey the impermissible: woman's rage. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss how Parker uses the satiric grotesque, a subgenre of satire that relies on distortions of the human body. I look at representations of the female body in three of Parker's stories and suggest that she co-opts elements of the satiric grotesque to resist contemporaneous codes of beauty, which might hinder and oppress women. In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf argues that standards of beauty have been used against women for generations, and I argue that to some degree, Parker's use of the satiric grotesque actively resists those debilitating standards.

My final chapter addresses Jessie Fauset's 1933 satiric-tragic novel *Comedy: American Style*. Relative to her other novels, *Comedy* has received little critical attention. Some critics view the novel as a satire of intra-racial prejudice and of upwards mobility within the black middle class. This reading depends on viewing the protagonist, Olivia Cary, as a black woman. But I argue that because Olivia is a biracial woman who phenotypically appears to be white and who identifies herself as a white woman, Olivia is

a caricature of a white woman. I further argue that Olivia is also a signifying caricature designed to critique white supremacist thinking. *Comedy: American Style* is nationalist in its critique, and it satirizes an essentialist notion of race, the idea of a monochromatic cultural nationalism, and hypocrisies surrounding miscegenation.

In the second half of the chapter, I focus on the tragic elements of *Comedy: American Style* arguing that Fauset deliberately structures her novel like a Greek tragedy and constructs a tragic hero, Oliver Cary, who dies of his tragic flaw. Oliver Cary is also the representative artist figure that commits suicide at the age of sixteen. I argue that Fauset chooses to adopt the mantle of the tragedian when portraying the promise of the black artist as a way to signal her despair over the efficacy of the arts to accomplish anything of value; and perhaps, as a way to signal her own departure as an artist from the political scene. Capturing the zeitgeist of the times, Fauset depicts her promising artist in a tragic light. One of the central tenets of the New Negro movement was that the arts had the power to bring about social change, to dismantle discriminatory beliefs and practices. But in putting to death her representative artist, Fauset declares dead the power of the arts, not because of any lack of talent on the part of African Americans but because of entrenched hatred in the white world. I close the chapter by discussing how Fauset, through references to acting, performance, and drama floats the idea of race as relational, a series of performances, anticipating what Stuart Hall would term “race as a floating signifying.”

In his book on the modern satiric grotesque, John Clark writes about satire’s “positive energy,” a force that is “vigorous, investigative, oftentimes profound, and astonishingly imaginative and fecund” (6). Rather than view satire as a destructive, mean-

spirited mode of writing used to further suppress those who are already marginalized, I want to put forth the possibility of satire as a potentially generative, imaginative mode of writing used by marginalized writers to offset an imbalance of power, however temporarily. Using clever and entertaining masking devices--irony, caricature, parody, and so forth--the satirist gives voice to important social critique that might not otherwise be expressed. Satiric literature does the important cultural work of breaking up those lumbering stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, and pedantic dogmas Frye mentions, anything that might hinder the free movement of society. This dissertation starts the conversation on American women's contribution to this energetic, imaginative, potentially liberating mode of writing.

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<sup>1</sup>*They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I Drifted* (1991) by Regina Barreca and *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from the Colonial Times to the 1980s* (1988) by Nancy A. Walker.



## CHAPTER 1

### ‘A WHOLE NATION DEVELOPING WITHOUT A SENSE OF BEAUTY

#### AND EATING BANANAS FOR BREAKFAST’:

#### EDITH WHARTON’S SATIRIC FICTION 1899-1916

Northrop Frye wrote that “The world of humor is a rigidly stylized world” (225), and this is no less true of satire which, despite its protean qualities, has retained identifiable conventions that distinguish it as a mode of writing, distinct from other genres.<sup>2</sup> While masking devices and something under attack remain two constants, one of the most common and perhaps misunderstood conventions of satire is caricature, defined generally as a portrait that ridicules or, alternately, pays homage to a person through exaggeration or distortion. Caricature might come in the form of a grossly distorted illustration of a historical figure, such as Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard in George Schuyler’s *Black No More*, a caricature of W. E. B. Du Bois, or it might be a generic type, such as the *eironeia* (ingénue) or *alazon* (braggart), comic figures that have existed in satire since classical times. Sometimes depicted with verisimilitude and only a trace of exaggeration while at other times portrayed with such hyperbole that the result borders on the absurd, caricatures can be conveyed with comic playfulness or with denunciatory sarcasm. While caricature doesn’t necessarily follow a singular formula, one thing is certain: caricature is an integral part of satiric literature. Alvin Kernan asserts, “We never find characters in satire; only caricature” (265), and George Test argues that caricature is “intrinsic” (204) in satire. Robert Elliott writes that Menippean satire uses characters “as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent” (187). Because caricature relies on distortion, it provides much of satire’s comic appeal, whether evoking a genial or a jeering kind of

laughter. But caricature has a second function: it acts as a vehicle for social or political critique because the portrait points out a human weakness or social vice that is under scrutiny.

### **Signifying Caricature**

One of the difficulties in talking about caricature, however, is determining who or what is being mocked. Sometimes a caricature makes fun of a well-known historic individual, such as the aforementioned Beard in *Black No More*, but generally, critics talk of caricature in hazy terms. In order to broaden the discussion of satire, I want to introduce two types of caricature that will help determine where the all-important social or political critique may be: generic caricature and signifying caricature. Most readers are familiar with generic caricature; they are characters with exaggerated traits that represent *types* of people. Anita Loos' Lorelie Lee is a generic caricature of the proverbial dumb blonde, a comic stereotype found throughout American popular culture. Many of Dorothy Parker's short stories are filled with generic caricatures of New York society women, characters that represent *types* of individuals and their associative human failings. Comedy is filled with generic caricatures--the harried housewife, the bluestocking, the ingénue--which is why characters in comedy seldom seem able to move beyond stereotype. Generic caricatures typically point to a human foible or vice, such as vanity, materialism, or hypocrisy; and generally, one trait is exaggerated in the characterization. A signifying caricature, on the other hand, represents more than just an individual or a type or a human failing but points to a social group, or an institution, or a larger social or political condition or ideology.

In calling this particular rhetorical strategy a signifying caricature, I am deliberately alluding to Henry Louis Gates's groundbreaking work, *The Signifying Monkey* because I want to signal a departure from the conventional understanding of how caricature works. Gates uses the word signifying in a variety of ways, of course, moving past the simple understanding of signification as the relationship between the sign and the signifier and towards the concept of the signifying as a multilayered process of repetition and revision. This type of signifying draws attention to the differences between black vernacular structures and the white forms it repeats and revises. Gates writes, "Whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin (g) difference" (xxiv). While Gates sets out on to chart a usable theoretical framework within which to read, understand, and enjoy African American literature, a framework based on a complex, multilayered understanding of signification, I use the word in a far less ambitious manner. A signifying caricature takes on a dual purpose in literature having both a denotative and connotative meaning. A signifying caricature conveys literal face value meaning (denotative) while also conveying an abstract, implicated meaning (connotative) where the caricature functions as a metonymy for a larger condition. To a lesser degree, a signifying caricature may also talk back to caricatures found throughout women's literary tradition. For my purposes here, however, I am not so much concerned with this aspect of signifying as I am in its connotation-denotative duality. Examples of signifying caricature include Lemuel Pitkin in Nathanael West's *A Cool Million*, a caricature meant to ridicule not only a specific literary type, the indomitable hero in Horatio Alger novels, but also the blind optimism that underscores the notion of postwar American progress. Another signifying caricature is the eponymous narrator in James

Thurber's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. Mitty represents another familiar literary type--the henpecked husband--but he also represents the modernist anti-hero rendered impotent by industrialized society.

A singular problem presents itself, however, when looking at caricatures of women. Present scholarship tends to view all caricatures of women in literature along one line, as being degrading to women. This is largely due to the long history of misogyny in literary satire from Juvenal to Alexander Pope to Jonathan Swift. Because women have been the brunt of many cruel jokes for centuries and because such degrading humor has done nothing to advance the status or rights of women, when an ugly or demeaning hyperbolic portrait of a woman appears in a literary work, even if a woman writes it, readers naturally respond with trepidation. In her book tracing the history of misogyny in satire, Felicity Nussbaum correctly states that there is "a clear line of continuous antifeminist poetic portrayal throughout the Restoration and the eighteenth century" (2); and that while satiric literature ridicules men for corrupt behavior, the same literature derides women for their gender alone. Naturally these portrayals have an adverse cultural impact and do nothing to elevate the status of women. In fact, Nussbaum writes that this antifeminist tradition of satire creates a "poetic fiction of power and authority" (3), one that has helped to perpetuate damaging cultural myths regarding women, from the notion that women are unruly monsters, to the idea that they are valued mostly for their beauty, to the myth that so called masculine women are perverse (159). This sort of anti-feminist caricature is prevalent in satire prompting Robert Elliott to write that misogynists in satire "have a strong and abiding brotherhood—one of the great cross cultural institutions of history"(41).<sup>3</sup>

More recent scholars, like Nancy A. Walker, argue something similar by stating that “women and minorities” tend to direct their humor at themselves or at those below them (*Redressing* xxiii). In Walker’s estimation, women do tend to make fun of other women, but while she doesn’t go so far as to say that these humorists are misogynists, she does suggest that women use female comic types as a form of self-attack, a defensive gesture made by those who “feel themselves weak or vulnerable to attack with impunity the forces that oppress them” (xxiii). And so, according to this viewpoint, when a satirist uses female caricatures, she or he may very well be echoing the misogynistic satiric tradition.

Without discounting the long tradition of misogyny in satire or the possibility that women can write misogynistic works, I would like to offer an alternative reading. However, women satirists often use a generic or signifying caricature not as a means of attacking women qua women but as a way to convey broader cultural critique. These caricatures signify far more than a surface, literal meaning. Determining if a caricature is generic or signifying is not as difficult or as imprecise as it may appear. The context of the story, the tone of the humor (genial wordplay, caustic wit, detached irony, and so forth), the historic particulars of the narrative, and the author’s worldview made implicit from her *corpus* all play a part. For example, the unnamed society lady in Dorothy Parker’s 1933 “From the Diary of a New York Lady” functions as a signifying caricature. The woman’s diary reveals her self-absorption: she obsesses over tangerine nail polish and chiffon evening gowns while breadlines form in the streets below her Manhattan apartment. The tone is haughty and aloof, and the narrative tonally criticizes the woman’s actions, not her gender. Parker is ridiculing this woman not because she is

female but because she is superficial. As a signifying caricature, however, this portrait does more. It also draws attention to the civic indifference of the leisure class and the economic disparities at work in 1933. Parker subtitles the piece, “During Days of Horror, Despair, and World Change,” and the contrast between the banality of the leisure class and the desperation of the working class is made especially clear in this satire. The lady’s Wednesday diary entry contains the line: “Started to read the papers, but nothing in them except that Mona Wheatley is in Reno charging *intolerable cruelty*” (192). While the nation is suffering double-digit unemployment rates, this lady is only concerned with news in the gossip column. The caricature signifies more than gossip mongering. Many of Parker’s stories--“The Custard Heart,” “A Certain Lady,” “Mrs. Carrington and Mrs. Crane” spring to mind --have a similar theme and use a similar signifying caricature, so this sort of representation is in concert with other Parker pieces. Rather than view all caricatures of women as a form of woman bashing, we might view signifying caricature as a rhetorical device used to convey a broad social, political, cultural, or ideological critique.

Edith Wharton’s Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* (1913) is a signifying caricature writ large. Not only does Undine represent a type of individual, a social climber, she also represents a new social class of Americans: wealthy families from the American Midwest who have taken over the upper strata of New York society. In *The Custom of the Country* Wharton portrays Undine as a socially ambitious woman who desperately wants to rise to the heights of the American leisure class, even if she doesn’t know why: “To have things had always seemed to her the first essential of existence” (Wharton, CC 329). While Undine is certainly a generic caricature of a social

climber, this caricature also serves a much larger purpose, especially given the nationalist framework of the novel itself. As many critics have pointed out, Undine Spragg's initials are U.S. (U. S. of A-pex to be precise), and she functions as a transparent metonymy for a newly emergent social class in the United States, a stand in for a new pecuniary order that has its basis in the mass market and consumer capitalism.<sup>4</sup> *The Custom of the Country* pivots on this signifying caricature, yet the implications of this caricature have not always been acknowledged. Early critics, for instance, focus on how Wharton's caricature implicates women.

Three contemporaneous reviews of *Custom*, published in 1913 and 1914, exemplify how critics overlook the metonymic function of the main character. In a May 15, 1913 review published in *The Nation*, the author (unnamed) focuses on the economic theme of the novel and complains that "stock figures" (494) like Undine abound in reality. Undine is just another "spending American woman" (494) who doesn't appreciate the men who bankroll her adventures. According to this reviewer, the custom of the country is men earning and women spending. While American women in the past had worked alongside men and had an equal share in "the conquest of a continent and the upbuilding of a nation" (494) in colonial and pioneer days, by Wharton's time, the reviewer argues, there had been a marked change in the economic functions of the sexes. Men still earn but women now spend as "a compensation for what she has suffered and achieved in the past" (494). The reviewer concludes that "Today we are undoubtedly in the position of having placed women on a pedestal and left her there lonely and rather dizzy" (494), suggesting on the one hand, that men have banned women from the business and economic sphere as a chivalric gesture; but on the other hand, that this

intended honor only serves to alienate and disorient, not to mention, subjugate women. The article does not mention satire. To this reviewer, *Undine* is a realistic, not satiric, portrait of the American female consumer who pursues pleasure because it is her nature.

A second review titled “Mrs. Wharton’s Manner” also appeared in *The Nation* in 1913. The reviewer, H. W. Boynton, views *Undine* as another tedious type found wherever “realism rears its ugly head” (405) and calls her a “monster of vulgarity” (405) and a “daughter of the plain people” (405). The reader, we are told, should have no sympathy for *Undine* because she is cold, selfish, ruthless, and calculating. Boynton then takes aim at Wharton, suggesting that she fails as an author not only because there is nothing novel in *Undine*’s characterization, but also because *Undine* isn’t appealing enough, purportedly the heroine’s main purpose. The reviewer concludes that Wharton no longer ranks among the country’s finest novelists because her style has turned satiric, making a bizarre connection between satire and maturity: “The mood of satire seems to be growing upon Mrs. Wharton, a dubious sign in a writer who has passed a certain age” (405). While Boynton does note the novel’s satiric tone, he fails to address its social or cultural implications. *Undine*’s unpleasantness is the focus of the review, but Boynton never considers what this caustic portrait might signify. What’s more, Wharton’s failure to supply her readers with appealing characters signals a literary decline.

In a third article, “Three Disagreeable Girls” published in *The Forum*, J. Huneker discusses the vices of Hedda Gabler, Mildred Lawson, and *Undine Spragg*. Huneker views the three protagonists as variations on the New Woman, a figure who by this time had become a commonplace in popular literature. Like the previous reviewers, Huneker finds *Undine* vulgar, “the worst failure of the three” (775) because she is as “monotonous



as a self-playing pianoforte” (775). While he applauds the novel’s satiric tone—“a welcome astringent for the mental palate” (773)--he fails to consider the possibility of Undine as a caricature but repeatedly mentions her lack of *pleasantness*.

If these reviews indicate the general mood of the times, it appears that women in novels, like their real life counterparts, were judged by how well they conformed to societal codes regarding idealized femininity and were not expected to contribute to society on any meaningful level, and certainly never to be disagreeable. It’s significant that all three reviewers denounce the novel’s main character because she is not felicitous, and yet all fail to address, in any significant fashion, the novel’s satiric implications. None of these reviews link Undine Spragg to an emerging national identity. These reviews illustrate how a preconditioned, misogynistic reader can miss the impact of a signifying caricature simply because he expects women characters in a literary work to behave in a pleasing, passive manner and not in a disruptive, or significantly meaningful way. Denying women caricatures the same social or political implications as their male counterparts seems to reflect a double standard in literary criticism where men’s literature is considered representative of the human condition but women’s literature represents only a narrow part of culture. Male caricatures might represent human vices or political intrigues, but women caricatures only represent feminine or domestic vices. The objectification of women--as sex object, object of derision, or status object--is so profound in our culture that it seems to distort the way we read literature; and this seems especially so when reading satire, which, by nature often disrupts the existing social order.

The question remains: If Undine is a signifying caricature representing the United States, a new national identity, what aspects of American culture are under critique in the novel? Critics have argued for decades about the real satiric implications of *The Custom of the Country*. Linda Wagner-Martin posits that the novel is “almost entirely about divorce” (xiii) while Elizabeth Ammons writes that the novel satirizes marriage, “stripping it of all sentiment and sentimentality” (*Argument* 96). Stuart Hutchinson suggests that Wharton’s real argument with America is with “America’s demotic energies” (“Sex, Class” 438) and that *Custom* is a “reflective satire, functionally only on behalf of Wharton’s residual sentiment for old New York” (440). Elaine Showalter views *Custom* as “Wharton’s sardonic view of an acquisitive but ignorant American culture” (279). Continuing with this idea of a consumer culture, Debra Ann MacComb argues that Wharton’s most pointed criticism centers not on Undine, or on acquisitive women, or even on marriage, but on a consumer culture that objectifies women and places value in “commodified self display” (785). Placing the novel in its progressive era context, Paul Ohler writes that the novel reflects Wharton’s response to social Darwinism, her refutation of the notion of “the nation as perfectible” (138). Most recently Sarah Emsley suggests that the novel is centrally about desire and “the distortion of ambition that results from the incessant pursuit of desire as an end in itself” (18); it is a satiric critique of “the restlessness of consumerism, especially the way unprincipled consumers use people as well as things” (18).

Like other satiric novels where the critique functions on many levels, all of the above mentioned institutions and systems and personal vices are under attack in *Custom*. As a novel that is self-consciously national in scope, *Custom* concerns itself with cultural

shifts taking place in American society without being a simplistic refutation of the new and an endorsement of the old. Wharton may critique America's newer obsessive materialism in *Custom*, but she also critiques its older diehard patriarchal romanticism. Similarly, *Undine* is undeniably tied to "national traits of exploration and domination" (Ohler 92), but she is also tied to a new democratic aesthetic, which Wharton evidently did not consider to be progress. Wharton's dislike for modernist, democracy-leaning writing is well chronicled. She deemed William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* "an idiot's tale, signifying nothing" (qtd. in Lee 627) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* "a turgid welter of schoolboy pornography" (qtd. in Lee 610). Letters to friends reveal a special disdain for the new democratic American literature, where, according to a disgruntled Wharton, "only the man with the dinner pail shall be deemed worthy of attention" (qtd. in Lee 612). In her 1927 essay, "The Great American Novel," Wharton further complains about democratic elements in American fiction because in her view, it focused too much on lower class individuals who lack the broad educational background of someone of her own economic class. She equated this so-called narrow subject with an "impoverished use of the English language" (qtd. in Lee 628). Wharton's signifying caricature acts as a critique of American colonization, exploration, and domination, or as Ohler puts it, how the new moneyed elite "build palatial monuments to capital" (93), but the caricature also mocks the potentially enlivening forces at work in popular culture, forces that Wharton called "impoverished."

Because so much has already been written about how the novel critiques corrupting forces such as materialism, consumer and corporate culture, I wish instead to discuss how *Undine* functions as a signifying caricature and to examine how several of

her exaggerated characteristics--her childishness, her fierce independence, her vanity, and her lack of a developed language--point to Wharton's nationalistic critique. Seen from this light, *Custom* then might be viewed as Wharton's discomfort with and resistance to the necessary chaos implicit in a democratic rather than elitist society, and her anxiety about a populist influence on art and literature. Undine comes from common people, speaks a commoner's language, reads a common press. Like Elmer Moffat, she is not born into privilege and has no education or elevated social status and yet rises to the top of the social strata. This Wharton finds disquieting, for if the power of a civilization lies in its gentry and in the art that that class values, as Wharton suggests, then in a democratic society, that power is available to virtually any person who has the determination and luck and chutzpah to amass the necessary wealth. *Custom* denigrates the nation's democratic potential and the disordered state of flux that ensues when a group of elites loses control over cultural capital, especially literary. As Paul Ohler has argued, Wharton believed that the leisure class had the responsibility of national leadership (131), and it seems she felt that the nation was doomed if Undine and her tribe of commoners were left in charge.

Written in France during the year of her divorce from Teddy Wharton and serialized in *Scribner's* in 1913, *The Custom of the Country*, a four hundred plus-page, five-book novel spanning two continents, chronicles the life of the young and beautiful Undine Spragg. When we first meet the enterprising Undine, she has been on the New York social scene for two years. With her parents, she has come from a nondescript town in the Midwest, the ironically named Apex City, with one goal in mind: to climb to the pinnacle of the New York leisure class. With a keen eye for fashion and uncanny knack

for manipulation, Undine insists that her parents spare no expense in imitating the wealthy class: “Undine had decided early that they could not hope to get on while they “kept house”—all the fashionable people she knew either boarded or lived in hotels” (*CC* 10). Undine is unstudied but she can recite all the names of the New York glitterati by heart, and she uses her talents to conquer the scene like a marauding pirate. By the novel’s end, Undine has gotten what she wanted, but not without leaving three husbands, two lovers, a neglected son, and an impoverished father in her wake. Undine considers her only child, Paul, a supreme inconvenience, forgets his birthdays and uses him as emotional blackmail in order to extort a divorce from her second husband. She drives her first husband, Ralph, to a desperation that ultimately results in suicide. And that only brings us part way through the novel. It’s easy to see how such an overdrawn character fits into the satiric tradition. James Nichols describes caricature’s hyperbolic tendency as “loading the portrait to create a blameworthy impression” (24), and Wharton loads the portrait, to be sure.

As a signifying caricature, Undine has many exaggerated and negative qualities that represent particular vices in American culture, which Wharton found distasteful. One of her most obvious flaws is her immaturity. Even though she is an adult, Undine is routinely referred to as a child. In the first few pages Undine is described as a “youth” (*CC* 3), a “poor child” (9), suffering a “childish disappointment” (4), and of being “youthful” (5), even though by this time she is already a divorced woman and a skilled socialite. Her parents recall how back in Apex City, Undine often behaved like a loud spoiled child (27). Undine’s petulant behavior does not change throughout the novel. Both Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles look at Undine as if she were a child and

even refer to her in those terms. Ralph talks of Undine's "infant hands" and feels compelled to protect her "virgin innocence" (50) and addresses her as "my poor child" (61). Her second husband, Raymond de Chelles, refers to Undine as "my dear child" (308). Mr. Dagonet also addresses Undine as "my child" (59). The men in Undine's life behave like parents of a spoiled child; they are simply worn down by Undine's tantrums and conclude that "it seemed easier to let Undine have what she wanted" (161) than to resist her demands. Much later in the book and despite her past cruelties, Ralph continues to think of Undine as a young innocent, "still in the toy age" (189). When she realizes that she cannot get her way with de Chelles, another "one of her childish rages possessed her" (335). Undine represents the immaturity of a nation.

Edith Wharton wrote of America as an immature child in her collection of essays, *French Ways and Their Meanings* (1919). Written for American audiences during the last two years of World War I and based, in part, on a 1918 speech Wharton gave to American soldiers serving in France, *French Ways and Their Meanings* is a collection of essays intended to explain French culture to an American audience. According to Wharton's most recent biographer, Hermione Lee, the book was "ordered to be placed in all ships' libraries by the U.S. Department of the Navy" (462) and was written "in terms she thought suitable for ignorant young American soldiers" (462). In it Wharton repeatedly refers to American culture as childish, immature, and inchoate especially when compared to the older, more sophisticated French culture. France is "of all countries the most *grown up*" (*French Ways* 59, 66) while Americans tend to "irreverence, impatience, to all sorts of rash and contemptuous short-cuts" (32). America has a "flippant disregard for her own past" (32), believes in "shorts cuts to knowledge"

(55), and is a nation obsessed with get rich quick schemes not to mention fast-acting cure-alls. French women are “grown up” (100-101); American women are immature in comparison. By Wharton’s estimation, a nation that takes its time, like France, produces a culture of lasting depth and necessary reflexivity; whereas, a nation given to haste, like America, is an immature nation destined for superficiality (73). Commenting on William Dean Howells’s observation that what the American public wants “is a tragedy with a happy ending” (qtd. in *French Ways* 65), Wharton argues that this theatrical taste is not so much an indication of the country’s preference for comedy but reflects the country’s *infantile* tendencies, needing like a baby “to be harrowed and even slightly shocked from eight till ten-thirty, and then consoled and reassured before eleven” (65). What is true of theatre, Wharton continues, is true of the national character:

‘A tragedy with a happy ending’ is exactly what the child wants before he goes to sleep: the reassurance that ‘all’s well with the world’ as he lies in his cozy nursery. It is a good thing that the child should receive this reassurance; but as long as he needs it he remains a child, and the world he lives in is a nursery-world. . . . until he has faced the fact and digested the lesson, he is not grown up--he is still in the nursery. (*French Ways* 65-66)

Connecting *Undine* with youth, Wharton equates national character with rashness and shallowness of judgment, perpetuating the familiar binary of the undeveloped, inferior American and the sophisticated, superior European. Raymond de Chelles’s diatribe against Americans, spoken in a fit of anger at *Undine*, epitomizes this view:

You come in speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses,

exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about you--you come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have. (CC 334)

From de Chelles's perspective, American character is reprehensible because it values newness and progress more than stability and longevity. His speech is a paean to conservatism.

Another exaggerated aspect of Undine's character is her extreme individualism. One of Undine's most distinguishing traits is her lack of communal or familial responsibility. She exhibits no concern for her parents' welfare and insists that her father purchase box seats for the opera even though he can't afford them. When one of Mr. Spragg's business deals collapses, Ralph is shocked at Undine's "indifference to her father's misfortune" (101). Later she prohibits her son Paul from seeing his maternal grandparents even though they provide him with much needed affection. As a mother, Undine demonstrates little maternal obligation to Paul. She views him principally as an object, either something to adorn or something to use as leverage. Paul's illness is viewed more as an expense than a cause for concern; and when she sees Paul again after a three-year absence, she thinks, "what an acquisition he must be" (294). Undine's extreme individualism also translates into her disregard of any marital responsibility. She has a priceless Marvell heirloom ring reset because it holds no sentimental value for her. In fact, it is her complete indifference to Ralph's life-threatening illness that finally repulses the unscrupulous Peter Van Degen. When she marries de Chelles, Undine refuses to



conform to his family's strict social codes and rejects any responsibility she may have to de Chelles or to his family. Undine personifies American individualism gone awry. Taken to its extreme, individualism insists on personal desires above all else, disregarding any social or familial responsibility or civic accountability. That Undine's individualism takes on a very destructive nature--her father is nearly financially ruined, her first husband commits suicide, her son is emotionally devastated--suggests that left unchecked, the push for American individualism, divorced from any social duty, would be a destructive rather than a constructive force.

Margaret McDowell calls the mirror the novel's "central image" (152), and another of Undine's distorted characteristics is her lack of an inner life or self-reflexivity. The only game the young Undine played was dressing up in her mother's clothes and admiring herself in the mirror, and this "Narcissus-element in youth" (CC 96) continues throughout Undine's life. Fittingly, at the end of the book when Undine is settled in her final home, a garish mansion on Fifth Avenue, her new bedroom has one entire wall lined with mirrors. This mirror gazing is especially apparent at key points of decision in Undine's life, as if to suggest that the only self-reflection Undine is capable of is a literal, surface reflection. In fact, Undine's habit of looking in the mirror in times of crisis seems to be one of the novel's running jokes. In one scene, just before her guests start to arrive for a dinner party, Undine reflects on her latest marriage: "These facts disposed her favourably toward her husband, and deepened the sense of well-being with which--according to her invariable habit--she walked up to the mirror above the mantelpiece and studied the image it reflected" (362). Undine may be able to see herself in the mirror, but that is as far as her reflexivity will take her. Wharton links Undine to the mirror both as

an indication of her vanity and also as a way of critiquing the nation's lack of intellectual reflexivity, lack of depth. How Undine appears to others is "her only notion of self-seeing" (245). The satiric implication is that like Undine Spragg, the new nation seems incapable of looking past the surface for value or meaning and has become a nation where, to coin a popular slogan, image is everything. Wharton even writes about this "narrow surface of perception" (*French Ways* 96) in her essays.

This narrow surface of perception is symbolized not only in Undine's chronic mirror gazing but also in how she uses pulp fiction and tabloid newspapers as a secondary type of mirror. Undine sees herself in the pages of New York society columns, romance novels, and gossip columns; her inner consciousness as well as her outward appearance is taken from the popular press. Because she reads in *Boudoir Chat* that "all the smartest women were using the new pigeon-blood notepaper with white ink" (CC 12), Undine orders a large supply, monogrammed in silver. She has her chocolate brought to her in bed because it was described in "A Society Woman's Day" column. Her opinions of others are based on the "world she read about in the Sunday papers" (15). Undine likes Mr. Pople's company because he speaks in rhetoric "drawn from more familiar sources" (116) like contemporary fiction and the "lighter types of memoirs, in which the old acquaintances of history are served up in the disguise of a 'A Royal Sorceress' or 'Passion in a Palace'" (116), fictional names Wharton invents to ridicule popular literature. When Undine is at a ball where she is the center of attention, she reflects that it is as thrilling as "a page from one of the 'society novels'" (138). At one point when she learns how lucrative a writing career might be for Ralph, she decides, "for the first time literature was becoming fashionable" (172). She then imagines herself as the wife of

a well-known author, wearing “‘artistic’ dresses and doing the drawing-room over with Gothic tapestries and dim lights in altar candle-sticks” (172-3), images no doubt gleaned from the pages of popular gothic romances. Even her affair with Van Degen is guided by romance novels, the sort of fiction where “the type of heroine who scorns to love clandestinely and proclaims the sanctity of passion and moral duty of obeying its call” (223). When Undine’s father insists that she give back Van Degen’s pearls and she is unsure how to respond, she again takes her cues from novels: “Her novel-reading had filled her mind with the vocabulary of outraged virtue, and with pathetic allusions to woman’s frailty” (230). When de Chelles flirts with her, Undine has the sense of “breathing the very air of French fiction” (247). Just as Undine uses the looking glass as a form of self-identity, she also uses popular fiction (romance novels, society columns, tabloids) to “see” herself. The notion that the popular press now reflects or defines national identity seems to drive Wharton’s satire.

Ultimately, Wharton’s censorious judgment of American culture extends to language. Rather than view the Americanization of English as a sign of vitality or progress or even interest, Wharton chastises Americans for not having a “more reverent hold upon this treasure” and for “debasement and impoverishing” the language through “short-cuts in spelling” (*French Ways* 97) and other linguistic atrocities. In *French Ways*, she thinks that most Americans like to read but that it does them little good; they simply are not reading the right stuff: “If the ability to read carries the average man no higher than the gossip of his neighbours, if he asks nothing more nourishing out of books and the theatre than he gets in hanging about the store, the bar and the street-corner, then culture is bound to be dragged down to him instead of his being lifted up by culture” (69).

Here Wharton attaches power to literature (books and theatre) giving it the ability to lift up or to debase a nation. That Undine takes her cues from the popular press seems unconscionable to Wharton. And, of course, the result of Undine's cultural depravity is reflected in her speech. Undine doesn't say very much, and she has no memorable speeches in the novel. On the contrary, what is recorded are a few of her brief, inarticulate rants or snippets of dialogue, as if to suggest that the only way to make sense of Undine's inadequate language is to translate it through the educated voice of the narrator, as illustrated in the following passage:

She meant to watch and listen without letting herself go, and she sat very straight and pink, answering promptly but briefly, with the nervous laughter that punctuated all her phrases--saying "I don't care if I do" when her host asked her to try some grapes, and "I wouldn't wonder" when she thought any one was trying to astonish her. This state of lucidity enabled her to take note of all that was being said. The talk ran more on general questions, and less on people, than she was used to; but though the allusions to pictures and books escaped her, she caught and stored up every personal reference, and the pink in her cheeks deepened at a random mention of Mr. Popple. (CC 22)

Undine's thoughts are a "blank wall of incomprehension" (198) as Ralph belatedly discovers, and this is evidenced in her undeveloped, unsophisticated language.

Wharton also uses a peculiar form of free indirect discourse as a way to convey Undine's diminished powers of expression. Key words or phrases appear in quotation marks not only as a distancing technique, but also as a way to draw attention to both the artificiality and the power of language. Sometimes these are words spoken or thought by

Undine: “Undine sat between Mr. Bowen and young Marvell, who struck her as very ‘sweet’ (it was her word for friendliness)” (CC 21). This is the word Undine uses to describe Ralph during a dinner table conversation. But more often, these quotation marks are related through the narrator’s ironic, mocking voice. In this way, the narrator retains control over Undine’s speech and attaches disapproval of it through heavy irony. Early in the book, while Undine is preparing to enter the social scene, she decides that the Spraggs “could not hope to get on while they ‘kept house’ --all the fashionable people she knew either boarded or lived in hotels” (10). She doesn’t know anything about art and “much less that ‘people’ went to see them” (24). Undine’s parents know that she is “‘nervous’ ” (25), an understatement suggestive of Undine’s explosive temper. Neither she nor her mother “could ‘bear’ to have their maid about them when they were at their toilet” (29), and she hesitates to talk to Peter Van Degen “without being ‘introduced’ ” (31). Readers are cued that they should laugh at how artificially Undine uses these words. If we string together some of these ironically quoted words and phrases from one section, they give the impression that Undine uses speech just as she uses clothing--to appear fashionable. In chapter four, words like *nervous*, *scenes*, *fusses*, *bear*, *look*, and *introduced* appear in quotation marks and connote what Undine says, but they denote how her speech is an extension of her artifice.

In another scene, Wharton puts the word *powerful* in quotation marks. The line reads: “In the ‘powerful’ novels which Poppel was fond of lending her she had met with increasing frequency the type of heroine who scorns to love clandestinely” (223). Here, Wharton uses the word as an ironic sneer, as a way to invite the reader into laughing at Undine’s valuation of novels, as if to say “These sort of people think silly romance

novels are *powerful*.” The word becomes doubly ironic, however, because these types of novels, no matter how poorly written, are in fact very powerful, having the ability to influence a large number of readers. This use of quotation marks, an ironic conveyance of words and meaning, insinuates a judgmental narrator who views Undine’s speech as another form of artifice. While not all the words put into quotations are used in this mocking manner, they are frequently used this way, especially when describing Undine’s thoughts or speech. The reader is thereby directed to judge that Undine uses a word or phrase merely because it is in vogue and not because it conveys meaning, or even her genuine thoughts or feelings. And because Undine is a signifying caricature, this rhetorical strategy, appearing on virtually every page of the novel, also suggests that for the United States, language has become another part of its display culture.<sup>5</sup>

Undine’s speech reflects her limited thought processes and paltry education (one term at a boarding school in the Midwest), but the rhetoric Wharton used to describe Undine’s activities is the language of commerce. Undine travels in a social set that “revolved about their central sun of gold” (CC 118). When Peter Van Degen becomes impatient with Undine’s flirtations and wants more than her attention, he says, “Look here—the installment plan’s all right; but ain’t you a bit behind even on that?” (140). Even her motive in having an affair with Van Degen is described like one of her father’s “financial enterprises” (223). Undine’s changing marital status is described in the rhetoric of corporate finance. The change in her visiting card after divorce is like “the coin of a debased currency testifying to her diminished trading capacity” (221). In using this rhetoric of finance--and it dominates the pages of *Custom*--Wharton suggests that the United States has become a nation whose language has radically deteriorated, shifting

from an artistic ideal built on Enlightenment principles and classical ideals to a commercial standard, built on a pecuniary culture and conspicuous consumption.

Wharton's own autobiographical writing and her personal letters to Henry James reinforce this connection between Undine and money. In her 1933 autobiography, *A Backwards Glance*, Wharton defends *The Custom of the Country* against James's criticism. James scolds Wharton for not fully developing the novel's central theme, which he felt was how the uncouth Undine finagles her way into Paris high society. Wharton disagrees, however, arguing that her main focus was on "chronicling the career of a particular young woman, and that to whatever hemispheres her fortunes carried her, my task was to record her ravages and pass on to her next phase" (*Backwards* 182). Even in this short reflection, Wharton uses the rhetoric of finance to describe Undine: career, fortunes, record. Later in the memoir, Wharton writes that she resisted having *The Custom of the Country* translated into French because she thought it "almost impossible to make a tale so intensely American intelligible to French readers" (288). Wharton later comments to Henry James that he could not successfully write an American story because he had little understanding of economics. Taken together, these comments suggest that Wharton believed that an intensely American novel would centrally be about money, and so it stands to reason that American English would become infused with the *lingua franca* of the business world.

Wharton further associates Undine with economics by linking her with Elmer Moffatt, a wealthy robber baron from the "common herd of money-makers" (*CC* 131). Significantly, Elmer and Undine's compatibility is described as a language: "Here was someone who spoke her language, who knew her meanings, who understood instinctively

all the deep-seated wants for which her acquired vocabulary had no terms; and as she talked she once more seemed to herself intelligent, eloquent and interesting” (329). Perhaps the best summation of the Moffat-Undine merger is given at the end of the novel: “Every Wall Street term had its equivalent in the language of Fifth Avenue, and while he talked of building up railways she was building up palaces” (329). Empire building has become the *lingua franca* of the United States, with Undine and Moffat carrying it out in their separate spheres. Linked at both the beginning and end of the novel and emblematic of the crass *nouveau riche*, Undine and Moffatt rise to the top of American leisure society as great imitators, rich enough to buy great art but too ignorant (in Wharton’s view) to appreciate it. To the end, Undine is linked to buying, selling, and displaying. The last transaction Undine makes is to secure Moffatt, and the last acquisition Moffatt makes is to marry Undine, whom he displays in a lavish new home, the ultimate showcase for the ultimate trophy. A newspaper clipping refers to Moffatt as “the greatest collector in America” (356), an ironic title given the fact that he ostensibly purchases Undine, having paid a large sum of money to finalize her divorce from de Chelles. Wharton links Undine to money as away to further her nationalist critique.

Undine Spragg is also described in the language of conquest, an invader who charges into civilized society and topples its order. Men find Undine’s presence overpowering. Even the chilly Dagonet says “her image had throned over his future the night he had sat in that very room and dreamed of soaring up with her into the blue” (CC 208); Undine’s portrait “throned over a waste of gilt furniture” (196). Ralph Marvell admits that Undine “ruled his life” (189). It’s not accidental that Wharton persistently describes Undine’s ambition in the rhetoric of conquest. Twice she refers to her as an



“Amazon;” she calls her family a “tribe of Invaders” and remarks about how it’s her “pioneer blood” that won’t let her rest. Undine views Looty Arlington as “another intruder’s venturing upon her territory” (306). Throughout the novel Undine battles her way through New York and Paris society like a frontier woman on a rampage, only much better dressed. As a representative of the west, Undine leads the charge east in a sort of *reverse* manifest destiny where the new invaders plunder the capital, cultural and monetary, of the “aboriginal New York” (45). Denied any speech of her own and described in the language of finance and conquest, Undine Spragg, the “Warrior Queen” (60), becomes a metonymy for the language of the United States, a language Wharton depicts as destructive, pecuniary, and populist. Her presence in the upper reaches of New York society is depicted as a type of invasion.

### **Parody of Slang and Gossip Columns**

*The Custom of the Country* relies on Edith Wharton’s use of a signifying caricature to convey the novel’s humor and nationalistic critique, but the novel also makes use of another satiric convention, parody, to further this critique. Like caricature, parody is intrinsic to satire, contributing to its hodge-podge effect: the author’s own style is intermingled with a hyperbolic imitation of other types of language. Often conflated with satire, parody is an imitative style of writing that distorts and exaggerates the original in order to evoke “amusement, derision, and sometimes scorn” (Hight 69). Linda Wagner-Martin writes that *Custom* is a “parody of the fairy-tale marriage” (viii), and while Wharton certainly distorts and revises the traditional fairytale marriage, she does not necessarily parody the *language* of the fairytale. She does, however, parody

Midwestern dialect and newspaper gossip columns as a means of extending her criticism of the democratization of American language and of tabloid culture.<sup>6</sup>

In order to portray Midwesterners as an inferior class of Americans, Wharton parodies their speech, names, and locations while infusing this parody with tactics normally associated with lowbrow comedy, especially jokes and puns. Midwestern cities are named *Apex* or *Deposit* while wealthy Midwesterners vacation at the *Nouveau Luxe* in Paris and ride the high-speed train, *The Twentieth Century*. Midwestern characters have ridiculous names like *Looty Arlington*, *Undine Spragg*, and *Indiana Frusk*. Not only do these names connote bumpkinsim, but the deliberately dissonant consonants (“sprg,” “fr,” “sk”) sound blunt and harsh, conveying an element of uncouthness. Further, the nickname *Looty* suggests a criminal element, and Wharton uses a pun to expose Looty’s lack of pedigree: Her father is a general, a “General Manager, whatever that may be” (CC 306). Such joke-y rhetoric conveys an uncultured, opportunistic class of Americans.

Like most of Wharton’s fictional characters from the American Midwest, Undine, Indiana, Mrs. Spragg, and Elmer Moffatt all speak a mixture of ungrammatical English, colloquialism, and slang, the classic formula of American dialect humor. From Mark Twain to Fanny Fern to Finley Peter Dunne, dialect humor had been used in American comedy to convey an uneducated, working class (usually rural) folk. Some use the mode as a form of ridicule while others use dialect humor simply as a way to develop character, or for comic effect. Wharton’s contemporary, May Isabel Fisk, uses dialect in several of her monologues to convey city and youth culture and not as a form of derision. Wharton, however, parodies the jargon of Midwesterners to express her eastern snobbery and her anxiety over the democratization of language. Letters to friends indicate that Wharton

was distressed over the preponderance of slang in American fiction, viewing it as an indication of cultural decline (Lee 607). One reason she disliked Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922), a novel Lewis dedicated to Wharton, was because it had too much slang in it (Lee 624). Her Midwesterners, consequently, use words like "swell," (CC 5), "sweller" (19), and "bunch of mushers" (17) to signify that they are part of this verbal downslide, despite their penthouse apartments and sapphire jewelry. Mrs. Spragg says things like, "he sorter drifted into the ministry" (49), "he got speculating in land out at Apex" (49), and "father always thought the name made it take" (49). Although Undine tries to ape the urbane speech of refined New Yorkers, she slips into expressions like "Out in Apex, if a girl married a man who don't come up to what she expect, people consider it's to her credit to want to change" (58). Wharton isn't particularly good at writing in this mode. She does not sustain the language for any considerable length, never moves beyond haughty mockery, and fails to capture any of the poetry or cadences or slyness that exists in vernacular speech. Her use of slangy dialect in the novel seems to suit one purpose--to indicate that although these parvenus have the money to live on Fifth Avenue, they don't have the necessary pedigree to make them cultural elites.

As the ostensible head of this tribe of invaders, Moffatt uses speech patterns that embody this democratization of American English. He says: "Well, that sounds aristocratic; but ain't it rather out of date? When the swells are hard-up nowadays they generally chip off an heirloom" (CC 328). His drunken Fourth of July speech given to the Temperance Society is an especially fine example of this type of language and one of the rare instances where Wharton achieves humorous effect through dialect:

Ladies and Gentlemen, if there's one thing I like better than another about getting drunk--and I like most everything about it except the next morning--it's the opportunity you've given me of doing it right here, in the presence of this Society, which, as I gather from its literature, knows more about the subject than anybody else. Ladies and Gentlemen [. . .] I've gathered from your own evidence--what I'd strongly suspected before--that all your converted drunkards had a hell of a good time before you got at 'em, and that . . . and that a good many of 'em have gone on having it since... (338)

The incongruity of a drunken man called upon to address a temperance society supplies the humor, and Wharton adds a touch of lowbrow physical comedy, the pratfall, to the scene. As he is giving his speech, the drunken Moffat leans on a table and, by degrees, inadvertently pulls off the tablecloth. Wharton continues the narrative in her own polished language: "At this point he broke off, swept the audience with his confident smile, and then, collapsing, tried to sit down on a chair that didn't happen to be there, and disappeared among his agitated supporters" (338). A classic pratfall. The rest of the scene devolves into chaos and is the stuff of slapstick comedy: "tumultuous rappings and howls" (337) from the crowd, "explosions of hilarity" (337), and "crash of crockery and tumbling chairs" (338). From Wharton's perspective, America was on a cultural landslide, and the effects of this decline are evidenced in its uncouth language. Wharton did not embrace the increasingly popular use of slang in fiction and considered it "a colossal literary convention, invented by the delightful Sinclair Lewis & adopted by the throng of lesser ones" (qtd. in Lee 624). It stands to reason that she would therefore make a mockery of this type of discourse in her novel, associating it with rubes and lowbrow

comedy. Reducing something to a joke makes it that much easier to dismiss. Her disdain for rather than celebration of vernacular speech is sustained throughout *Custom*.

Not only does Wharton parody Midwestern speech in *The Custom of the Country*, she also mimics the language of newspaper gossip columns as a way to extend her nationalist critique, this time of the tabloid press. Unlike her attempt at dialect humor, Wharton's parody of gossip news is expertly crafted. As her biographers have noted, Wharton was fond of collecting outlandish newspaper columns and enjoyed laughing at their preposterous language with her friends; her parody of gossip rags shows that she had studied the mode carefully. Mrs. Heeny, the Spraggs's masseuse, reads this clipping to young Paul:

With two such sprinters as 'Pete' Van Degen and Dicky Bowles to set the pace, it's no wonder the New York set in Paris has struck a livelier gait than ever this spring. It's a high-pressure season and no mistake, and no one lags behind less than the fascinating Mrs. Ralph Marvell, who is to be seen daily and nightly in all the smartest restaurants and naughtiest theatres, with so many devoted swains in attendance that the rival beauties of both worlds are said to be making catty comments. But then Mrs. Marvell's gowns are almost as good as her looks--and how can you expect the other women to stand for such a monopoly? (CC 193)

The horse metaphor (sprinters, pace, gait, lags behind) and the titillating language (swains, fascinating, rival beauties, naughtiest theatres) is written in classic hyperbole, parodying the sensational language of tabloid journalism. In one instance, the parody extends to four paragraphs. Mrs. Heeny again reads a news clipping:

No case has ever been railroaded through the divorce courts of this State at a higher rate of speed: as Mr. Moffatt said last night, before he and his bride jumped onto their east-bound special, every record has been broken. . . . Judge Toomy, who is a personal friend of Mr. Moffatt's, held a night session and rushed it through so that the happy couple could have the knot tied and board their special in time for Mrs Moffatt to spend Thanksgiving in New York with her aged parents. The hearing began at seven ten P.M. and at eight o'clock the bridal couple were steaming out of the station.

At the trial Mrs. Spragg-de Chelles, who wore copper velvet and sables, gave evidence as to the brutality of her French husband, but she had to talk fast as time pressed, and Judge Toomey wrote the entry at top speed, and then jumped into a motor with the happy couple and drove to the Justice of the Peace, where he acted as best man to the bridegroom. The latter is said to be one of the six wealthiest men east of the Rockies. His gifts to the bride are a necklace and tiara of pigeon-blood rubies belonging to Queen Marie Antoinette, a million dollar cheque and a house in New York. The happy pair will pass the honeymoon in Mrs. Moffatt's new home, 5009 Fifth Avenue, which is an exact copy of the Pitti Palace, Florence. They plan to spend their springs in France. (358-59)

Divorce rates in the United States had doubled between 1880-1900 and then again between 1900-1920 (Lee 367), and here the parody critiques the rate with which these social changes took place: "higher rate of speed," "every record has been broken," "rushed it through," "talk fast," "time pressed," "top speed," "jumped into a motor." Undine receives her decree of divorce and was "remarried fifteen minutes later" (CC

358). The word “railroaded” is a *double entendre*, referring to Moffatt, the Railroad King, and to the fact that he railroads de Chelles into divorcing Undine. Wharton parodies the diction of gossip columns by using clichés, slang, sensational language, and over extended metaphors, leavened with just enough fashion details such as “copper velvet and sables,” and “tiara of pigeon-blood rubies.”

Wharton may enjoy imitating this outrageous rhetoric, but she does not soften the ruinous effects this type of writing might have on an individual’s privacy or reputation. When Ralph Marvel reads about the sordid details of his own divorce, he is deeply affected: “nothing that had gone before seemed as humiliating as this trivial comment on his tragedy” (CC 210). In the days that follow, he reads about his divorce in various forms of the popular press: first in letters to the editor, then in humorous editorials, and finally, his divorce is written up as a “Heart Problem” (210) in a Family Weekly. This public humiliation, what the novel graphically describes as the “coarse fingering of public scrutiny” (210), drives Ralph to desperation and contributes to his decision to commit suicide. Wharton’s 1913 critique of America as a tabloid nation seems eerily prescient.<sup>7</sup>

While the parody of the tabloid press exposes its encroachment on privacy rights, the parody also is part of Wharton’s ongoing critique of the democratization of American language. The columns are associated with uneducated or working class Americans. For instance, Moffatt’s office is “stacked with old numbers of *Town Talk* and the New York *Radiator*” (CC 387); and Undine not only takes her cues from these columns, she is often herself the subject *de jour*. When Ralph reads brazen headlines about his own divorce in a “heavily head-lined paper” (210)--the description leaves no doubt that this is a tabloid--

he is sitting on the subway next to a “unshaved occupant on the next seat” holding the paper “between his grimy fists” (210). The descriptors “grimy” and “unshaven” as well as “coarse fingering” previously suggest a seamy underclass. And the columns are especially associated with the only working class character in the novel that is developed to any degree: Mrs. Heeny, the Irish masseuse and manicurist, who keeps “bunches of clippings” (193) in her handbag. In fact, most of these columns are inserted into the narrative by means of Mrs. Heeny recitations to Paul. The inference is that working class individuals like Mrs. Heeny, grimy sorts who travel on the subway, and the invading band of illiterate Midwesterners like Moffatt and Undine are the class of people who keep the tabloid press in business; they are the heinous economic force behind the democratization of American English. Tabloid culture--the product and its consumer--is depicted as a dehumanizing institution in American culture, one that nullifies any past literary or aesthetic tradition and replaces intellectual reflexivity with an impulse to purchase and to imitate. Wharton is making value judgments here, and the larger implication is that whereas the older social order derived its values from Enlightenment ideals and classical aesthetics, the newer social order takes its values from corporate ideals and from a mass media aesthetic, an aesthetic based on little more than consumption and voyeurism. While Wharton’s critique of the democratization of language seems arrogant and heavy-handed, her insights into the dangers of tabloid culture seem spot on.

In *The Power of Satire* Robert Elliott makes an important observation about satire and power. He argues that those in authority have always used satire, ridicule, and invective to mock any emerging class that threatens the existing order: “Each newly arrived immigrant group in America became a butt of ridicule for older groups who had



risen to power and who therefore were able to set standards of Americanization. The immigrant is always a challenge, even a threat, to established customs” (85). In *The Custom of the Country* Wharton uses the conventions of satire, including caricature and parody, to mock a new social class of “immigrants,” Midwesterners who, because of their wealth, now shape standards of Americanization. Elizabeth Ammons argues that reading the novel as a conservative attack on parvenus misses the novel’s “main target” (102), but Wharton’s conservatism is hard to ignore. In *French Ways and Their Meaning* Wharton extols the “value of tradition” and the “strength of continuity” (96), and Hermione Lee describes the politics of Wharton’s French circle as being “overwhelmingly conservative” (Lee 295). At the same time Wharton makes a mockery of language that reflects a broader, populist influence. Using caricature and parody to buoy her satiric attack, Wharton resists the necessary chaos and flux inherent in a democracy and portrays the democratic potential as a destabilizing, corrupting influence. Rather than see the evolution in American English and the populist elements of American visual and literary culture as a positive or enlivening force, Wharton dismisses them through mockery and parody in *The Custom of the Country*.

Wharton’s aesthetic conservatism is on display in a pivotal scene in the novel. Late in the narrative, Undine arrives at Moffatt’s New York hotel to coerce him into marrying her, and Wharton uses architectural and decorative details to highlight the contrast between an older aesthetic, based on classical order and Enlightenment ideals, and an emerging aesthetic, based on a pecuniary, popular culture ideals:

She advanced into the room and slowly looked about her. The big vulgar writing-table wreathed in bronze was heaped with letters and papers. Among them stood

a lapis bowl in a Renaissance mounting of enamel and a vase of Phoenician glass that was like a bit of rainbow caught in cobwebs. On a table against the window a little Greek marble lifted its pure lines. On every side some rare and sensitive object seemed to be shrinking back from the false colours and crude contours of the hotel furniture. There were no books in the room, but the florid console under the mirror was stacked with old numbers of *Town Talk* and the New York *Radiator*. Undine recalled the dingy hall-room that Moffatt had lodged in at Mrs. Flynn's, over Hobery's livery stable, and her heart beat at the signs of his altered state. When her eyes came back to him their lids were moist. (CC 347)

In this scene priceless and ancient (Renaissance, Phoenician, Greek) works of art are depicted as genuine ("pure," "sensitive," "rare") in contrast to Moffatt's own surroundings, which are "vulgar," "crude," "false," and "florid." In Wharton's satiric personification, works of art cringe in the presence of such vulgarity. As part of an inferior, invading class, Moffatt possesses no books and by extension, has no real erudition, but his room *is* littered with gossip rags and tabloids. As Paul Ohler has observed, *Custom* denies the idea of "humankind, and the nation, as perfectible" (138), and Wharton leaves the reader with of disdainful view of America, or as she once framed it, as "a whole nation developing without the sense of beauty, and eating bananas for breakfast" (qtd. in Showalter 273).

### **Satire of Women in the Public Arena**

Wharton's grievance with social changes taking place in America in the early decades of the twentieth century are on display not only in her novels, but also in her short fiction. While she uses a signifying caricature in *The Custom of the Country* to

mount her nationalist critique, she uses generic caricatures in many of her shorter satiric pieces to convey her discomfort with, among other things, women functioning in the public arena. While many recent critical essays address things like “feminist strategies” in Wharton’s fiction, or “feminist themes” in her novels, or “business--feminism” in *Custom*, as well as “lurking feminism” in her ghost stories, no essay fully addresses the misogyny that underscores some of her work, particularly her satiric stories. Similarly, only a few paragraphs in Hermione Lee’s exhaustive, nearly 900-page biography mention Wharton’s anti-feminist, racist, and anti-Semitic views, which are especially apparent in her personal letters. Lee writes that in Wharton’s novels, “the politics of sexual injustice and inequality are very strongly felt, though she would have been appalled to be called a feminist” (188). Lee lists feminism as one of the things Wharton disliked about the Bloomsbury Group (611); and in a letter to her sister, Wharton writes, “I’m not much interested in traveling scholarships for women--or in fact in scholarships, *tout court!*--they’d much better stay at home and mind the baby” (qtd. in Lee 613). In another letter, Wharton admits, “I, who think that women were made for pleasure & procreation, note with satisfaction that the leaders of the movement, judging from their photos, all look unfitted for the first, & many for both functions!” (qtd. in Lee 611-12). This dislike of women functioning outside the home is traceable in three satiric stories published between 1899-1916, “The Pelican” (1899), “The Mission of Jane” (1902), and “Xingu” (1916). In these pieces, Wharton uses generic caricatures of the New Woman: a circuit lecturer who makes her living by giving talks on current topics; a young reformist determined to cleanse society of malevolence in all its forms; and a clubwoman who attends monthly meetings in order to discuss the latest issues in science and philosophy.

Though they range from acerbic to playful in tone, all of these stories satirize women as public figures and mock the idea that women could function legitimately in public service or intellectual arenas.

Historian Nancy Woloch describes the new woman as one who “integrated Victorian virtues with an activist social role” (275) and identifies the decades between the late 1890s to the 1920s as the era of the new woman. The new woman took part in social and political activities outside the bounds of domesticity, everything from settlement work in urban centers to book clubs in the suburbs to professional posts within higher education. Edith Wharton was busy during the halcyon years of the new woman, writing five novels, *The Valley of Decision* (1902), *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), and dozens of short stories published in distinguished magazines like *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner’s* and *Century Magazine*. So it is no surprise that the new woman would make several appearances in her fiction. In a longer, non-satiric work like *The Fruit of the Tree*, the new woman is portrayed in a generally positive light. Mary Marchand discusses the centrality of the new woman in this 1914 novel and argues for its “feminist subtext” (66). Placing the novel in the tradition of other turn-of-the-century novels about industry and women reformers, Marchand argues that the protagonist, Justine Brent, is purposefully not described in domestic rhetoric, nor is she a sentimental character moved by impassioned feelings. Instead, Wharton attributes Justine’s reformist abilities not to some universal maternal instinct but to her intellectual and rational behavior as a professional nurse: “Wharton further challenges the popular basis for women’s standing in reform by insisting on the intellectual quality of Justine’s decision” (Marchand 73).

Rather than portray her reformer as a mother figure who solves the complex problems of an industrial society as if she were running a home, Wharton rejects this maternal stereotype and replaces it with a figure both dispassionate and scientific.

### **The Pelican**

Justine Brent may be a positive representation of women activists at the turn of the century, but Wharton paints a much different picture of the new woman in her satiric short stories. At the turn of the century, women were entering professional ranks in great numbers, particularly in nursing, teaching, library work, and in academic life (Woloch 288); and Wharton, who once announced that she considered it “a man’s job and not a woman’s” to speak in public (qtd. in Lee 462), viciously mocks women working in either public or intellectual arenas. “The Pelican” (1899) is a story about a widower, Mrs. Amyot, who gives lectures in order to support her son, Lancelot. In this satiric sketch, Wharton uses a generic caricature of a public lecturer to ridicule women intellectuals. The narrative also tonally criticizes women poets, women translators, women deans, and women who attend public lectures given by female speakers.

As the story goes, because her husband “died of drink” (Wharton, “The Pelican” 76) when their son was only six months old and rather than remarry as the male narrator thinks she should, Mrs. Amyot decides to use the only skills she has as a means of economic support: “The only way of paying her husband’s debts and keep the baby clothed was to be intellectual; and, after some hesitation as to the form her mental activity was to take, it was unanimously decided that she was to give lectures” (76). She does this for a number of years, gaining wide popularity and earning a lucrative salary. Over time the public loses interest in Mrs. Amyot and attends her lectures out of pity, falsely

believing that she still has a child to support. In the end, Mrs. Amyot is exposed as a charlatan who has preyed upon her audience's good intentions. For decades she has told people that she is "doing it for the baby," even though the "baby" has grown into a man with his own means of economic support.

"The Pelican" is a first person narrative told from a male speaker's point of view. It's possible that Wharton is using an unreliable narrator here and that Wharton may, in fact, be satirizing *him* rather than the woman in this piece. After all, his commentary is ruthless to an extreme and his tone is exceptionally snide, even for a Wharton character; perhaps his *hauteur* is being satirized. But because there is nothing in the story to indicate his unreliability, nor is the unreliable narrator a device Wharton uses with any frequency, it seems that she uses this narrator as she does in the majority of her fiction, as a sort of indifferent spectator used to convey Wharton's own disdain. In fact, Hermione Lee claims that Wharton "never speaks for herself. She often uses an observant, dispassionate man as her narrator" (186) like Charles Bowen in *Custom*. And in this instance, the narrator's speech reveals class and gender prejudice:

She was very pretty when I first knew her, with the sweet straight nose and short upper lip of the cameo-brooch divinity, humanized by a dimple that flowered in her cheek whenever anything was said possessing the outward attributes of humor without its intrinsic quality. For the dear lady was providentially deficient in humor: the least hint of the real thing clouded her lovely eye like the hovering shadow of an algebraic problem. (Wharton, "The Pelican" 76)

His description of Mrs. Amyot emphasizes her charm and physical attractiveness. He claims it isn't Mrs. Amyot's "nature" (76) to be intellectual and that it is her "dimples"

(77, 78, 79), “lovely eye” (76), pretty “upper lip” (77), and ability to “flirt with her audiences” (80) that keeps her in business. It is the woman’s physical appeal and not her ability as a public speaker that makes her a success. In fact, the narrator himself cannot help but objectify this woman, considering her “ravishing” (77), a potent mixture of “sham erudition and real teeth and hair” (77). He also portrays Mrs. Amyot as a product of lowbrow culture, comparing her to a music box “charged with popular airs” (82) and a “conjurer who pulls hundreds of yards of white paper out of his mouth” (79). She speaks “slop-shop epithets” (80). These descriptions reveal the narrator’s prejudiced views of a woman who is a public lecturer.

Amyot’s female relatives are also ridiculed. Her mother, Irene Astarte Pratt, is a famous poet; her aunt is a Greek scholar; and a second aunt is “dean of a girls’ college” (Wharton, “The Pelican” 76). Throughout the story, the narrator makes derisive comments about the mother’s poetry, he sneers at the aunt’s translation of Euripides, and he uses the derogatory phrase “girls’ college” rather than “women’s college” as a way of deprecating women’s higher education. When the narrator later mentions Harvard, he does not refer to that institution as a *boy’s* college. Further, there’s every indication that these women hail from Amherst, Massachusetts, a town often associated with women’s education. Her mother and aunts live in “the New England university town” (77) where “the celebrated Irene Astarte Pratt lived on the summit of a local Parnassus with lesser muses and college professors” (77), possibly a reference to Mt. Holyoke College. Her aunt is dean of a woman’s college there, possibly Smith College. In alluding to Amherst and describing these women with sarcasm, Wharton extends her disparagement of

women as intellectuals. “The Pelican” tonally criticizes any woman who might assume the role of the public intellectual.

Not only are women lecturers, writers, educational administrators, and intellectuals mocked in this piece, so is the female audience who comes to hear Amyot speak. Much of the new woman’s success was through single-sex associations (Woloch 276), and Wharton seems to be especially derisive of women’s social gatherings that were designed to develop the intellect or the civic mindedness of women. In *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton makes this astonishing statement: “it is because American women are each other’s only audience, and to a great extent each other’s only companions, that they seem, compared to women who play an intellectual and social part in the lives of men, like children in a baby-school” (102). Women attendees in “The Pelican” are the objects of Wharton’s punishing wit. They attend Amyot’s drawing room lectures but are only “preoccupied with their spring bonnets” (Wharton, “The Pelican” 76). In Boston, “strenuous females in ulsters” (79) and “austere sisters” (79) gather in a packed lecture hall to hear her speak. The reference to ulster approaches an ethnic slur; an ulster is a large overcoat originally made in Belfast, Ireland, (*OED*), and so the description suggests that these lecture halls were filled with Irish women, a reasonable connection, given the locale. But these women are all portrayed in a disparaging manner. One is described as speaking with an “educated mispronunciation” (79), a slight on her linguistic polish, and words like “strenuous” and “austere” suggest that these are starchy women who take their public lectures a little too seriously. In New York, the women are merely a “throng of well dressed and absent minded ladies who rustled in late, dropped their muffs and pocketbooks, and undisguisedly lost themselves in the study of each



other's apparel"(82), but in Boston, the women are a bit too serious about their lyceums. In one cleverly turned line, Wharton is able to disparage both the lecturer and her audience: "It was the art of transposing secondhand ideas into firsthand emotions that so endeared her to her feminine listeners" (80). Edith Wharton once joked that "in Boston she was a failure because she was 'too fashionable to be intelligent,' in New York because she was 'too intelligent to be fashionable'" (qtd. in Lee 73), and "The Pelican" seems to provide both audiences with her own, unique comeuppance. Wharton ridicules the Bostonian women for being too earnest and the New Yorkers for being too stylish. Both groups, of course, are ridiculed for going to hear a woman speak.

The narrator's patriarchal worldview is made clear in his several references to how Mrs. Amyot should have gotten remarried rather than support herself financially. The story's running joke is that Mrs. Amyot is not really doing it for the baby, and one wonders why Mrs. Amyot continues this charade into old age. Although Wharton intends it as a joke, this situation actually reveals a sexual double standard: that a woman lecturer would have to pose as a *caring mother* in order to make a living as an intellectual. Male lecturers like Ralph Waldo Emerson or Mark Twain did not have to adopt a paternal mantle in order to make their public readings legitimate. By viscerally mocking Mrs. Amyot--the wit in this story is vituperative--Wharton scorns the idea that women could successfully navigate the public domain, could comport themselves as professionals without turning into flirts, and might prefer to support themselves economically rather than (re) marry. Even the story's title casts aspersions on Mrs. Amyot. According to one scholar, the pelican is an ancient symbol that represents self-sacrifice--a pelican might harm itself for the sake of its young--and so eventually it came to be associated with

Christ and self-sacrifice (Saunders). In ironically titling the story “The Pelican,” Wharton reinforces the narrative’s main joke, that Mrs. Amyot is not really “doing it for the baby,” but it also chastises Mrs. Amyot for not following the script of the self-sacrificing mother. The story portrays a patrician society that requires women to hide behind a mask of maternal concern in order to be accepted as public intellectuals, if at all.

### **The Mission of Jane**

Written three years later, “The Mission of Jane” also uses a generic caricature of the new woman; in this case, it is a young reformer concerned with improving society. In the early twentieth century, many single women of the middle class volunteered to work for an improvement society or settlement house, an organization dedicated to world peace, labor reform, social purity, health, city and welfare work (Woloch 294). Relying on the Victorian concept of woman as arbiter of morality and more or less politically aligned with temperance organizations, improvement societies took an active role in bringing about social justice, usually by offering free services to the poor. Perhaps the best-known reformer of this kind was Jane Addams whose Hull House served the poorest segments of the Chicago population. Published in 1902, Wharton’s “The Mission of Jane”--the eponymous character might be a nod to the famous Addams--satirizes the new woman as reformer, mocking her zeal and portraying her ultimately as a danger to the nuclear family.

In the story, the humor hinges on incongruity: Jane zealously seeks to improve not slum conditions but her own affluent parents. A funny enough premise, but Wharton doesn’t mention Jane until half way through the piece, and so the humorous potential is diluted. Instead, the story viciously satirizes Jane’s adopted mother, Mrs. Lethbury. The

story opens with a scene familiar to Wharton readers: a married couple argues, revealing their intellectual incompatibility. The Lethbury's bicker over whether or not to adopt a baby; and in the process, the husband makes derisive comments that are lost on his dimwitted wife.<sup>8</sup> This is the conventional joking pattern of misogynistic satire: a clever husband uses his foolish wife as a foil so that the woman's silliness is magnified and ridiculed. Nearly half of the narrative in "The Mission of Jane" relies on this joking pattern, and Wharton shows no mercy: "Her body had been privileged not to outstrip her mind, and the two, as it seemed to Lethbury, were destined to travel together through an eternity of girliness" (Wharton, "Mission" 414). She writes, "most of his wife's opinions were heirlooms" (415); "her transparent mind was as clear, as shallow, as easily fathomable as when he had first suffered the sharp surprise of striking bottom in it" (416). Mrs. Lethbury has "trivial eyes" (417), and there are no "hidden depths beneath her outspread obviousness" (417). The spiteful tone criticizes rather than sympathizes with the woman's lack of intelligence: "It was not that he ceased to think his wife stupid: she *was* stupid, limited, inflexible; but there was a pathos in the struggles of her swaddled mind, in its blind reachings toward the primal emotions" (418). Even after she has confessed to her husband how lonely she feels because she doesn't have a child (they are unable to have children), the narrative continues along the same vituperative path. Her mind is described as "a labyrinth of dead walls and bolted doors. There was nothing behind the walls and the doors led no whither" (419). She was like a "dried sponge put in water: she expanded, but she did not change her shape" (421).

Wharton links this woman's lack of intelligence to a sort of primitive maternity. Mrs. Lethbury can only comprehend "very elementary things" because she was "as

difficult to amuse as a savage” (Wharton, “Mission” 417). After they adopt a baby, Mrs. Lethbury has “stored instincts,” an “animal maternity,” and she protects Jane like a “cave-mother rending her prey for her young” (421). Mr. Lethbury concludes, “maternity was no doubt the supreme function of primitive woman, the one end to which her whole organism tended” (418). The end result is a type of psychosis: “ She was no longer herself alone: she was herself and Jane. Gradually, in a monstrous fusion of identity, she became herself, himself and Jane” (422). In a story titled “The Mission of Jane,” there is very little Jane, and the focus on Mrs. Lethbury’s idiocy costs the narrative its focus, humor, and momentum. Wharton’s relentless cruelty is difficult to endure.

Another weakness of the story is the shift in tone. When Wharton satirizes Mrs. Lethbury, the tone is acidic and derisive; but when she satirizes Jane, the tone becomes comic and buoyant, relying on hyperbole and incongruity for humor rather than unremitting sarcasm. In part four, the story shifts abruptly to Jane, who has her own mental deficiencies. Jane can store knowledge but not necessarily comprehend it: “She simply collected dates as another child might have collected stamps or marbles” (Wharton, “Mission” 424). And now the satiric critique targets Jane as the product of scientific education and reformist ideology. Like the fifteen year-old Judith Wheeler in *The Children* who assumes the parental role in the family, Jane decides (also at fifteen) to become “the natural guardian and adviser of her elders” (424). Here Wharton relies on an inversion of the parent-child role to supply the incongruous if predictable humor and adequately develops the situational comedy. Jane scolds her father for smoking and corrects her mother’s sloppy cooking methods while reprimanding the servants for inefficiency. Wharton employs scientific rhetoric to describe Jane’s tyrannical behavior,

giving a hyperbolic portrait of hygienic practices that were in vogue at the turn of the century. Jane calls attention to the “unhygienic qualities of carpets” (424), lectures her mother with “facts about bacilli and vegetable mould” (425), demonstrates how picture frames are “a hotbed of animal organism” (425), and regulates their diets based on a “scientific average between starch and phosphates” (425). As another way of linking the reformer with science, Wharton describes Jane’s physical attractiveness in terms of weights and measures: she has a “categorical prettiness” a “creditable collection of features,” an “encyclopedia in her eyes” (425) and enough good features if one were “to take an inventory of them” (425). This isn’t necessarily an anti-science declamation so much as it is a comment on the new woman’s reliance on science (rather than religion) as a way to effect social change.

This uneven satire also depicts the new woman as having a destabilizing effect on the nuclear family. Unpopular on the social scene, Jane seems destined for spinsterhood until Winstanley Budd, a minor character who appears *deus ex machina*, proposes to her. Jane consents to marriage but has no intentions of relinquishing authority: “not for a moment did she relax her dominion: she simply widened it to include a new subject. Mr. Budd found himself under orders with the others” (Wharton, “Mission” 429). Mr. Budd is unfazed that Jane assumes “prenuptial control of her betrothed” (429) but admits “his devotion throve on her cruelty” (431). They marry, and the Lethburys are finally free from Jane’s despotism. Using a generic caricature of a reformer, Wharton portrays the new woman as a destructive force within the nuclear family where the child assumes parental authority and the wife, the husband’s patriarchal “dominion,” Wharton’s own word. However, in Wharton’s fictional world, the change is short-lived, and the satire

ends, like a classical or Shakespearean comedy, with the restoration of the old order. The last scene relates that Budd “snatched Jane from her mother’s bosom and bore her off to the brougham” (432); unlike earlier, Budd now is described as Jane’s “captor” (432) who has suddenly become “more dominant, more aquiline” (432). Jane’s prenuptial control has been surrendered. She has assumed the proper role of the subservient wife. The Lethburys’ own marital harmony has also been restored: they are united in their resistance to Jane’s reformist ways. The last line reads: “Jane had fulfilled her mission after all: she had drawn them together at last” (432). In restoring the patriarchal order in this narrative, Wharton suggests that the new woman, despite her zeal, has no real effect on society other than to unite her detractors.

### **Xingu**

Wharton uses another caricature of the new woman in “Xingu,” only this time it is clubwomen that are targeted. Not only were women working as social reformers at the turn of the century, they were also active in women’s clubs, groups which ranged from frivolous social affairs to powerful political organizations. In 1892, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC) had more than 100,000 members; and at the turn of the century, there were about 160,000 participants in women’s clubs nationwide. By World War I, that number had swelled to more than one million (Woloch 295). More than just providing women with social outlets or a chance to show off their latest fashions, as Wharton suggests in “The Pelican,” these clubs eventually turned into gatherings with serious minded, civic purposes even as their clout in American society increased. The Chicago Woman’s Club, for instance, with its exclusive, wealthy membership, had access to major funds and wielded considerable power in that city and

was a “counterpart to the male power structure” (Woloch 295). A typical women’s club of the 1880s met weekly for lectures, talks, and to discuss literature, philosophy, history, drama, and the like; but, by the turn of the century, the thrust of the clubs had shifted to civic affairs. As the president of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs put it, women were “ abandoning the study of Dante’s *Inferno* and beginning to ‘prove in earnest to contemplate our own social order’” (qtd. in Woloch 295).

“Xingu” (1916) is a satiric portrait of a woman’s club called “The Lunch Club.” Unlike other stories where a singular generic caricature is used, “Xingu” uses several variations of the same comic type: a dim-witted society woman who pursues knowledge only because it is fashionable. Comprised of women of the leisure class--they are wealthy enough to employ butlers and maids--the Lunch Club meets to debate current topics, to talk about “the Book of the Day” (Wharton, “Xingu” 7), or to investigate what is sarcastically referred to as “the Thought of the Day” (7). Like the popular novels Undine reads in *The Custom of the Country*, the books occupying the Lunch Club are “almost always damp from the press” (7), suggesting their newness. The women display no intellectual depth and little interest in learning but convene only to give the appearance of being in touch with the latest philosophical trend, the hottest new novel. Mrs. Leveret carries a volume titled *Appropriate Allusions* in case she needs a quotation or a truism; and another member likes to make classical references, even if she does mix up Apelles with Agamemnon. Mrs. Ballinger, their president, has a mind likened to “an hotel where facts came and went like transient lodgers, without leaving their address behind, and frequently without paying for their board” (7). Mrs. Plinth speaks for them all when she admits, “books were written to be read; if one read them what more could be expected?”

(5). Because this group functions *en masse*, the satiric critique also extends to the lack of individuality such a club might engender. These women pursue “culture in bands” (1) and are “indomitable huntresses of erudition” (1). Though they have different names, attire, and marital statuses, the clubwomen are variations of the same caricature.

As the story goes, a famous author, Osric Dane, is invited to speak at the Lunch Club, but because no one in the group has actually read any of her books and because no one wants to admit it, the women are frantic when Dane arrives. Haughty in manner--she “helps herself critically to coffee” (Wharton, “Xingu” 11)--Dane asks the group pointed questions they cannot answer, and the women fumble as they try to cover up their lack of preparation. The meeting is a disaster until one member, the unpopular Mrs. Roby, brings up Xingu. The conversation takes off, and even the condescending Dane is caught up in the enthusiasm, although no one actually knows what Xingu is. Enjoying her joke, Mrs. Roby, who alone knows it is a river in Brazil, leads the women along on a finely choreographed chase. Wharton uses cleverly placed puns in this section; the clubwomen inadvertently use phrases like “it *is* deep in places,” or “it isn’t easy to skip,” and “there are difficult passages” (13) when talking about Xingu. Eventually Mrs. Roby tires of the joke and abruptly leaves to play bridge with other friends, a flustered Osric Dane escaping with her. The story ends with the clubwomen, having discovered that they were the victims of a practical joke, voting to expel Mrs. Roby from the Lunch Club.

Not only does “Xingu” satirize clubwomen, it also targets popular novelists and faddish literary criticism. Osric Dane is referred to three times in this short piece as a celebrity or celebrated novelist, and her novels have pretentious titles like *The Wings of Death* and *The Supreme Instant*. Even her dramatic penname exudes pomposity: Osric is



the name of the ridiculous courtier in *Hamlet*, and the surname “Dane” is another allusion to the play. Dane is a caricature of a celebrity author who might write the type of melodrama popular with women’s book clubs. “‘Literature’?” Mrs. Plinth asks one of the members. “ ‘But this is perfectly unexpected. I understood we were to talk of Osric Dane’s novel’ ” (8).

In fact, it’s even possible that Dane is a caricature of Mrs. Humphrey Ward. Mrs. Ballinger compares Dane’s books with Ward’s popular 1888 novel *Robert Elsmere*, and Dane is described as a “distinguished personage” (8) who always looked “as though she were about to be photographed from a new edition of her books” (8). Hermione Lee writes that Wharton “had mixed feelings about Mrs. Humphrey Ward. She and James used to satirise her love of fame and adulation, and her name came to stand for Wharton as an emblem of everything old-fashioned and passé in literature; she dreaded being compared to her” (466). In linking the clubwomen with this Ward-like character, Wharton hints at the reciprocal relationship between consumer (clubwomen) and creator of commercial literature (celebrity novelists), parties that value the newness of a book rather than its literary merit. It also shows contradictory or hypocritical elements at work in this group; even though they are devoted to newness in literature, the clubwomen actually endorse a type of literary fustiness in supporting an author like Dane/Ward.

Wharton also parodies the jargon of quasi-literary criticism. In discussing Dane’s book, the clubwomen use catch phrases like “the wonderful tone-scheme of black on black,” “the book is etched, not painted, yet one feels the colour-values so intensely,” and “a somber background brushed in to throw your figures into more vivid relief. *Are you not primarily plastic?*” (Wharton, “Xingu” 5). Though they sound impressive, their words

have no substance or meaning. They talk *around* Dane's novels with empty phrases like "I have always maintained that you represent the purely objective method," (10), or, "In reading *you* we don't define, we feel" (11). Just as she parodies the language of gossip columns in *Custom*, Wharton here parodies the language of popular literary culture as a way of challenging its legitimacy. Throughout "Xingu" the narrative criticizes the faddishness of the popular commercial market, portraying it as an enterprise that values a work simply because it is *au courant*.

In Wharton's created world, the faddishness of the literary market is a product of a strictly feminine culture. With Wharton, real erudition is coded male. At one point in the story, Miss Van Vluyck asks the club president, "Haven't you any useful books?" "Of course I have," replied Mrs. Ballinger indignantly; "I keep them in my husband's dressing room" (Wharton, "Xingu" 102). While the women read the latest melodramas, their husbands read works by Karl Marx, St. Augustine, Wordsworth, and Verlaine, details supplied in the story. In fact, one of the reasons the clubwomen dislike Mrs. Roby is because she reads Trollope rather than best-selling female authors. Despite the popularity of these clubs and despite their having become important civic or intellectual outlets for women, Wharton depicts them as incubators of feminine vacuity. Portraying the women as duplicitous, stupid, and insincere while portraying the white, male patriarchal superstructure as having authority and legitimacy, Wharton makes a mockery of the real impact clubwomen were having on American civic affairs. Using satire as a weapon to censor members of a subordinate class (women) who threaten the established order, Wharton makes known her gender politics.

It's important to consider Wharton's decision to *satirize* the new woman rather than the men and women who resisted new woman ideology. Frederic Jameson makes the following connection between literary form and cultural ideology: "Ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather, the aesthetic art is itself ideology" (1944). Therefore, to satirize the new woman might be viewed as a conservative gesture that seeks to retain an old ideology that is resistant to change, not just because it is new, but because of a belief system that upholds separate (but not equal) spheres. Jameson also cites the "antagonist dialogue of class voices" (1948) as a necessary indication of narrative efficacy, and yet these satiric stories have no class contradiction represented. Maids, servants, butlers are only briefly mentioned in the narrative, are never given a voice, and exist only as indices of social status. For instance, the clubwomen determine that Mrs. Ballinger's two parlor-maids trump Mrs. Plinth single footman. Kathleen Helal notes that satire is a genre "associated with both masculinity and literary longevity" (79), and in using the satiric mode to depict the new woman rather than to satirize a society who resists the new woman, Wharton aligns herself with a misogynistic literary tradition that punishes a progressive, feminist, and populist agenda, particularly as it encroaches on cultural capital. Significantly, Wharton's new woman has no real power within or influence on society: Mrs. Amyot is a laughingstock; Jane is brought to heels by her bully of a husband; and the clubwomen don't care a whit about "whatever is highest in art, literature and ethics" (Wharton, "Xingu" 10) as Mrs. Ballinger frames it. Even though white, wealthy women are the target of Wharton's stinging wit, it isn't their race or class status that makes them the object of ridicule. It is their gender. Sneering at women intellectuals, parodying the

language of middlebrow literary culture, portraying genuine erudition as strictly a male prerogative, Edith Wharton resists a populist or feminist influence in art and literature.

While it would be wrongheaded to say that Wharton always uses the satiric mode to this end, it would be equally wrongheaded to ignore the many times she does. As such, she joins the tradition of her predecessors like Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, or Voltaire, who use satire as a way to conserve rather than to upset the gendered *status quo*.

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<sup>2</sup> When a satiric attitude, tone, or approach dominates a work, it might be thought of as a genre, but when the same merely flavors a work, then it may be considered a mode.

<sup>3</sup> Elliott provides many examples of misogyny in satire, like this example from nineteenth-century Irish literature: "O grandson of Conn, O Cormac," said Carbre, "how do you distinguish women?" "Not hard to tell," said Cormac, "I distinguish them, / but I make no difference among them. / They are crabbed as constant companions, /haughty when visited, / lewd when neglected, / [are] stubborn in a quarrel, / not to be trusted with a secret, / boisterous in their jealousy, /lustful in bed, better to whip them than to humour them, / better to scourge them than to gladden them. /They are waves that drown you, /They are fire that burns you, /They are moths for sticking to one, /They are serpents for cunning" (qtd. in Elliott 4-41).

<sup>4</sup> According to mythology, undines are water nymphs that have no soul until they marry and have children. Wharton uses the name ironically because even though Undine marries four times, she never gains a soul. Wharton begins the satiric retelling of the myth early in the novel when it is revealed that Undine gets her name from her father's greasy hair tonic, and not from the hallowed halls of mythology. Undine marries only to advance her financial and social status; there is no evidence that she has any remorse or anything remotely resembling a soul, some inner self where conscience resides: "So malleable outwardly, she had remained insensible to the touch of the heart" (136). A cold, unfeeling mother, Undine demonstrates little love or passion for anyone. This soulless quality is seen in Undine's thirst for imitation: "Undine was fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative. She wanted to surprise every one by her dash and originality, but she could not help modeling herself on the last person she met" (13). Undine has no inner life to speak of; her lack of reflexivity is comic in its exaggeration. In portraying Undine as a soulless object, a figure who only imitates life without really living it, Wharton revises the undine myth to bolster her satire.

<sup>5</sup> Wharton seems to use these quotations marks differently in *The Age of Innocence* as a way to signal the cultural codes at work among the upper class, but the device nonetheless draws attention to how language shapes and is shaped by class distinction.

<sup>6</sup> Wharton also parodies the romantic literary idiom through the speeches and descriptions of Ralph Marvell, not as part of her nationalist critique but perhaps as a way to distance herself from an older tradition of sentimental writers like Mrs. Humphrey

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Ward, whom Wharton disliked. Marvell is a moony poet, a romantic figure who evokes a bygone era not only in his outdated views on love--women are innocent children who forever need rescuing--but also by his tendency towards fantasy. He was "a modern man in mediaeval armor" (286), who he feels it his duty to "rescue young ladies" (51). Ralph is as influenced by romantic literature as Undine is by her potboiler novels. Carried away with his own hyper-idealized imagination, Ralph imagines himself alternately as a Greek hero or a Don Quixote figure (51). As a dreamy, romantic poet, an aesthete, Ralph often lapses into purple prose. When Undine and Ralph are in Italy on their honeymoon, the opening scene, told from his point of view, is described in mock rapturous language beginning with arousal and ending in climax: houses "palpitate" in the sun's glare, the heavy Italian summer is described as "the white fire below" (85). Undine is a "radiant creature," they are able "to penetrate" the hillsides, the Sienese air is "intoxicating" (85), and Italy finally does "prostrate beneath the sun knew what secret treasures she could yield" (86). Wharton continues the subtle parody of the romantic idiom with hyperbolic sensual imagery: "The sun, treading the earth like a vintager, drew from it heady fragrances, crushed out of it new colours" (86), and "words were flashing like brilliant birds through the boughs overhead; he had but to wave his magic wand to have them flutter down to him" (86). Caught up in a sensual and sexual reverie, Ralph views Undine as if she were a work of art, studying her hand "as if it had been a bit of precious porcelain or ivory" (86). Ralph is fond of giving himself up to beauty, of thinking he is under Undine's spell, and of talking about his writing in dramatic metaphors: "It came to me suddenly, magnificently, swooped down on me as that big white moon swooped down on the black landscape, tore at me like a great white eagle" (93). While trying to persuade Undine to remain in Europe, Ralph offers, "We can sit and look at a green waterfall while I lie in wait for an adjective" (89). Parodying the romantic idiom, Wharton also describes Ralph's sexuality by using nature as a stand in for erotic desire. Ralph frequently conflates sexual arousal with artistic inspiration, as befits a romantic poet: "Caught up in the fiery chariot of art, he felt once more the tug of its coursers in his muscles, and the rush of their flight still throbbed in him when he walked back late to the hotel" (105).

<sup>7</sup> Evelyn Waugh's 1930 satire, *Vile Bodies*, makes a very similar critique of the tabloid press in England where it causes a similarly tragic suicide of a young man.

<sup>8</sup> This type of couple appears regularly in Wharton's fiction and is perhaps a working out of her and Teddy's own marital incompatibilities. But whereas in reality Edith was the partner with a superior intellect and Teddy the one with little intellectual interest or ability, in Wharton's fiction, it is the male who is the sneering, intellectually superior partner.

## CHAPTER 2

### **‘THE FUNNIEST WOMAN MONOLOGIST IN AMERICA’: MAY ISABEL FISK AND THE ART OF THE COMIC MONOLOGUE**

“What every woman wants more than anything else in the world is absolute dominion over one man” (Whatham 183) reads a line by May Isabel Fisk, appearing in a 1921 article in *Medical Life* titled “Eroticism in Woman.” The author, Arthur Whatham, quotes Fisk, but her name and the quotation are given without any context. The line by itself suggests that in the 1920s, Fisk had enough star power to merit being quoted without explanation or qualification. Years earlier, a British journalist also uses Fisk’s name to open his article about the Pelman-Foster memory system in the monthly journal *Review of Reviews*. The article has nothing to do with Fisk whatsoever, but again Fisk seems to have had enough celebrity status, even across the Atlantic, to merit a mention in a prominent journal without qualification.

May Isabel Fisk is virtually unknown to scholars today, but at the height of her career in the early decades of the twentieth century, Fisk was a well known comic monologist and humorist both in the United States and in England, a personal friend of Mark Twain, and was considered “the funniest woman monologist in America” by the *New York Times* (“Silent Sex”). When William Dean Howells assembled what he considered to be twelve outstanding American authors for his collaborative writing project, *The Whole Family* (1908), he selected May Isabel Fisk as one of the twelve writers. Author of at least six books of comic monologues, two books of fiction, several plays, and numerous short stories, Fisk was also a successful vaudeville comic,

performing in venues like Proctor's Fifth Avenue Theater, Proctor's Twenty-Third Street Theater, the Boston Music Hall, and a number of similar venues in London.<sup>9</sup> Starting out as a society entertainer, Fisk performed her original monologues in small settings like the Waldorf-Astoria ballroom ("Society Notes"), but in 1904 she made her professional debut in vaudeville's big time at Proctor's Fifth Avenue Theater ("Vaudeville"). By 1923, Fisk was referred to as a "humorist of international repute" (*British Books*).

Fisk's popularity both on the stage and in print seems undeniable. Four of her five books went into numerous reprints; her second work of fiction, co-written with Herbert Kaufman, sold out before publication and then quickly went into its second edition ("Stolen Throne"). At least a dozen of her monologues were reproduced under the popular French's Monologue Series, so it is likely that her material also saw wide circulation among amateur performers.<sup>10</sup> Fisk's appearances on the London and New York stage were routinely reported in the theater sections of major, national newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic, and her books were advertised and reviewed in similar fashion. Despite her popularity as a humorist, however, May Isabel Fisk remains lost in obscurity. Not only is biographical information scarce, so too is critical scholarship. Aside from a few paragraphs in *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*, Fisk's work has not been addressed. Even scholars like Nancy A. Walker or Regina Barreca, specialists in American women's humor, do not include Fisk in their anthologies or discuss her work in their analysis. Reference books on American theater like *The Cambridge Guide to American Theater*, *The Cambridge History of American Theater*, or *The Oxford Companion to American Theater* omit Fisk, as do general books like *The International Dictionary of Playwrights*.

May Isabel Fisk is a performer who deserves wider critical attention not only because of her popularity but also because she is part of a tradition of American women satirists whose voice of discontent and protest has been ignored or trivialized by literary scholars. Like other satirists, Fisk expresses women's anger through a mask of humor at a time when popular writers idealized feminine felicity and passivity. While other women made their living in vaudeville through traditional forms of objectivity, whether stripping off their clothes in an erotic dance routine or being the passive foil in a misogynistic comedy routine, Fisk claims female subjectivity through the performance of her satiric monologues. She revises the satiric tradition by reversing traditional joking patterns, making men rather than women the brunt of the joke. She vilifies patriarchal marriage, makes fun of monogamy, laughs at prurient husbands, and breaks down class barriers all while using a form that denies the male voice a single utterance. Through the monologue, Fisk claims for women the right to voice antonymous opinions in a public forum. In *The Anatomy of Satire*, Gilbert Highet writes that in monologues "the satirist, usually speaking either in his own person or behind a mask which is scarcely intended to hide, addresses us directly. He states his views of a problem, cites examples, pillories opponents, and endeavors to impose his view upon the public" (13). At the turn of the century, few women could impose their views on the public on a broad scale, but Fisk is able to do so because she works behind the safety of humor's mask. As many theorists have noted, humorists can get away with far more dissident material than their serious counterparts because it is couched in a pleasurable, that is to say laughter-inducing medium.



Fisk also wrote and performed in diverse voices, reflective of a heterogeneous society. While her leisure class women speak in formal high-toned English, her working class characters, frequently of Irish descent, use dialect, slang, and colloquial expressions. Because she performed for the working and middle class audiences of vaudeville, Fisk tailored her work accordingly. For instance, “A Sales Lady” was performed by Fisk at the Boston Music Hall in 1905 and features an Irish sales clerk who outwits a wealthy customer. “A Sales Lady” is one example of Fisk’s dialect monologues where the humor is deflected off of the speaker and onto either the exaggerated scene unfolding around her or onto a member of the leisure class who is on the periphery of the action. And while maids are nearly always Irish Catholics in Fisk’s fictive world, they are not the targets of her satire; rather, their imbecilic employers are.<sup>11</sup> It would be an exaggeration, however, to suggest that Fisk is a turn of the century equivalent of today’s populist Blue Collar Comedy Tour because so many of her monologues feature society women and many of her publications appeared in highbrow magazines like *Harper’s* and *The Smart Set*. Clearly, Fisk knew how to appeal to many audiences. But what is significant is that unlike her contemporary Edith Wharton, Fisk uses satire’s censorious wit to attack rather than reify class privilege, using the mode as a subversive rather than as a conservative tool. Studies in anthropology and psychology have shown that those in power routinely use humor to maintain their privileged positions (Apte, Ziv), and with her Park Avenue connections, Fisk could easily have made a career out of satirizing working class women or suffragists. Instead she uses her monologues to ridicule wealth and privilege. Her sympathies lie with working and middle class women, and not with their wealthy Anglo-Saxon counterparts.

It should be said that while Fisk gives voice to different social classes, race is almost completely absent in her work. In the more than 60 monologues she published in book form, there are only two specific references made to race. In “Hunting for an Apartment” (1903) the haughty speaker, a woman of the leisure class, says about her new maid: “Yes, she’s colored. Those colored girls don’t seem to eat anything, and the Irish ones have awful appetites, so I would rather trust to one stealing something occasionally than to have a girl eating a lot all the time. You’d find, in the end, the colored one was the cheaper” (*Monologues* 33-34). On face value, such a declaration perpetuates racist and ethnic stereotypes, yet it should be noted that the satiric critique in the monologue is directed at the speaker, and not at her maids. By the end of the monologue, the speaker has revealed snobbery on a grand scale, and this statement only adds to the disparaging characterization. In “At the Beauty Parlors” (1911) the speaker alludes to racial passing: “See that black lady going out? ... We skinner [*sic*] her last month—doesn’t she look white? She’s got lots of money, and she’s going to marry a young man who is in the same class with her son at college” (*Eternal Feminine* 19). The implications of this statement are discussed later in the essay; but more to the point, in this monologue the satiric critique is focused on class and not race discrimination. Aside from these two references, there appears to be no other specific mention of race in any of Fisk’s numerous monologues.<sup>12</sup>

This race elision may reflect Fisk’s own apathy towards racial discrimination, but it might also be a deliberate decision based on performance limitations. Fisk is writing at a time in the American comic tradition where racist insults and ethnic slurs were commonplace, especially on the stage. In his essay on vaudeville humor, Lawrence Mintz

describes how racist and xenophobic jokes “expressed resentment against the waves of new immigrants and also allowed for conflict and hostility between ethnic groups to be expressed in a displaced, but not necessarily, socially benign manner” (22). This resentment towards immigrants is absent in Fisk’s work as are blatant racist insults and ethnic slurs. Given the heavily xenophobic backdrop of nineteenth-century American humor and the denigrating nature of vaudeville comedy, this invective-free comedy seems to be a radical break from tradition.

What’s more, it would be highly problematic for Fisk to write a monologue as a black speaker because if she were to recite on the vaudeville stage, she would likely have to appear in blackface. Women did participate in minstrelsy, and in fact Fisk did perform in London in 1910 with an American singer, a Miss Ariston, who “sang coon songs” (“Notes and Impressions”). Whether or not this singer performed in blackface is not known, and it is almost certain that Fisk, herself, did not act in blackface. Fisk’s monochromatic comedy, then, reflects not only the reality of a racially segregated society but also the artistic limitations of a white woman performing comedy at the turn of the century. While the performance of ethnic and class diversity was permissible, the performance of racial diversity was not, unless the actor wished to resort to the minstrel tradition.

### **Monologue**

May Isabel Fisk wrote fiction, non-fiction, plays, and self-help articles for ladies’ magazines, and yet the majority of her published work, six out of eight books, is in the form of the comic monologue. Why might an author like Fisk rely so heavily on the monologue to convey her comic vision? One possible reason is the form’s popularity.

Historian Albert McLean suggests that the monologue all but defined the new humor of American vaudeville (111); and so it stands to reason that if a comic has her sights set on the professional stage, the monologue would be an ideal form. A monologue certainly is the most streamline dramatic form requiring little or no apparatus, so pragmatics might have been another reason. Personality, too, might have played a role. While no personal correspondences have yet been uncovered, Fisk's literary and biographical background does reveal a bold, adventurous personality, someone who circulated with literary celebrities and was at home with both vaudevillians and the Vanderbilt set. The amount of traveling she undertook while performing her monologues, apparently separate from her husband, plus the number of publications she managed suggest an intrepid personality. So perhaps the sheer egocentrism of the form appealed to her; after all, a monologist shares the spotlight with no one. But because the overwhelming majority of Fisk's monologues are filled with a muted protest over some form of social inequality, I suggest that Fisk uses the form to claim a woman's right to voice public opinion on a variety of provocative issues, from marital disillusionment to hostility over class discrimination. The monologue provides unrestricted artistic agency without being reinterpreted through a male-dominated discourse or through forms that might dilute a woman's authority or control over her own ideas. Via the monologue, Fisk might have conveyed whatever views she wants, however antagonistic.

The monologue also gives Fisk the opportunity to make social commentary about issues that matter to a variety of women, to be a mouthpiece for women's concerns. Her satires take readers into the urbanized twentieth century where women are store clerks, proprietors, or postmasters, and not simply overworked housewives or rich dowagers. In

his book *Zen and the Art of the Monologue*, Jay Sankey writes that the monologue “typically explores a greater intellectual and emotional range” (5) than stand-up comedy and that because the connection to the audience is one of the form’s strengths, the monologue has the potential for a “true transformation of both the audience and the performer” (6). The comic monologue would give Fisk the flexibility to delve into serious social issues while providing her with the necessary mask to make her material pleasurable to audiences. For instance, many of her monologues reveal that marriage often feels more like a prison than a fairytale romance; most of Fisk’s wives are bored and sexually dissatisfied, if not downright homicidal. In fact, a wife’s frustration and anger seems to pulsate below the surface of many of her comic speeches. “A Bill from the Milliner,” features a wife who is at wits end because she is trying to hide expenditures from her husband. She spits, “They always want you to economise [*sic*] but they never like you to begin on them” (*M* 86). Beneath the jokes and the hyperbole lies the woman’s annoyance at being economically dependent on her husband. Similarly, in “Her ‘Night-Thoughts’,” an insomniac muses:

What an awful thing it is to be a woman--we are so maligned and misunderstood--our motives so misconstrued. If we are deceitful, it’s not our fault--it’s forced on us and we are obliged to accept for diplomatic reasons. If we want anything we have to coax and connive to get it how--how difficult it is to get anything you really want out of a husband by just plain asking for it. (*The Silent Sex* 213)

This speech also reveals the disadvantages of economic dependency and the woman’s anger about it. The monologue, then, gives Fisk the necessary space to tease out these conflicts, allowing audiences and readers the opportunity to *hear* what has previously

only been *thought* by women, who, because of entrenched rules about etiquette, decorum, and ladylike behavior, have been always been more restricted in speech than men. The form therefore provides ample room to explore a woman's interiority, with no degrading interruptions from men, and the humor provides the protective mask to express anger or dissatisfaction with the status quo.

For a woman performer at the turn of the century, the monologue also might serve an anti-objectifying purpose. A monologist is not on stage to elicit an erotic response or to display the body in some other form of objectification *per se*; she is on stage to be heard, to draw attention to the product of female subjectivity and interiority rather than to female objectivity and physicality. It is her thoughts, opinions, and verbal dexterity that are on display commanding attention and not necessarily her appealing face or figure. While it is impossible to determine how many women monologists were performing on the vaudeville circuit in Fisk's day, records suggest that a female comic monologist was a rarity. Women solo acts on vaudeville were likely to be dancers like Josephine Cohan, or famous dramatic actresses like Lillie Langtry, or well-known beauties like Lillian Russell whose main draw was not so much her voice as her expensive and form-fitting costumes. Even high profile comediennes like May Irwin or Fanny Brice were known for their singing and comedy sketches and not for their monologues. According to historian Albert McLean, vaudeville's top nine monologists were all men (110).<sup>13</sup> So while women entertainers were often valued for their ability to please either by singing, dancing, or appearing on stage in provocative costumes, monologists were valued for their ability to entertain through provocative verbalization. It is an aggressive and authoritative rather than passive and acquiescent act. Gail Finney identifies female comics of the 1970s and

1980s with having a newfound “autonomous female subject” (4) in their humor, and it might be said that Fisk claimed a similar subjectivity nearly seventy years prior. Valued for her wit and audacity, a woman monologist claims an individual, discrete space for herself even as she claims the authority of a satiric performance with its inherent judgments and stances.

And yet despite this subjective agency, all of Fisk’s monologues appear to make fun of women, to mirror the familiar misogynistic humor of satire that ridicules women simply because they are women. Fisk’s non-comic writing indicates that she certainly believed in such a thing as a “feminine mentality” (“Woman’s Love”) and that certain foibles might be “distinctly and essentially feminine” (*Monologues and Duologues* 10). Like many women satirists, Fisk writes almost entirely about women, and so she naturally uses comic stereotypes in the process. This doesn’t mean, however, that she automatically mirrors the misogynistic satiric tradition. While a male monologist may find a woman laughable simply because she is a *woman*, Fisk laughs at a woman because her *behavior* is laughable. Pettiness, hypocrisy, and civic indifference are often the targets of her satire and not women themselves. In “Keeping a Seat at a Benefit,” the speaker arrogantly criticizes the hard working charity workers who are sponsoring the fund raiser while she herself does sits around sipping tea. The woman’s hypocrisy is exposed as she speaks, and there is no indication that her gender is to blame. Similarly, in “At the Theatre,” a woman complains to her husband about the rude behavior of the audience members around her, yet she rudely refuses to remove her enormous hat even though it is obscuring the vision of patrons sitting behind her. A vain and wealthy woman in “The Tailor-Made Gown” scolds her seamstress for an ill-fitting new gown even

though it's her own bloated figure that is the problem. The woman's vanity is ridiculed, and anyone who has blamed the poor cut of a garment rather than her own weight gain can relate to the comedy and pathos of this scene. These monologues expose *human* hypocrisy and vanity; the laughter is aimed at the behavior and not necessarily at the gender.

A complication arises, however, because these monologues draw from images of women's culture--seamstresses and teas and wide brim hats--and so the assumption is that they must be making fun of women. But why is it that women's satire may only represent the foibles of women while men's satire is thought to critique the failures of humanity? There seems to be a double standard here. Jonathan Swift's Lemuel Gulliver is understood as a critique of gullibility; his maleness isn't considered the cause of the problem. Evelyn Waugh's Lord Metroland, Colonel Blount, and Lord Thingummy are caricatures in *Vile Bodies* satirizing the British upper class in the 1920's. Their outlandish behavior and inane talk makes them ridiculous, and not necessarily their gender. And yet when a woman satirist uses female comic types it is assumed that she is criticizing uniquely female vices when in fact they more often represent human failings. This is simply the residual effect of a patriarchal social order that still views men as the default species, representatives of humanity, arbiters of culture while women assume a secondary, inferior position, with a limited range of representation. Like all satirists Fisk uses comic types to ridicule hypocrisy, social indifference, entitlement, class disparity, fads, to name a few subjects. If any one group *is* targeted in Fisk's work, it is not women, but members of the leisure class: her most biting wit is saved for her lady



satires. She is more ready to attach blame to the privilege of wealth and the delusions of status than to gender. This is consistent throughout all her monologues.

In fact, Fisk uses the monologue to counter sexist joking patterns by making men, particularly husbands, the brunt of her jokes. The few times husbands do appear, they are always the recipients of their wives' contempt. An older woman in "Another Point of View" hints at her husband's impotence complaining that her wrinkled, bald, and graying husband has gotten to the "indifferent" (*M* 113) stage. Mrs. Townsend in "At the Health Resort" quips, "They had a nice looking young man at their table the other night, but they were having such a good time I made up my mind it wasn't the husband" (*The Talking Woman* 124). In "A Matter of Discretion" an angry wife snaps, "men's hearts don't break nowadays. They're like indiarubber--give them a pinch and you think they're squashed beyond redemption; then some other girl comes along and they bounce right out, as good as new, without even a dent to show" (*MD* 126), the phrase "bounce right out" perhaps hinting at an erection. Fisk turns tables on her male counterparts in comedy by making husbands rather than wives the objects of ridicule. In Fisk's creative world, the stereotype of the daft housewife is replaced by the stupid husband, the frigid woman is replaced by the impotent man, and women, not men, are celebrated for having a wandering eye. By making husbands and not wives the target of ridicule, Fisk upsets a misogynistic satiric formula that dates back to Juvenal.

Even in her few duologues, Fisk mocks marriage and reveals a new sexual openness for women. All of her duologues are discussions between a husband and wife, and all of them deal with marital infidelity and secret trysts. Published in 1914, "A Game for Two" and "The Crossing of the Wires" are clever, fast-paced dialogues that rely on

dramatic irony and double entendres for humor. In the first, a young woman is cheating on her husband but hides this from her lover. She says audacious things like, “a husband is half mother and half jailor” (*MD* 34) and that marriage is “food with no flavor, drink with no intoxication...champagne with all the sparkles left out--dead, flat--it gives you the headache and no raptures” (39). In “The Crossing of the Wires” the reader is privy to six different phone conversations, which eventually reveal that both husband and wife are hiding an illicit affair from one another. The husband is overheard saying to his lover that his wife is “a bit prim and sedate. But then you want that in a wife” (*MD* 59). Countering, his wife says something similar to her own lover: “Vance is a little sober and sedate, but that’s what you want--in a husband” (64). Here Fisk flips the social script by depicting a wife as predatory, preferring docility in a husband but virility in a lover. Certainly this sort of adulterous scenario has been around for centuries, but the novelty here is that a woman is now publicly voicing this libidinal desire, rejecting the stereotype of the asexual, marriage-worshipping woman. This is hardly misogynistic humor. Historian Andrew Erdman contends that at the turn of the century, the modern wife often engaged in a complex ritual of flirtation with strange men and that this ritual of flirtation not only proved a “quasi-sexual thrill” (157) but also came to define a new openness in women’s sexuality, which, Erdman argues, played out on the vaudeville stage in performances by people like Eva Tanguay (157). Fisk’s duologues are similar in that they normalize flirtations and infidelity for women and reveal a new openness in expressing women’s sexuality.

A monologist like Fisk worked outside the bounds of propriety by entering into the male-dominated world of satiric humor and in so doing claimed a voice of her own

without having to use a filter of masculine privilege and prejudice. Theater historian Maggie Gale notes that Fisk and her contemporary, Beatrice Hereford, had taken solo performance to a new level by moving the monologue past the “fusty tradition of dramatic recitation” (298) and into the dangerous terrain of satiric comedy. Hers is a subjective, rather than objectified voice. The form gave Fisk the freedom not only to disrupt institutions like marriage, but also to turn tables on sexist stereotypes, to revise misogynistic joking patterns, and to openly express women’s libidinal desire when the social etiquette of the day called for a much more demure comportment.

### **Women Playwrights of the Progressive Era**

Women, she observed, had their place in war as in most other things, and intimated that if they had a hand in the administration of the country’s affairs, as they properly should, the Nation would not have been so utterly unprepared for war as it was when hostilities with Spain began. It was to “the criminal negligence of our men in high places, more bent upon their own aggrandizement than upon safeguarding the interests of the country,” that this dangerous unpreparedness was due, she declared. (“Woman’s Place”)

This passage is from an 1899 *New York Times* article, “Woman’s Place in War: Mrs. Belle Gray Taylor Discusses It Before the Society for Political Study.” The writer goes on to say that not only have women been active in past war efforts as nurses and as philanthropists but also as warriors and argues for a woman’s right to be admitted into war camps. Taylor was a well-known poet (the author of three books of poetry), a public lecturer, suffragist, clubwoman, and the mother of May Isabel Fisk.<sup>14</sup> Taylor dedicated her first book of poetry, *Captive Conceits* (1896), to her daughters, Grace and May; in

return Fisk dedicated her only novel, *The Stolen Throne*, to her mother. While it would be impossible to delineate the way in which Taylor's politics influenced Fisk's writing, it seems reasonable to assume that Fisk would have been at least sympathetic to suffragists like her mother, who insisted on a woman's right to vote as one indication of gender equality. And while none of Fisk's monologues are explicitly political in that they do not necessarily endorse a particular platform, like the creation of the Federal Reserve System or the income tax, many of her monologues draw attention to unfair restrictions on women and on degrading, sexist stereotypes. In this regard Fisk shares a commonality with dramatic playwrights of the era who also focused on women's changing social consciousness.

In the essay "Realism and Feminism in the Progressive Era," Patricia R. Schroeder discusses some of the main issues playwrights were grappling with in their work during the early decades of the twentieth century. Taking examples from playwrights Zona Gale, Rachel Crothers, and Margaret Kendall of *Wentworth*, Schroeder concludes that these plays typically portray domestic space as a place of confinement for women mostly because of their economic dependence on men, while also reflecting the cultural shifts taking place as women entered the work force and started to vote (33). While a playwright like Gale might depict the reality of "domestic entrapment" (35) as a common experience for many women, a humorist like Fisk would make fun of that entrapment. Or more commonly, she reverses traditional gender roles altogether where the milquetoast husband is subservient to his domineering wife or where wives complain about their husbands because they are too old and unattractive. Women in a Fisk monologue routinely make fun of men for being impecunious, or they make jokes about

what bores husbands can be, especially compared to younger, handsomer men. The humor in these monologues is found in the irony of the situation, in the jokes and puns, in the frequent comic digressions, in jokes, and in the inversions of traditional or expected gender roles.

From a sociological perspective, what is absent from Fisk's corpus is as significant as what is present. Suffragists, for instance, rarely make an appearance in a Fisk monologue and are never the target of her sardonic wit. Schroeder notes that playwrights of the Progressive Era worked to counter negative stereotypes about the New Woman, who was often depicted in the popular press as sexless, humorless, and unfeminine, a threat to the patriarchal order (37). While demeaning satires of the New Woman might exist in Edith Wharton's writing, none of Fisk's comic monologues directly attack suffragists, clubwomen, public lecturers, or any other iteration of the New Woman.<sup>15</sup> Fisk's "Keeping a Seat at the Benefit" makes fun of a woman at a charity benefit, but it targets the irony of the situation—the woman is at a charity event yet she is ridiculously uncharitable—and not the fact that a woman is participating in a public forum to advance social justice. Similarly, "At the Hair-Dressers" pokes fun at the hypocrisy of a charity worker, not at a woman involved in public service. Hypocrisy has always been one of satire's main targets, and if a clubwoman appears in a Fisk monologue, it's her hypocritical behavior that is mocked and not her public function.

Another common issue being explored in women's theater at the time was the shift from domestic or private space to public space, and there are parallels to this in Fisk's work as well. Nearly all of her monologues take place in locations outside the home: in a beauty parlor, at a health resort, on the beach, and so forth. Many of these

enterprises are managed by women, or they are staffed by women workers and frequented by women customers. As historian Nancy Woloch notes, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, women's culture took on a noticeably more public form, allowing women the opportunity to impact public life far more than they ever had in the past (275). Fisk's monologues reflect these cultural changes. That most of her pieces are set in a public arena suggests how commonplace it was for women to be working as clerks, customers, or innkeepers. This is a dramatic departure from nineteenth century women's humor, which focused mostly on domesticity, maternity, and wifely duties. Like her dramatic counterparts, Fisk's workingwomen appropriately reflect the social changes taking place as more and more women moved from the private to the public arena.

Fisk seems to have struck a balance between humor and social criticism that resonated with her audience, both reading and viewing. Sherry Engle suggests that the sharp rise in the number of women playwrights during the Progressive Era was due largely to the fact that most of the paying public—an estimated seventy-five percent--were women and girls (10-11).<sup>16</sup> The stage was one arena where a woman could earn an impressive wage, as much as, if not more than, her male counterparts. It was not uncommon, for instance, for a moderately successful woman playwright to earn more than \$300 per week in small venues, double that for runs in large cities (Engle 6). Fisk's brisk book sales, coupled with her popular stage performances, must have yielded her a considerable income. Evidently, she honed a formula that worked. Mocking rich ladies, pushing back on boorish husbands, and giving voice to women's newfound sexual and social freedom was something that women evidently wanted to hear, and to laugh about. In her monologues, Fisk is able to advance a platform that stresses women's social

equality through the disarming charms of stage comedy. Writing about stand up comics Joanne Gilbert writes, “Within the topsy-turvy world of stand-up comic performance, hierarchies are inverted, power relations are subverted, and a good time is had by all. Because it can avoid inflaming audiences by framing incisive—even incendiary—sociocultural critique as mere ‘entertainment,’ comedy is undeniably a unique and powerful form of communication” (xii). Fisk’s comic monologues play with power relations and touch on the taboo even as they manage to convey a genial wit that endeared her to critics and audiences alike. That’s not to say, however, that a Fisk satire has no bite. As at least one critic has observed, “the more naïve and inoffensive one appeared on the surface, the deeper the barbs that might be inflicted” (McLean 124). This punishing wit is especially evidenced in Fisk’s many marriage satires.

### **Marriage Satires**

One of the main themes being treated on the American stage during the Progressive Era was marriage as a domestic prison, and May Fisk’s comic monologues frequently satirize matrimony. Whereas her dramatic counterparts may have treated marriage as a dismal affair with wives in abject misery, Fisk routinely depicts marriage as a game, with the wife in open rebellion and in deliberate control over the action, especially over her husband. In other instances, she is out merrily philandering or engaged in an elaborate game of flirtation. In her first book of monologues (1903), three out of eleven pieces satirize marriage. “Hunting for an Apartment” depicts a couple that is on the market for an apartment. Right from the opening lines Fisk establishes that the young woman will handle the obstinate landlords while her diffident fiancé watches. She warns him: “[I’m] not going to be bossed and made to do things I don’t want to, and the

sooner you understand it the better” (*M* 32); she calls him “stupid” (35-6) twice and tells him to be quiet while she’s bartering with the landlord. Then she scolds her partner when he doesn’t speak up. After unsuccessfully arguing with several landlords, the woman drags her fiancé away, blaming him failing to find an apartment. On the one hand, Fisk flips gender stereotypes by making the man the passive partner and the woman the deal-making entrepreneur; and yet on the other hand, this monologue could be viewed as endorsing sexist stereotypes by making the officious woman the brunt of the joke. Read from a conservative perspective “Hunting for an Apartment” becomes a cautionary tale about how women who boss their men will never triumph. But read from a more liberal perspective, the story features an independent, outspoken young woman who refuses to follow the patriarchal order. The laughter then is aimed at the fiancé.

“Another Point of View” satirizes the romanticized notion of marriage. The speaker complains about domestic drudgery and how marriage has turned out to be “nothing but old bothers about butchers and grocers and servants” (*M* 113). She talks about how boring and unattractive her husband has become now that he’s wrinkled and bald and at “the indifferent stage” (113). A new sapphire ring for her birthday temporarily mitigates her unhappiness and makes her husband seem somehow more attractive, hence the other point of view. The humor is found in how fickle the woman is; one minute she is in the depths of despair, and the next she is ebullient. The satiric critique is aimed not only at the woman’s materialism but also at the idea of a fairytale romance. Though intended to be humorous, the monologue nonetheless reveals the unpleasant reality of a passionless marriage and the monotony of domesticity, all brought to bear because of the woman’s economic dependence.



In her earlier pieces, marital ennui might be allayed by a new purchase or a trip abroad, but in her later satires, the bored wives simply take young lovers. Over time, Fisk's marriage satires become more vitriolic, her attack aimed more squarely at men. This joking formula is a radical departure from popular literary humor of the time period. For instance, in the July 1900 issue of *The Smart Set*, there are dozens of jokes that depict women in degrading stereotype, like the comic poem "An Average Girl:"

She has views of Venice and Rome,  
Of the Thames, the Seine, and the Rhone;  
She has traveled afar from her home,  
But she has no views of her own. (Levy 65).

Or this well-worn joke, found in the same issue:

Newlywed: Does your wife ever threaten to go home to her mother?

Oldboy: Why, my boy, I wouldn't consider that a threat. ("Viewpoint")

Dozens of similar jokes portray women as a fashion obsessed, brainless species and marriage as a sexless, joyless enterprise that women crave but men seek to escape. A typical joke:

*Bridegroom* (returning from the honeymoon): Do you keep this car thoroughly lighted going through the tunnel?

*Brakeman*: Yes, sir.

*Bridegroom*: All right. I'll go and get my wife. ("Sagacious")

Fisk turns such material on its ear by portraying women as philanderers and men as parsimonious bores. Her marriage satires are filled with jokes like the following: "[it is] the fate of great minds not to get along with their husbands" (*TW* 128). When a husband

makes a disparaging remark about feminine duplicity, the wife retorts: “You men are quite as deceitful in your way, for when a man is trying to get a girl engaged to him, he pretends he possesses all the loveliest traits of character, and then, when you *do* marry him, you find out he is quite different from what you thought. And if that isn’t deception, *criminal* deception, I don’t know what you call it!” (*EF* 43). Such jabs are routine in a Fisk monologue and upset the misogynistic formula ubiquitous in print humor at the time.

In the cleverly titled, “Harmony in a Flat” (1914), Fisk articulates her disdain for marriage in her stage directions. In sarcastic terms worthy of Mary Astell, she describes the scene in detail: “A small, cosy, and unmistakably NEWLY-MARRIED sitting room. Each glittering and blatantly polished article shrieks aloud of recently acquired matrimony and of an industrious bride with the usual mad desire to appear as a model housekeeper before her adoring spouse. The two, encased in their smug happiness...” (*MD* 71). Then ensues gushing dialogue about supreme happiness and spousal perfection until a fight breaks out over virtually nothing. By the end, the two are reconciled and the discordant harmony is resolved. In her sarcastic stage directions and in her melodramatic dialogue, Fisk intimates that marriage has its appeal only to the newly initiated. Her use of words like “acquired” and “appeared” in her stage directions further suggests that marriage is a performance where couples maintain a cheery exterior despite the less than perfect circumstance. In this and other monologues, Fisk shows that a happily-ever-after mentality belongs to the realm of myth; hence, it is an ideal target for satire.

Thematically, the monologues that satirize marriage seem to be the most progressive of Fisk’s work in that they champion women’s libidinal desire and articulate a woman’s cynical view of romanticized unions. Infidelity is commonplace. But these

marriage satires also push the bounds of satire as an art form. Several later monologues blur the boundaries between tragedy and comedy by hinting at domestic strife and violence. “The London Char-Lady” (1911) offers an indirect critique of a deadbeat husband who drinks up his wives’ wages while “Almost a Tragedy,” published the same year, exposes the dark side of matrimony. It features a new bride who listens to an older woman, Mrs. MacDowell, and her litany of marital horrors. She starts out with this warning about husbands:

They always begin like that—make you stop doing all kinds of things you like and always have done. . . .they do it to show you how important they are. But. . . it’s all a question of *who* puts his foot down *first* and *keeps* it there—and keeps it there the *longest!* . . . . men are all right if they’re properly trained from the beginning. (*EF* 168-169)

In an attempt to further frighten the child bride, Mrs. MacDowell scans the papers for the juiciest divorce gossip. She takes perverse pleasure in telling her young friend about a jealous husband who throws a lighted lamp at his wife, or how another woman is filing for divorce because of infidelity. The impressionable girl starts to worry herself, imagining the worst scenarios because her husband is late coming home from work. All is forgotten, however, when the husband arrives with roses for his adoring wife. The piece unmasks the unsavory side of marriage, where jealousy and suspicion can escalate into violence, even as it exposes the bitterness that may accompany old age. The speaker’s anger and vindictiveness is barely masked and the humor here is grim.

In comparing Fisk’s 1903 monologues with those published in 1923, there is an evident shift in tone from the genial and lighthearted to the sarcastic and bleak, even

though marriage remains a favorite target. Marital woes come to a horrific climax in a dramatic monologue, “The Way Out,” published in 1923. Tucked in the midst of Fisk’s last collection of comic monologues is this Ibsen-like dramatic piece about marriage, infidelity, and suicide. (It is one of two monologues in Fisk’s collected work that is *not* comic; both involve domestic violence.) Fisk tells the story of an unhappily married woman, Agnes, who is about to leave her cold and abusive husband, Horace, for her younger lover, Arnold. The action takes place in Arnold’s bedroom, where Agnes waits. Through a series of events—she places a phone call to Arnold; she reads one of his letters; she spots the revolver on his desk--Agnes discovers that Arnold has run away with another woman and that he has never really loved her but only pitied her. Horace, meanwhile, having read her good-bye letter, pounds on the bedroom door demanding to be let in. “I’ll give you and your *lover* two minutes to open this door before I smash it in,” he shouts (SS 119). Cornered, Agnes reaches for the revolver, and says, “There is no other way out” (120) and then shoots herself. Fisk’s stage directions here are precise: “She goes swiftly to the door and silently withdraws the bolt and switches off the light. A shot rings out and a cry, followed in a second by a woman’s moan and the sound of a body falling” (120).

With its *Hedda Gabler*-like themes and strategically placed clues—a telephone call, a letter, a revolver--“The Way Out” is a surprising piece of melodrama that confronts serious issues about marriage and divorce in the 1920’s. Early in the play, Agnes says to herself: “No more cheating and lying, no more--of this. We will face the world honestly, at last, and if it condemns us, it doesn’t matter in the least—we shall have each other—and that is *all*” (SS 104). The inference is that if a woman is unhappily

married, her only two options are infidelity or divorce, and both will be socially devastating to a woman. Fisk reveals the double standard; even though divorce rates skyrocketed at the turn of the century, there was still a social stigma attached to divorce, for women. Agnes hesitates to divorce Horace, even though his is cold, condescending, and physically abusive—we know that he slapped her recently--because she knows that *she* will bear the brunt of the public humiliation. “I know him too well—he will divorce me at once. He will revel in his revenge—he will glory in dragging me through the mud! For mud it will appear to the world”(105). Then comes this comment about divorce rituals: “ ‘Our world’—a world of hypocrisy and sham which only demands that outwardly all must appear according to conventions. One’s heart may be wrung with agony, every sensibility tortured to madness, every quivering nerve protesting at the sacrilege of a so-called marriage—as mine—and yet, all this is no ground for breaking a hideous bondage!” (106). Earlier in the play, Agnes refers to marriage as “bondage,” an “unspeakable travesty,” and “a long drawn-out misery” (106). Even though she is unhappy, Agnes has no grounds for divorce because her marriage *appears* to be fine. It doesn’t matter that Horace is psychological and physically abusive. Fisk’s dramatic ending uncovers the desperation some women might feel because of the social stigma attached to divorce. The monologue equates matrimony with bondage, travesty, and misery.

Fisk’s marriage satires reflect a shift in attitude about the traditional patriarchal arrangement. Not only are her wives in open rebellion against repressive relationships, they also participate in intricate flirting rituals and are relatively open about their sexual adventures outside marriage. On the rare occasion when men do speak in a Fisk piece,

their speech usually reveals that they are cuckolded. But what “The Way Out” and other monologues divulge is that for many women, marriage still meant boredom, suffocation, even desperation. While Fisk treats infidelity lightly and makes snappy jokes about dull husbands, her satires about marriage also carry serious critique about inequality for women, suggesting that marriage might be more a tool for social control than it is a hallowed institution, the cornerstone of civilized society. Importantly, Fisk makes it crystal clear that the economic dependency of the traditional marriage ensures a woman’s bondage. Northrop Frye identifies satire’s function as “breaking up the lumber of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions, and all other things that impede the free movement (not necessarily, of course, the progress) of society” (233). For a satirist like May Isabel Fisk, that includes the institution of marriage.

### **The Alazon and Eiron**

#### **Lady Satires: The Alazon**

Not only did Fisk satirize marriage in her monologues, she also ridiculed the American leisure class, likely doing so in front of working and middle class audiences. One of the more intriguing aspect of Fisk’s life is that even though she was associated with New York’s famed “400” and even though her name sporadically appears in society columns, most of her comic material attacks wealthy women.<sup>17</sup> With close ties to New York’s moneyed elite, Fisk had an insider’s advantage. Like Oscar Wilde before her and Dorothy Parker after, Fisk could satirize high society because she circulated in it. By making fun of wealth and privilege, Fisk reflects the new humor that characterized vaudeville comedy, a democratizing humor that historian Albert McLean describes as

reducing “figures of respectability and privilege to his own commonplace station” (117). McLean argues that this humor is characterized by its word play and dialect as well as its use of biting and aggressive jokes (109). Played out for a mass, urban audience this new comedy modified the more sentimental, genteel wit and tall tale humor of the nineteenth century and replaced it with material that spoke for the audiences of the modernized twentieth century (McLean 109, 112-113). Fisk’s contribution to this genre should be considered, especially since most humor scholars do not include women in their analysis, McLean included. While her material isn’t as bawdy or as violent as her male counterparts, her monologues do have elements of this new humor and do carry the democratizing power that McLean mentions.

The majority of Fisk’s sixty or so monologues are what might be considered to be lady satires using a stock caricature that dates back to Greek comedy--the *alazon* or impostor figure.<sup>18</sup> Fisk uses dozens of *alazon* figures, typically wealthy society women who have different outward characteristics but share the same talent for self-aggrandizement. Ordinarily the *alazon* is a woman of the leisure class whose endless prattling, while often comedic, unmasks her vacuity. The satiric laughter is aimed at the women’s inhumanity or arrogance or hypocrisy, not to mention her indifference to those less privileged. While critics have discussed the *alazon* in canonical works written by men, this figure has not been discussed in women’s satire to any degree. Northrop Frye, for instance, in the *Mythos of Satire*, writes at length about the *alazon* and its counterpart the *eirone* but relies exclusively on the literature of the white, Anglo male to make his argument. According to Frye’s definition, the *alazon* is a stock comic character that pretends to be greater than he really is (39); his hyperbolic boasting typically not only

provides the humor but also usually results in his own undoing. Frye cites Squire Allworthy in *Tom Jones* as one example (172) and asserts that “the female *alazon* is rare” (172) no doubt because he hasn’t considered satiric literature written by women.

Fisk’s lady satires ridicule upper class women because they meddle in people’s affairs, gossip, and give unsolicited advice, but they are also satirized for their social indifference. It’s not unusual for a lady in a Fisk satire, for instance, to gloss over an important piece of news and to fixate on an advertisement for a sale, a device that Dorothy Parker uses in some of her own lady satires. The *alazon* appears in all of Fisk’s books and is typically occupied with a trivial activity like trying on shoes or sunbathing at a beach. As she blathers on about popular trends, lazy servants, infidelities, or other tidbits of gossip, her puffed up status is uncovered. Jokes, irony, and comic digressions supply the humor, as does what I call the incidental insult, a seemingly innocent comment that is nothing more than masked invective.

One of her earliest lady satires, “Heard on the Beach” (1903) paints a scathing portrait of a snobbish woman, Mrs. Randall, who is vacationing at a resort. It opens with an incidental insult: “Well, my dear, I have been watching your bath-house for the last hour. I thought you were never coming out. It takes you so long to dress-- but, then, it pays, for any one could tell the amount of time you spend on your toilettes--it shows” (*M* 177). The aggression and hostility is barely masked, as Mrs. Randall’s greeting has an icy double meaning: her friend takes so long to get ready because she needs to wear a lot of make-up. When Mrs. Randall tries to wipe off some excess rouge, her friend claims that the redness is really just a sunburn. Mrs. Randall replies, “Sunburn? Oh yes, but how convenient! It rubs right off!” (177). The speaker then continues with her veiled insults,



implying that her friend needs all the latest cosmetic treatments. She talks about beauty products that will erase “those little lines around your eyes” (179) and the electric wrinkle roller, “[which] if you have a double chin, it will rub it right off; and if you are thin, it will rub it right on!” (179). She reports how a friend had twenty-five pounds “rubbed off by a French masseuse named Miss O’Grady” (189), which reveals either her ignorance-- O’Grady is an Irish name--or her astuteness in sniffing out pretension in others. That is, if “Miss O’Grady” were delivered in a sarcastic tone, the insult would be for her friend who pretends to have a sophisticated French masseuse but in actuality has hired just a local woman. Mrs. Randall assures her listener that she herself has no need of these products.

When her friend compliments another woman who passes by, Mrs. Randall counters with this boomeranging insult: “I don’t understand why Mr. Randall finds her attractive. That woman doesn’t resemble me in the least!” (*M* 188). After she gossips about a divorcée and criticizes a newlywed couple for kissing in public, the speaker then turns her vitriol towards servants. Even though one of her maids is elderly and has sciatica, Mrs. Randall makes her work eleven-hour days. When the maid dies (textual clues suggest of starvation), Mrs. Randall goes to visit her sister in Brooklyn, but not out of sympathy: “You see, when she died, she owed me a half days work, and I went right over to see her sister about it” (189). The monologue ends when the listener can stand no more and abruptly leaves. When she does the lady spits, “She is the hatefulest cat in the whole place!” (190). Filled with veiled insults and aggressive verbal attacks, this monologue portrays a braggart who thinks herself superior to everyone in sight. In laughing at her, Fisk deflates the person’s elevated position in society.

In *The Talking Woman*, all but two of the monologues feature *alazons*, women who are wealthy enough to have servants, buy the best seats at the theater, and wear tailor-made gowns. “The Invalid” describes a society lady who pretends to be sick so that she can visit the young, handsome doctor while “The Tailor-Made Gown” depicts an older woman who blames her seamstress for her own bad figure. “An Afternoon Call” is a biting portrait of a society lady calling on her friend, Ethel. The monologue uses the familiar Fisk formula: a chattering woman inadvertently insults her listener, condemns other women for what she herself is guilty of, and makes the customary crude jokes about fads, servants, and divorcées. The piece opens with an incidental insult. She tells Ethel that her new photograph is “perfectly stunning... simply lovely--just *gorgeous*. But it doesn’t look a bit like you” (*TW* 102). She admits that the only reason she stopped by was because she felt sure Ethel would be out; and then, caught in her own duplicity, she tries to backpedal. Another veiled insult follows: “Now Ethel, how horrid of you--you know I didn’t mean I really thought you would be out, I only *hoped*--“ (101). She criticizes infidelities, even though she flirts regularly with an old flame, and she mocks a woman who dyes her hair, even though her own hair is an unnatural shade of red. As in most of her monologues, Fisk here uses an invisible listener (Ethel) who acts as a foil to augment the speaker’s hypocrisy.

But more than point out a snobbish woman’s vanity, “An Afternoon Call” reveals the social indifference of the leisure class, anticipating Dorothy Parker’s satiric pieces of the 1930’s. Parker’s “From the Diary of a New York Lady,” a mock diary chronically the life of a society woman, unmask the woman’s civic indifference. She writes in her diary, “Started to read the papers, but nothing in them except that Mona Wheatley is in

Reno charging *intolerable cruelty*” (Parker 192), a reference to a divorce proceeding. Even though these were some of the worst days of the Great Depression when newspapers were filled with grim news about catastrophic events, this woman is only concerned with social gossip. The pettiness of the diarist stands in sharp contrast to the gravity of the situation. Similarly, Fisk’s speaker says:

I read the paper every single morning straight through—at least I read everything that’s interesting—I couldn’t exist unless I knew who was dead, and the personal column, and the department store advertisements... The war? I suppose so, but it really bores me to death—and, my dear, have you seen the bargains in silk-shirt-waists Wilkheimer and Murray are advertising for their Friday sale? (109)

The gravity of war is contrasted to the frivolity of a sale on silk shirts. According to newspaper archives, the year “An Afternoon Call” was published there were at least eight major articles in the *New York Times* on the Black Patch Tobacco Wars, a civilian uprising involving the Ku Klux Klan and the Night Riders that took place from 1904-1908 in response to a supposed tobacco monopoly in southwestern Kentucky and parts of Tennessee (Gregory). Headlines reveal fear and panic: “Night Riders Plant Dynamite in Wheat: Ku Klux Klan Methods Revived in the Kentucky Tobacco Planters’ War” and “Night Riders Kill Kentucky Farmer; Shoot Him Down on Doorstep Despite His Promise to Dig Up His Tobacco.” A front page headline from November 11, 1907, declares: “Fear Tobacco War: Thousands of Armed Planters Swarm into Owensboro, Kentucky.” Because this conflict was front-page news in New York City, it’s likely that this is the war referred to in Fisk’s monologue. (The *Times* also uses the word “war” to describe the

events.) The violence of the uprising, plus the terror associated with the KKK and the Night Riders, would have made this a hard news item to ignore, and yet Fisk's speaker is indifferent to the violence and racial hatred in her own country and is concerned only with a shirt sale at the local department store. Fisk, and Parker after her, satirize these women because they represent the insularity of the leisure class, privileged people who remain indifferent to social upheaval and human suffering, whose world is limited to their own tiny circle of self-interest and conspicuous consumption.

Not all of Fisk's *alazon* figures are wealthy society women. In "The Suburban Hostess" (1914), Fisk portrays a socially ambitious hostess who pretends to be cultured and refined but merely is a bumpkin in *faux* designer clothing. This monologue has elaborate stage directions that describe the setting and speaker: "a conventional suburban drawing room, universal, sodden" (140) decorated in a "monotint" (*MD* 140), artificial flowers (always a signal of banality in a Fisk piece), and "fatiguingly familiar popular works of art" (141). The words "universal," "artificial," "popular" suggest the mass, manufactured nature of suburbia while "sodden" and "fatiguingly familiar" hint at Fisk's own disdain for such dwellings. These stage directions continue throughout the piece and act as a subtext where Fisk describes suburbia as a place of ignorance and imitation, clearly an derivative product of mass culture. The hostess is satirized because she is a *suburban* hostess, as the title suggests. She serves her guests "weak lemonade and tea" (157) and "diaphanous sandwiches" (157) that don't produce "particularly stimulating results" (157), possibly because she values appearance over substance or because she is trying to make the refreshments appear artistic rather than appetizing. She wears a "curious homemade 'art' gown of dull red" (142), implying that the woman's homespun

attempt at *haute couture* falls short of the mark; it is not stylish but merely curious and dull. In other lady satires, the *alazon*'s own speech condemns her, but in this piece Fisk enters the commentary by providing descriptions that are laced with her own derision. How these subtexts might inform her satiric monologues is outside the purview of this essay; but more to the point, these stage directions reveal Fisk's contempt for suburbia, a common attitude among urban satirists, particularly New Yorkers.<sup>19</sup>

The piece continues to portray suburbia as a place of sham erudition and culture. For the evening's entertainment, the hostess hired a "band of artistes" (*MD* 148) but warns her aunt not to seat them near Mrs. Lowden: "I don't know what she would do if she really came in contact with persons of that class" (148). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "artiste" refers to a "performing artist; a professional singer, dancer, etc.," and the speaker's comment suggests that amateur performers held a lower social status than middle or upper class people. The hostess has also hired "a girl to recite" (157), perhaps a dig at the non-professional elocutionist, one of Fisk's pet peeves. When the singer and pianist fail to show, the hostess asks a guest to play "Shopin, Shopinhauer, Menelssohn's Songs without Seeds, or Lohengrin Funeral March" (158), comments that reveal her musical ignorance. Not only are the composer's names misspelled and mispronounced, the title of their pieces are mixed up: it is Lohengrin's "Wedding March" and Mendelssohn's "Songs without Words." The party over, the hostess retires, leaving her aunt with the task of cleaning up. "A Suburban Hostess" portrays suburbia as a depository of mass production, a cultural wasteland presided over by pretentious women. Dorothy Parker's "Such a Pretty Little Picture" (1922) offers a similarly biting version of suburban conformity.

Fisk targets a sanctimonious do-gooder in the ironically titled “A Busy Woman” (1923). The woman declares, “I’m the last one to wish to gain by my own kind actions” (SS 235); and, “I cannot understand these hollow, shallow, heartless women who seem to have no thought but for their own enjoyment and comfort. . . . I can honestly say that I am never really happier than when I am suffering from what I consider right” (233). She believes that women were born “to suffer in silence” (241), but the moment she is asked to sacrifice her own comfort, she explodes. A fellow concertgoer politely asks her to remove her hat, but she refuses. The woman in the audience taunts her by saying she couldn’t take her hat off because she had “left most of her hair at home on the dressing table” (240). Not to be outdone, the speaker retorts, “Persons who came to music halls without their *real* husbands ought to stay at home and bring their manners instead” (240). In this piece, the *alazon* figure is deflated not only by her own incriminating speech but also by a second (imaginary) speaker. Fisk accomplishes this by echoing the respondent’s words, usually by means of a question. “What do you mean, I left my hair at home?” and so forth. The monologue ends with the woman announcing that she is going to become an “authoress” (250), and here Fisk is able to poke fun at amateur writers:

You know nowadays when there are so many openings to art, and women can go in them all, it is really every woman’s duty to take up something. . . . There really is nothing more refined than writing--and with Bella growing up--not to speak of all the money you could make--which, of course, I would give to charity. (251)

An easy target for the satirist, this charity worker turns out to be just as materialistic and opportunistic as the “heartless” women she pities. There is also a subtle critique of the

woman's conservatism embedded in the text: women may pursue a career *after* her children are grown and only *if* she works in the pre-sanctioned Arts and earns money for charity.

Published in the same book, "Shopping" features a typical *alazon* figure who dissects a variety of people. She can't stand Mrs. Little because she is "so everlastingly good-natured and never says a nasty thing about anybody—it's so unnatural. I'm sure she's a hypocrite" (SS 258). Her comments about servants smack of *noblesse oblige*: "They don't know what an easy time they have of it compared with what we have to put up with... You would think they would learn nice manners just by coming in contact with us and waiting on us—but it doesn't seem to have any effect on them" (263). She wonders aloud if men mean to be as exasperating as they are, or "if it's so natural to them they don't notice" (265). Making excuses about why she hasn't attended the lecture of a well-known speaker, she remarks, "I never have the least idea what she's talking about, but I thoroughly enjoy it, just the same. I often think it's that way about those way-up-in-the-air things—the less you understand them the more of an effect they seem to have on you" (269). The scene ends with the woman admiring a stylish hat and then arranges to have it sent home under the pretense of wanting her husband's approval. In actuality she wants to have her picture taken with it on—a photographer is coming by the house the next day—and she plans to return the hat afterwards. When her friend intimates that this action is dishonest, the lady replies, "Nothing of the kind—it's only clever, that's all" (278). The woman's condescending attitude is evidenced by her speech, but in making a mockery of this figure, Fisk deflates her elevated status.

It's not coincidental that the women in Fisk's lady satires bicker over seats at the theater, gossip about other women, obsess about their looks, overwork their servants, and, like Dorothy Parker's eponymous Mrs. Carrington and Mrs. Crane, criticize others for faults of which they themselves are guilty. They are braggarts, *alazon* figures whose incessant boasting causes their own undoing. Though they are materially wealthy, these women are spiritually and intellectually impoverished; their elevated status is a sham, their superiority, a pretense. The laughter is aimed *at* these women, rather than *with* them, not because they are women but because they are hypocritical or arrogant or socially indifferent. In so doing, Fisk demonstrates the democratizing effect of the age's new humor, one that seeks to take the upper echelon down a notch or two.

#### **Dialect Satires: The Eiron**

In contrast to the haughty *alazon* figure, the *eiron* is a self-deprecator of humble origin that often brings down the *alazon* through his plain speech, understatement, or wise sayings. Northrop Frye discusses how the *eiron* is used frequently in American folk humor, and he makes an important connection between the *eiron* and the "counsel-of-prudence genre" (227), which has its origin in Poor Richard's Almanac and the Sam Slick papers (227). Unique in that they fall into the American tall tale tradition, rely on a wise-fool persona, spin elaborate and preposterous narratives, and use dialect or colloquial speech for comic effect, Fisk's dialect satires employ humor conventions normally associated with nineteenth-century, male authors of the American southwest like A. B. Longstreet, T. B. Thorpe, George W. Harris, Mark Twain, and others. But Fisk adapts and revises these conventions to suit her art form and to appeal to a modern audience. Because she is working within the confines of a monologue, Fisk does not



have the necessary space to develop an elaborate tall tale, as Mark Twain does, for instance, in “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” Instead, her speaker describes preposterous events that have elements of folklore in them: a boy whose nose is kicked straight by an ox, a man with a paranormal wooden leg. And so the monologue takes on the magical elements of the tall tale without necessarily unfolding one. In this way, Fisk adapts an earlier comic tradition to suit her art form.

Fisk’s dialect satires take place either in the country or in the city, and her *iron* figure (always female) is either a country bumpkin type or an uneducated, working class urbanite. When the dialect speaker is an urbanite, the folklore elements drop off and Fisk uses citified speech as a way to indicate working class status and metropolitan culture. In these monologues, the dialect humor is located in the ungrammatical English, in mixed up colloquialisms, and in slang, not the highly developed vernacular language seen in Mark Twain or Finley Peter Dunne. While Twain and Dunne use vernacular English to indicate regionalism--backwoods Mississippi; Irish Catholic neighborhood in Chicago, respectively--Fisk uses dialect more broadly to suggest modernity, city culture, and youth, characteristics that become central to a modernist satirist like Dorothy Parker. But unlike earlier vernacular humorists like Fanny Fern and Marietta Holley, Fisk’s dialect monologues feature young, single, women (usually Irish) employed in the city. In contrast, Fern’s Aunt Hetty and Holley’s Samantha Allen are both older, married housewives who speak with authority because of their age and marital status. Fisk uses a single woman persona, whether a young store clerk or an older boardinghouse keeper, and so transfers the authority reserved for the male storyteller or the older, married

female speaker to the single, workingwoman, thereby giving voice to a previously marginalized population.

Typically the *eiron* in a Fisk monologue is a loquacious woman of the working class whose malapropisms and improper diction, while comedic, unmask her folksy wisdom. The laughter in these cases is in response to the verbal slippages or the preposterous scene and not at the woman herself. Often relying on zany visual cues or sight gags for comic effect, these dialect pieces were a favorite, both of William Dean Howells and Mark Twain. Howells frequently published a Fisk dialect monologue in his prized “Editor’s Drawer” section in *Harper’s*, and Mark Twain chose a dialect piece, “Mis’ Deborah Has a Visitor,” for inclusion in his 1906 *Library of Humor*.

Every Fisk book has at least one dialect monologue in it, and both the comic and the structural format is consistent: a woman of the working class talks in dialect about her work place; and, in the process makes jokes about patrons, twists around well known expressions, and relates folklore elements. The language and tone is markedly different from the lady or marriage satires. Because the speakers in these monologues lack the venom of the lady satires and because so much of the humor is supplied by exaggeration rather than by masked aggression or anger, the effect is playful rather than pointed. The humor in these pieces is genial where the reader or audience member is more likely to laugh *with* the speaker than *at* her. The speakers sound uneducated and uncouth but end up possessing understanding or insight, especially in regards to human nature. Whereas the lady satires make the women sound educated but look foolish, the dialect satires make the women sound uneducated but look wise. And just as there are servants and maids on the periphery of the action in the lady or marriage satires, there are women of the leisure

class, usually employees or customers, who are on the periphery of these dialect pieces, hinting at the intertwining class dynamics.

Fisk's earliest dialect monologue, "Mis' Deborah Has a Visitor" (1903), is a rambling narrative about the latest town gossip who starts her soliloquy off by describing a neighbor who likes to drink whiskey in the middle of the night even though he is "strictly temperance" (Fisk, "Mis'"156). She talks disapprovingly of people like Susie Tucker, who insists that her father buy two of the "best books in the shop" (157) to be displayed on the coffee table. The second book, *Afflicted Man's Companion*, Deborah describes as "dretful han'some and full o' high oppressive thought" (157). *Afflicted Man's Companion* is an historical text, a religious book published in 1744 and carrying the morbid subtitle, "A Collection of Comfortable Texts for Dying Believers." In calling the book "oppressive" rather than "impressive," the *iron* "accidentally" comments on the nature of religious literature: it appears to be impressive and full of high thoughts but is merely oppressive, good for little more than decorating a coffee table. While the *alazon* accidentally insults people, the *iron* accidentally speaks the uncomfortable truth.

Fisk repeats this pattern throughout the monologue: a character is described in a comic situation, then the speaker pronounces an aphorism that makes no sense in the situation but sets up the kicker at the end. Elements of folklore creep in. Deborah tells about a boy whose nose was bent in one direction after an ox had kicked him; but when he was kicked a second time by the same ox, his nose was made perfectly straight again. The speaker describes one hyperbolic scene after another without pausing, and so the humorous effect is cumulative. This repetitious formula--incongruity, surprise, wit, character, situation--would likely cause the ripple effect McLean discusses in his

description of vaudeville's "engineered, professional humor" (112). While the order of these conventions varies, evidence of incongruity, wit, surprise, character and situation can be found in all of Fisk's dialect satires.

Something that McLean does not address, however, is how the monologist incorporates visual comedy into her material. In her dialect monologues, Fisk often employs a sight gag, a funny visual object borrowed from stage comedy but that is supplied for the audience by the speaker's direct address alone. While there are several sight gags in this piece, the most dramatic one is a glass eyeball, which was a "dretful nice eye that could do everythin' but see" (Fisk, "Mis'"157). Even though the eye doesn't fit Miss Dimmick properly, she is determined to wear it anyway, showing it off at the next Sunday meeting. The surprise element follows: "Durin' the hymn she got singin' pretty hard, and sez I right then, 'Pride goeth before a fall.' Well, she must have bulged herself for, flip! Out it rolled onto the floor, and her little niece stepped on it and squashed it ter flinders" (157). Keeping the sight gag at the center of the action, Fisk then repeats the pattern of incongruity and surprise. Miss Dimmick gets a replacement, only this time it's the wrong color; the incongruity of one blue and one black eye, however predictable, is the stuff of lowbrow visual comedy. A second surprise follows. A few days later, Miss Dimmick is crying lustily at a christening when she begins to cry, and "[then] that eye swum right down her face and onto the floor" (138) where the family dog proceeds to swallow it. The situation in these two scenes is similarly ridiculous--a glass eye accidentally popping out--but Fisk uses two surprise endings to vary the humor.

The monologue ends with a description of Aunt 'Liza's funeral and how it was "sinful, her bein' all tricked out an' looked so gay at her own funeral" (159); and again,

the incongruity of looking happy at your own funeral supplies the humor. Then Fisk sets up a groaner: Deborah notes how the casket handles are real silver because the silversmith's name was printed right on it: "Sterling." It's no wonder that Mark Twain selected this monologue for inclusion in his collection of humor because it is filled with corny jokes, tall tales, dialect, and broad visual comedy, traits found in his own humorous writing.

Published in 1907, "The Sales Lady" is a dialect satire featuring a store clerk named Mamie, but instead of using backwoods English, Fisk writes the monologue in slangy, ungrammatical language. The action takes place in a department store where Mamie gossips with her coworkers, Tessie, Sadie, and Flossie, while trying to avoid waiting on customers. Mamie's speech reveals her social status and her young age. She has an "awful mash" (*TW* 74) on the attractive new manager and thinks him "dead swell" (74). Around the turn of the century, this usage of the word "mash" appears in the works of popular fiction writers like O. Henry and Lucy Maude Montgomery (*OED*), and humorists like P.G. Wodehouse and Hart Crane use the word "swell" in their own comic writing (*OED*). Fisk's use of these slang expressions, then, connotes a young speaker who perhaps likes to read popular fiction and mimic the latest verbal fashions. Mamie's flawed speech also reveals a lack of education: "Some of these women is terrible—they think you ain't got nothing to do but stand here and wait on 'em all day" (76). Fisk uses this ungrammatical dialect throughout the piece not to make fun of Mamie but to depict her social status as a working class woman.

There is an unusual sight gag in "A Sales Lady"--an inflatable girdle. Mamie shows a customer two numbers, "the Can't Tell an' The Never Suspect" (*TW* 79) and

says, “My sister—she’s thin like you, she ain’t got any figure neither” (80). This comment again reveals the girl’s poor education--“ain’t” and the double negative are grammatically incorrect--but the incidental insult (“she ain’t got no figure like you”) also reveals Mamie’s veiled antagonism towards her upper class customer. Here, the slight is used as a weapon to attack a wealthy woman of privilege. The laughter such an insult might evoke would serve to humiliate the upper class woman, thereby putting the working class woman on an equal footing, however temporarily. In this way, humor blurs social barriers. As for the inflatable girdles, the incongruity of blowing up an undergarment meant to reduce figures is funny enough, but the image itself is the stuff of lowbrow comedy.

“The Sales Lady” takes on added significance because according to a 1905 column in the Boston *Daily Globe*, Fisk wrote “The Saleslady” expressly for her January performance at the Boston Music Hall.<sup>20</sup> Renamed the Empire Theatre in February, 1906, the Boston Music Hall offered traditional vaudeville acts including comics, acrobats, jugglers, equestrienne acts, female impersonators like Stuart, “the Male Patti,” minstrels, and even Winschermann’s juggling bears and monkeys (“Plays and Players”). Irish acts were especially popular at the Boston Music Hall, as numerous *Daily Globe* articles from 1905 and 1906 indicate. Pat Rooney’s “Street Urchins” and the Irish comedian John T. Kelly are two examples of Irish acts that performed at the Boston Music hall within weeks of Fisk’s January performance (“Amusement”). Knowing she was going to perform for an audience comprised mostly of Irish people, Fisk gives her protagonist a nickname for Margaret, a traditionally popular name among Irish women, and makes her the conveyor of the satiric humor rather than the brunt of the joke. Fisk uses humor as a

leveling device to mitigate social disparities, and she does this before an audience comprised mostly of working and middle class patrons.

Not only does she valorize Mamie in the monologue, she also makes a temporary reversal that resists the extent social hierarchy. Mamie worries that her coworker is going to defect to the uppity ranks because she's been to the legitimate theater twice this month. As a mild rebuke, Mamie says, "First thing you know you'll be havin' Mrs. Astor givin' you facial massage" (*TW* 75). In this instance, a dramatic reversal supplies the humor because it was women of the working class, largely Irish immigrants, who were often employed as masseuses, and not the likes of Caroline Astor, the epitome of wealth and privilege at that time. (Mrs. Heeny, an Irish woman, is the masseuse in *The Custom of the Country*.) The image of Mrs. Astor giving an Irish sales clerk a facial would have evoked laughter not only because it is a preposterous scenario but also because it is a socially permissible release of hostility and aggression aimed at the leisure class. Further, the names of the other sales clerks, Tessie, Sadie, and Flossie, are nicknames for Teresa, Sarah, and Florence and also reflect a multiethnic background. Teresa is a common name for women of French or Italian origin, and Sadie is a popular Jewish nickname. A week prior to Fisk's performance, "Hebraic comedians" ("Plays and Players") performed at the Boston Music Hall, and Mary Madden, a "clever dialect storyteller" ("Amusement") followed a week later. Knowing she would be performing for a raucous multi-ethnic audience, Fisk cleverly peoples her monologue with working class women of Irish, Jewish, and, possibly, French or Italian origin but spares them the old vaudeville formula of ethnic slurs and degrading stereotypes. Instead, she elevates the Irish sales clerk and turns the satiric jest at women of privilege.

Published in the same collection of monologues, “The Boarding-House Keeper” also appeared in *Harper’s* “The Editor’s Drawer” and is accompanied by three drawings by American artist and illustrator Florence Scovell Shinn.<sup>21</sup> The speaker is a boarding-house manager who talks with a prospective client, divulging personal information about her tenants in the process. She speaks of Miss Mudd who is a “Hoodoo Scientist” (Fisk, “Boarding” 481), a new religion whose “chief aim is charity” (481). Only, Mudd isn’t very charitable when a flaw is pointed out to her: “When I told her her hair was getting thin in one spot, she said, no, it wasn’t—I only thought it was. That it was only matter anyway, and there really wasn’t any matter any way, so it didn’t matter any way you put it” (481). New Thought religion advocated physical healing through positive affirmations and visualization, and Fisk is likely mocking this type of belief system. The name “Mudd” may also carry Fisk’s own views on the religion’s lack of intellectual clarity. However, in describing Mudd as a “Hoodoo Scientist,” the speaker reveals her own ignorance and superstition. New Thought was influenced by Hinduism, which is possibly what the speaker means by “Hoodoo,” and it was also loosely affiliated with the Divine Science denomination, also called the Church of Divine Science. As a wise-fool figure, the speaker in this monologue appears to be too ignorant to know the facts about New Thought influences--Hinduism and Divine Science--and yet wise enough to see through the hypocrisy latent within a healing philosophy that flatly ignores physical evidence.

The boardinghouse keeper next discloses personal information about the rest of her lodgers. Mr. Hodge used to slip up the back “spinal staircase” (Fisk, “Boarding” 479) to avoid meeting his wife when he was getting his first divorce because she “used to come and sit on the front steps with a horsewhip” (480). The accompanying illustration



depicts an enormous, sour-faced, old woman waiting on the steps of the boarding house, a horsewhip in hand. The reversal and surprise supply the humor; readers might not expect a husband to be hiding from an abusive wife. Again, beneath the banter is a more serious subtext about spousal abuse; only this time, the wife is the perpetrator of the violence. The speaker then discusses Miss Doty who “teaches up to the Academy” (480) and likes to recite Shakespeare on Saturday evenings with Mr. Hodge: “You ought to see her when she lets down her back hair and puts on a kimona and plays Julia to Mr. Hodge’s Romero” (480). The inaccurate names (Julia instead of Juliet, Romero rather than Romeo) and the mispronunciation (kimona, rather than kimono) indicate her lack of education, but her comment also reveals how semi-public recitations of Shakespeare were still commonplace among the middle and working class at the turn of the century, and that these performances were part of publicly sanctioned flirting rituals. This short monologue has Fisk’s usual garbled phrases: “A stitch in time covers a multitude of sins” (479), and “A bird in the hand is worth a stork on the roof” (480). The humor is genial; even though the speaker might be a gossip, her divulgence is innocent rather than vindictive, and the humor is deflected off of her and on to the ironic commentary behind her inarticulate speech.

One of Fisk’s shortest monologues adopts similar tactics. “The Country Post Office” (1911) opens with a woman proprietor complaining about city lodgers. Her monologue is a running speech about the people who come in and out of the store. Illness and new advances in medicine like the X-ray and chiropractic medicine, which she calls “newfangled boneless surgery” (*EF* 83), are the next topics of conversation. A string of corny jokes follows, like this one about a new X-Ray machine: “She said you

ain't any idea how undressed you look in your bones" (90). The postmistress talks to a customer about a child's near drowning: "Bijah got too near the edge, an' fell in an' would never have gotten over the drowndin' if it hadn't been for the artificial perspiration they worked on him... Oh yes, it sp'iled the day for 'em—'specially after they found they had laid him too near the lunch-basket, an' the victuals was all water-soaked" (92).

Artificial "perspiration" rather than respiration supplies the wit while the surprise element is conveyed in the family's response: their day was spoiled not because the boy was nearly drowned but because their lunch had gotten soaked in the process.

Fisk also sets up the familiar country/city binary. The postmistress talks at length about the city vacationers who complain about her uninspiring choices in candy and who unfairly demand "somethin' I ain't got or never hearn tell on!" (EF 93). She in turn criticizes their new house: "Them built their front porch in the back o' the house just 'cause they had a view! Can you beat that? Think o' havin' nothin' better to do than stan' 'round an' look at scen'ry" (94). She calls their expensive white iron bathtub a "sinful waste o' good money" (94) and "just reckless show" (94). As an *iron* figure, the postmistress's seemingly foolish prattle reveals some important insights into how different social classes view rural spaces. The poorer country dwellers work on the land for survival and foster no romantic illusions about it (rivers can drown young children), while city dwellers have the leisure to sit and enjoy the scenery. Further, wealthy urbanites use their country houses as indices of status. Ordinary items like bathtubs are not necessities but are decorative items used to display conspicuous wealth.

The monologue includes folklore elements such as Jo Smedley's new wooden leg. Every time his wife "wanted Jo to mind the baby or go on a errand, that there leg of his'n

would rare right up an' run off with him in 'tother direction" (*EF* 102). This new leg went twice as fast as the other: "In fact, he had to run most o' the time to keep up with it!" (102). Ironically, this supernatural power only kicks in when Jo is requested to work or to carry out his paternal duties, a sly commentary on male delinquency, or petticoat tyranny, depending on the perspective.

The postmistress next reveals how a wronged wife exacts justice. When Mary Jane Crocker learns that her new husband is actually married to someone else, she decides to "sue him for bigotry" (*EF* 103), meaning bigamy. But rather than file for divorce immediately, as is her legal right, Mary Jane opts to keep her husband in prison for the winter as a form of punishment. This will give her time to sew, read, sleep, and play cards with her friends, she announces. The familiar pattern of wordplay (bigotry rather than bigamy) followed by surprise (she will spend the winter enjoyably rather than miserably) is evident, but the text also highlights the woman's coolness in exacting revenge over a wayward husband, something that would have resonated with Fisk's female readers. The story ends as it begins, with the postmistress complaining about city dwellers: "Landy Goshen! Here comes a whole troop o' them city boarders" (105). While her ungrammatical dialect reveals her lack of education and lower social class, her speech nonetheless reveals that rural folks do not foster romantic illusions about nature, marriage, or familial obligations. As a wise-fool figure, her speech appears to be silly and easily dismissed, but in actuality, her speech reveals serious social commentary and true enough insights into human nature.

One of Fisk's most inventive dialect monologues, "At the Beauty Parlors" [*sic*], features a manicurist in the city named Ada whose gossip about clients provides a

microcosm of class bifurcation at the turn of the century. In keeping with Fisk's Anglo Saxon hierarchy, Ada's co-workers are named Miss Finnegan, Miss Malloy, Ella, and Maggie, all Irish names. While attending to a customer, Ada gossips about recent clients including a leading lady in a burlesque show, a wealthy man from the Midwest, a light skinned black woman, and an author. Loquacious to a fault, Ada complains about a client: "they all say the same thing—have to catch a train, or meet their husbands, or got an engagement at the dressmaker's, or see a lady at lunch. . . . It don't make no difference to us girls—we have to do our work just the same" (EF 5). The joke is that her clients, in trying to be polite, make excuses in order to extract themselves from the talkative Ada, only she doesn't realize it. Yet the comment also reveals a worker's hostility toward the moneyed class. Ada then describes a wealthy man from Denver who had come in earlier for a manicure: "You ought to have seen his diamonds—a great big one on each pinky, and a great big one in his collar-button. [. . .] and the handsomest scarf-pin you ever saw—a galloping horse with a ruby tail and standing on a whip—all of diamonds" (7). In the next breath she talks about being sick and tired of "slaving" and the "everlasting scrimp for clothes" (9). Fisk juxtaposes Ada's overworked and underpaid economic condition with the wealthy man's ruby and diamond tiepin, a symbol of decadence and frivolity; and the careful positioning of these two images magnifies the contrast between the wealthy and working classes.

As an *ieron*, Ada makes comic yet incisive comments about people, usually by means of a well-placed joke. About a church social she says, "It does seem queer to have a minister talk where folks expect to enjoy themselves, don't it?" (EF 14). Comments like the following reveal an absurdist humor: "I'd rather be a coward and stay half sick all

the time than be dead for the rest of my life” (15). Later she remarks, “I really think the parents who don’t have any children are happier in the end” (21). When the author of “Sought and Unsought--Nature’s Wonders” enters the shop, Ada remarks: “I guess that’s the way with the best books--they make them so you can’t find out what they’re talking about too easy” (17). Appearing uneducated, Ada nonetheless voices a legitimate complaint: that metaphysical or philosophical texts are often needlessly abstruse. Always fond of taking a swipe at the amateur author, Fisk supplies the incidental insult, aimed at the writer: “She doesn’t look queer does she?” Ada asks. “Just like anyone else for all you could tell” (16).

Ada gossips about other clients as they come and go through the shop. When a large blonde woman enters, she informs her client that she is a leading lady from the burlesque who makes “an awful big salary” (*EF* 10). A favorite client of the girls in the beauty shop, the burlesque star once gave Ada free tickets to a show as well as a backstage pass. Ada found the backstage experience disappointing but her boyfriend enjoyed the “brazen hussies in short clothes”(12) whom he could see close up. Ordinarily a person shunned by middle or upper class people, this burlesque star earns enough money, however, to be admitted into the beauty salon with its upper class clientele. When another woman passes nearby, Ada shouts: “Quick! See that black lady going out? . . . We skinner [sic] her last month--doesn’t she look white?” (19). The word “skinner” may be a typographical error for “skinned,” which is an obsolete American slang expression meaning “To inject (a drug) subcutaneously, as opposed to intravenously” (*OED*) and may refer to the practice of whitening the skin through some type of injection. Based on the context, it refers to some cosmetic practice of skin whitening. Beauty shops were

typically racially segregated when this monologue was published, yet an African American woman patronizes the shop because she is wealthy and, likely, because she is passing as a white woman. It's interesting to note that according to this depiction, a light-skinned black woman was not prohibited from using a white salon because of her extreme wealth. Ada adds, "She's got lots of money, and she's going to marry a young man who is in the same class with their son at college. Terrible, ain't it?" (19). Like the burlesque star, this African American woman is admitted to the beauty parlor because she is wealthy.

Throughout the monologue, co-workers try to send customers to the overworked Ada, but she insists on taking her rightly earned lunch break: "They think just because a girl works for her living she hasn't got any rights" (*EF* 18). Fisk relies on the incidental insult to end the monologue. Ada tries to sell her customer an anti-aging product (an insult) then gasps, "Well, what do you think of that, Ella—slaving like a dog for the last half-hour and not a darn tip!" (22). "At the Beauty Parlors" serves as a microcosm of society where women and men of the leisure class have the time and resources to spend money on luxury services while women of the working class barely earn enough money to survive. This monologue reveals how in some public spaces, money can obliterate race, class, and gender lines: a man also uses the salon services. Through Ada and other *iron* figures, Fisk is able to make comments about social class in urban American society. Their speech supplies the humor for the monologues, yet their double-edged comments also unmask the arbitrary and artificial nature of class hierarchy.

Because comedy is a social act, and because the audience influences the way a comic crafts her humor, recognizing what type of audience Fisk played to becomes

tantamount to understanding the implications of her satire, particularly in regards to social class. Pinpointing the demographics of a typical vaudeville audience is risky business. Among scholars there seems to be no consensus about who might have attended a vaudeville performance; and, of course, each circuit attracted its own audiences. As for seating, the arrangements were similar regardless of the demographics. Working class people would sit in the gallery because the tickets were less expensive while those of the middle class sat below in the more costly orchestra or boxed seats. Despite anti-segregation laws, most audiences in this time period were racially segregated. Theaters in the northeast, for instance, usually seated African Americans in the back seats of the gallery or required them to buy tickets at a separate window and use a separate staircase (Kibler 34-36). Aside from these few constants, it is difficult to reconstruct the demographics of a vaudeville audience because each theatre was unique, attracting its own clientele, and that could change week-to-week depending on popular demand.

Despite these variables, we do know some details about specific houses, especially those owned by powerful producers like B. F. Keith and F. F. Proctor. Several newspaper advertisements and announcements indicate that May Isabel Fisk performed in theatres owned by F. F. Proctor, so it is worthwhile to consider what type of clientele might have visited a Proctor theatre. While Tony Pastor is credited with taking variety “out of the red light district” (McLean 31), Proctor is the producer who made his fortune associating propriety and high class entertainment with his vaudeville houses, and he did this in part by aggressively marketing his entertainment to upwardly mobile women. A handbill from 1894 advertises that Proctor’s Theater offers “only first class artists” and “Refined Entertainment” suitable for “Ladies and Children” (Marston 98-99). At

Proctor's Sunday concerts, special souvenirs were given to women who attended any matinee (Marston 75). Another Proctor handbill, depicting smiling women wearing elaborate dresses and posh hats, advertises special Sunday productions at Proctor's Ladies Club Theater on 23rd Street. This venue became known as "Proctor's Ladies Club Theater" on Sundays, and Fisk was listed as a "principal attraction" at a 1904 Sunday performance in this theater ("Sunday Concerts"). It's easy to see how Fisk would have appealed to Proctor. Not only was she a well-known author, but with her high society connections and her satiric monologues about rich women, Fisk also lent an air of refinement to his vaudeville stage. A savvy businessman, Proctor knew how to target the female consumer; he attached an aura of propriety and refinement to his sumptuous theaters even as he situated his houses in the heart of New York's shopping district. His theatres, then, targeted both working class women, who could afford the inexpensive entertainment, and the upwardly mobile, who might enjoy being seen in one of his upscale New York theatres.

Despite Proctor's efforts to draw in middle and upper middle class patrons, many first hand accounts by performers indicate that the majority of vaudeville audiences were comprised of working class patrons. In his brief, 1924 memoir *Twenty Years on Broadway*, Cohan recalls passing out handbills to factory workers while he and his family were between performances for Keith's theaters in New York. Audience members often read newspapers during the opening act because nobody paid much attention to first few acts, anyway (Cohan 14). Cursed with once having to open a show at the Union Square Theater, Cohan describes how a fight broke out in the gallery and that even though he continued with his performance, the audience was more interested in the fisticuffs than



they were in his song and dance routine (68-69). Never a favorite with critics, Cohan's work was often panned, and the writers would usually compare him unfavorably to more legitimate forms of entertainment, suggesting the lowbrow nature of vaudeville entertainment. One critic called him a "swaggering, impudent, noisy vaudevillian, entirely out of place in first-class theaters" (qtd. in Cohan 199). These first hand accounts, and others like them, indicate that there was a clear line of demarcation between vaudeville entertainers and those who worked in so-called first class or legitimate theaters, just as there was a clear distinction between those who sat in the gallery and those in the orchestra, or the box seats.

Historians like Andrew L. Erdman have also shown that the vaudeville audience was mostly comprised of people from the working class. While his recent study, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915*, focuses on the type of risqué theatres Fisk would not have played to, it nonetheless illustrates that vaudeville did not cater to upper class clientele. Erdman's book offers a counter narrative to the popularly held idea that vaudeville acts were "family friendly" variety shows free from sexual innuendo or blue material. Arguing that vaudeville's most popular stars were women whose acts involved disrobing on stage or appearing in skits that allowed them to appear in various stages of undress, Erdman states that while Keith, Proctor, Albee and other vaudeville producers advertised clean and refined entertainment, in actuality they made their fortunes with acts "whose main appeal was sexual titillation" (3). While producers posted signs backstage that prohibited swearing, and while their promotional materials promised acts appropriate for women and children, vaudeville acts were filled with sexual suggestiveness and the eroticized female body. Erdman writes:

By repeatedly advertising a “clean” product, the vaudeville owners were preparing the first national market for an entertainment product; their repeated efforts to paint vaudeville in the pure white hues of cleanliness may be viewed as in fact efforts to allay or mitigate anxieties in the minds of prospective theatergoers over the mass-ness that was a chief characteristic of the form. (7)

So while advertisements used sanitized rhetoric to lure in women to boost sales, in reality the most popular vaudeville acts pandered to an audience that was predominantly men from the working class, particularly when someone like Eva Tanguay was performing. Statistical data support this assumption. A 1911 survey conducted in New York City found that about 60% were from the working class, 36% from the “clerical” class, and 4% of the “vagrant, gamin, or leisured” class (Erdman 15). So it seems likely that the audiences Fisk performed for were predominantly people from the working and professional classes.

In his book *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine discusses how the American theater audience of the nineteenth century was a far more participatory, raucous, and homogenous lot comparable to fans at a major sporting event today (26). But by the turn of the century, American audiences were being tamed by new and rigorously enforced rules of propriety, the result being not only that audiences grew both mute and passive, but also that a relatively clear line of demarcation between highbrow and lowbrow culture emerged. Vaudeville mirrored this divide with some houses like Proctor’s designed specifically to “ape the physical trappings of high culture” (McLean 197). Proctor’s vaudeville, with its palatial theaters, helped to facilitate the display of wealth as outward signifiers of social

class. Patrons might not be born into an elite social class, but they could pretend to be making progress in that direction by simply sitting in a Proctor theatre, watching supposedly highbrow entertainment from Europe.

Fisk's monologues both reflect and resist this emerging class divide. She mirrors the high-low contrast by using different languages to connote different social class; but at the same time, Fisk resists this bifurcation by using humor as a leveling device. In her lady monologues, the laughter is aimed *at* the haughty and hypocritical speaker in order to take her down a peg or two. In her dialect satires, audiences laugh *with* the speaker as the preposterous scene unfolds, but they laugh *at* the wealthy persons on the periphery of the action, which temporarily puts the speaker on an equal footing. This formula naturally would appeal to a vaudeville audience, factory workers and shop clerks who might enjoy laughing at the machinations of upper class society so as to soften the reality of their own pinched existence. And, they would enjoy the familiar dialect, whether backwoods jargon or citified slang, especially when the speech humiliates an arrogant member of the leisure class, or a snobbish employer or client. Whether genial or pointed, the majority of Fisk's satiric monologues gives voice to woman's muted anger towards gender and class inequality; the unequal balance of power in the traditional, patriarchal marriage or the imbalance of privilege based on economic status.

For most Americans at the turn of the century, class was no longer based on ancestry or land ownership or cultural heritage; class status was now something you could simply purchase if you had enough money, an idea that Edith Wharton roundly satirizes in *The Custom of the Country*. Subsequently a person's place in society was tied to how much wealth he or she could display via conspicuous items such as clothing,

apartments, associates, and placement in the theater. Taken together, Fisk's lady and dialect satires mirror this display culture even while they temporarily destabilize the high-low social distinction. While her lady satires critique wealth and privilege, her dialect satires celebrate working class women without being patronizing. Even though she wrote relatively few monologues in vernacular English--it would be misleading to say that Fisk is a dialect humorist--Fisk nonetheless shows off her verbal dexterity by writing in both backwoods speech and in citified, slangy jargon. Her working class women may appear to be hicks or low-level employees, but they get the best of their employers and make sure the joke is on members of the leisure class or city folk and not on themselves.

Theorists have often discussed humor's ability to resist or to conserve social hierarchies--that minstrelsy was still wildly popular at the time reflects a conservation of the racist social order—and it might be said that Fisk's monologues blurs a high-low social structure while also resisting a male dominated order that limits women's speech. Lawrence Levine sees something similar at work in the comedy of Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers, all former vaudeville or variety stars, when he writes that in their parodies of high society, these comedians “generated a sense of complicity in their common stand against the pretensions of the patrons of high culture” (235). In performing her monologues for middle and working class folk, Fisk takes this same stand against the patrons of high culture, and invites her audiences to do the same.

Although associated with the famed New York 400, and although her name appeared in society columns in New York and in London, Fisk was, at least for a time, a comic monologist who performed on the vaudeville stage alongside a host of unusual and lowbrow entertainers. Whether performed on stage in New York or Boston, her

monologues drew attention to class disparity by juxtaposing the pretensions of the leisure class alongside the hardships of the working class. As a humorist, Fisk displayed considerable versatility, using dialect and the tall tale in some monologues, tactics normally associated with an earlier frontier humor, while using tightly controlled irony and biting wit in others, anticipating the modernist satire of Dorothy Parker, and later urban writers. Fisk revises an ancient satiric tradition, brought up to speed for a modern audience. Hers is a liberating humor in a time when women weren't supposed to be funny. As one critic said of vaudeville comedienne Lillian Shaw, "She is one of those marvels Heaven seldom sends us--a truly funny woman" (qtd. in Kibler 60). Whether Fisk came to the American stage by divine intervention or through the machinations of her booking agent in Manhattan, it remains that May Isabel Fisk creatively and successfully explored the art of the comic monologue.

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<sup>9</sup> *The Repentant Magdalene and other Stories* (1900), *Monologues* (1903), *The Talking Woman* (1907), *The Stolen Throne* (1907), *The Eternal Feminine* (1911), *Monologues and Duologues* (1914), *The Silent Sex* (1923), *Little Comedies of Married Life* (1926). This last title is a reprint of *The Eternal Feminine* under a different name. Another collection of monologues, *With Powder Puff and Dagger*, was published in England in 1909 but has been impossible to access. No copy exists in the United States, and the only library that holds a copy (National Library of Scotland) will not permit lending outside the country.

<sup>10</sup> To date, I have been able to determine that the following Fisk monologues were published under French's Monologue Series: (#57) An English Lady Marketing, (#58) Dressing for the Play, (59) The Village Dressmaker, (60) Mrs. Meekey Explains the 'Higher Thought', (61) His Hour (62) Making Money, (63), The Seaside Gossip, (72) Her Night Thoughts, (73) The Journey, (74) Keeping a Seat at the Benefit, (75) A Busy Woman, (77) At the Registry.

<sup>11</sup> In *The Talking Woman*, for example, maids are named Mary, Marie, Bridget, and Katy while their employers have Anglo names like Edward, Archie, Mabel, Ethel with surnames like Graham and Thorne.

<sup>12</sup> A character named Sadie, a popular Jewish nickname, appears in "The Sales Lady" but has no speaking lines. There are no derogatory comments made about her, and she is not the target of the humor; she is merely another sales clerk who works alongside the main speaker, Mamie. At the time when Fisk was writing, Jewish people were considered a

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race, but there appears to be no anti-Semitism in her writing, unlike her contemporary, Edith Wharton, whose anti-Semitism is explicit in her satiric fiction.

<sup>13</sup> Andy Rice, Rube Dickinson, Tom Lewis, James J. Morton, George Fuller Golden, James Thornton, Lew Dockstader, Fred Niblo, Doc Rockwell.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor's light comic verse, "The New Woman," uses humor to advance a suffragist platform. After the speaker wryly lists a woman's abilities and accomplishments--a superior erudition, an understanding of international and national affairs, a head for finance, a talent in writing, a fine public speaker, and not a bad cook, either--she concludes with a suffragist appeal: "In truth, from bondage woman's free--/Still one thing more she claims, sirs;/ Her right to vote--and you must see/ 'T will be our nation's gain, sirs!" (18)

<sup>15</sup> "The Pelican," "Xingu," and "The Mission of Jane" satirize the New Woman in several incarnations: public lecturer, clubwoman, and settlement home worker. In these pieces, Wharton's critique is aimed squarely at the women for their participation in the public and intellectual domain.

<sup>16</sup> This percentage does not hold true for vaudeville audiences, however.

<sup>17</sup> The term "400" was coined by American social leader Ward McAllister in reference to the 400 people he felt merited being part of high society in the early decades of the twentieth-century.

<sup>18</sup> In deliberately labeling them lady satires, I place these monologues as part of a long-standing tradition of lady satires, dating at least as far back as John Gay and Alexander Pope, where a wealthy society woman incriminates herself with her own speech.

<sup>19</sup> Fisk's stage directions typically run only a line or two; but in some cases, these extend to several pages. "At the Beauty Parlor," for instance, has two full pages of description before the monologue begins. Sometimes the notes are neutral and brief, and sometimes they are very sarcastic. No doubt provided to help reader or performer better imagine the scene, these stage directions nonetheless act as subtexts, revealing Fisk's own prejudices and preferences.

<sup>20</sup> That night Fisk also performed "The Summer Resort Gossip," a monologue mocking a Boston intellectual named Henrietta who, discontented with the world's religions invents a "new cult of her own" (*Talking Woman* 128). The speaker adds, "Henrietta tried to explain the clogging effect meat had on the vibrations of the spirit" (128) but to no avail. Newspaper announcements from the same week list many Spiritualist meetings in and around Boston, so Fisk may be satirizing Spiritualism in her monologue because it had an especially large following in Boston and used words like "vibrations" in its theology. It's also possible that Fisk is lampooning the New Thought movement, which also had a large following in Boston, was lead predominantly by women, and used similar terminology. "The Boarding House Keeper" also satirizes the New Thought movement.

<sup>21</sup> This juxtaposition has its own irony for Shinn was a well-known New Thought advocate, and "A Boarding House Keeper" directly satirizes New Thought theology. This does not seem to be an intentional joke by Howells but merely an irony, as Shinn came to the New Thought movement later in life, publishing her book advocating its beliefs in 1925, nearly twenty years after this monologue was published.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**POLYPHONY AND THE SATIRIC GROTESQUE**  
**IN DOROTHY PARKER'S FICTION**

Dorothy Parker was an agonizingly slow writer. Even though she was a prolific book and theatre critic, writing more than forty-five columns and reviewing more than two-hundred books for *Esquire* alone, she found writing fiction “a torturous process” and was “obsessively careful, a perfectionist” when it came to crafting a short story (Meade 100). It is no wonder that she missed deadlines, stalled editors, exasperated publishers, and generally worked at a rate of about a couple stories per year. And that was during her most productive days. A deliberate wordsmith, Parker admitted that it took “six months to do a story. I think it out and then write it sentence by sentence--no first draft. I can't write five words but that I change seven” (Capron 79). In 1930, Viking Press gave her a generous advance towards her first novel, which they hoped to have later that year, but Parker never produced a manuscript. She traveled to Paris intending to write, but after several months made no progress. She sent telegrams to her editors with the usual excuses, relying on jokes to hide her laxity saying that while she certainly *intended* to write a novel, she was “quite incapable of it--I'm a short-distance writer” (qtd. in Meade 210). No evidence of a novel ever appeared; Parker did not pay back the advance.

Compared to an inexhaustible writer like Edith Wharton, Parker's single-volume collection of short stories seems slight. But while her fictional output was small, Dorothy Parker is nonetheless remarkable for the way in which she expands the aesthetic limits of satire, not only in her subject matter but also in her writing style. Parker captures the alienation of postwar urban society in her sardonic satires while touching on taboo topics

like abortion (“Mr. Durant,” “Lady with a Lamp”), lesbianism (“Glory in the Daytime”), and domestic abuse (“Big Blonde”). Her female characters--gentlemen’s escorts, disgruntled divorcées, suicidal alcoholics--are a far remove from the harried housewife that populated American women’s literary humor in the nineteenth-century, like Marietta Holley’s Samantha Allen or Fanny Fern’s Aunt Hetty. Parker is writing during the days of the New Woman, the era of the college coed and the flapper, the businesswoman and the consumer housewife. According to women’s historian Nancy Woloch, the 1920’s were a time of upheaval and change as women pursued personal and political equality. In the political arena, post-suffrage feminists accomplished social changes such as making contraception widely accessible, working to lessen the wage gap between male and female earners, campaigning for improved educational opportunities for women, and supporting a more open attitude towards sexuality than their Victorian predecessors. On the personal level, women were concerned with a quest for individual freedom, which Woloch describes as “diffuse, unorganized, and often non-ideological . . . the province of the young” (389). Dorothy Parker’s satiric stories focus more on women’s personal rather than political equality, which is why so much of her work is focused on a woman’s interiority.

For most of Parker’s women, feminine identity is largely constructed in relation to the world around her, urban and hostile, and not necessarily to domesticity. Telephones, taxis, and bars are central metaphors in Parker’s fiction--not the home--and most of her female protagonists are unmarried or divorced; few are mothers. At a time when even college educated women in the United States were marrying at a rate of more than eighty percent (Woloch 417) and when marriage and the nuclear family were, for many women,



still a primary goal, Parker satirizes domesticity and ridicules the suburban housewife. In one of her earliest stories, "Such a Pretty Little Picture" (1922), Parker portrays suburbia as a place of stifling conformity. Adelaide Wheelock is an irreproachable wife and mother who oversees her household with a militant domesticity. She keeps a spotless house, arranges her family's clothes in neat piles, and re-sews the buttons on her husband's news shirts so that they don't pop off prematurely. Meals are always on time. The house is always perfectly ordered because Mrs. Wheelock is "a sterling woman, an utterly faithful wife, an almost slavish mother" (9). Their well-mannered, obedient daughter, Sister, completes the picture. Parker does not supply the child's name in order to reinforce the idea of suburbia as a place of conformity, of fixed roles. As the Wheelock family sits on their spotless porch one evening, neighbors walk past and comment, "Such a pretty little picture!" (12), hence the title. But what the neighbors do not see is that beneath this pleasant façade, Mr. Wheelock is inwardly hysterical. He fantasizes about deserting his family or committing suicide or having an extra marital affair in order to escape the monotony of his life. Parker never resolves this conflict between exterior appearance and interior reality. She leaves the reader with the bitter irony of the neighbors' comment.<sup>22</sup>

### **Polyphonic Monologues**

This tension between exterior appearance and interior reality is the subject of many Parker stories; and when these pieces involve women, they often express the woman's anxiety over public and private speech. What a person may be socially permitted to say and what she actually wants to say is often vastly different, and the contrast between the two provides an incongruous framework that Parker recognized as

being inherently humorous. In his essay on humor and incongruity, William O. Beeman writes:

Basic incongruity theory as an explanation of humor can be described in linguistic terms as follows: A communicative actor presents a message or other content material and contextualizes it within a cognitive "frame." The actor constructs the frame through narration, visual representation, or enactment. He or she then suddenly pulls this frame aside, revealing one or more additional cognitive frames which audience members are shown as possible contextualizations or reframings of the original content material. The tension between the original framing and the sudden reframing results in an emotional release recognizable as the enjoyment response we see as smiles, amusement, and laughter. (3)

In Freeman's explanation, it is the sudden shift of narrative frames that supplies the humor, and, subsequently, the laughter or release of tension. In her polyphonic monologues, Dorothy Parker uses this formula by shifting the narrative frames back and forth from a public voice to a private voice, or from a polite, accommodating voice to a ferociously angry voice. These monologues depict a woman outwardly behaving according to propriety; but at the same time, they also reveal her angry rebellion against propriety. Regina Barreca writes that much of Parker's writing ridicules the ideal and reveals the gap between "the vision of a woman's life as put forth by the social script and the way real women lived real lives" (xii). This departure from the social script is a trademark of Parker's satiric wit.

Parker's polyphonic monologues are, indeed, monologues--the singular, discrete expression of a woman's interiority--but Parker interjects other voices into this interior

speech, making it polyphonic. Sometimes the woman imagines or recounts what others have said, and this supplies the various voices; but more often, the other voice is the woman's own uncontrollable anger, which slips out. The difference between these two types of speech forms a natural incongruity, hence the humor; but at the same time, the incongruity draws attention to the sexual double standard at work, where a woman's anger needs to be cloaked in a humorous (i.e. pleasing) framework in order to get a hearing. In this case, polyphony is a subversive tactic that manages to please readers while conveying a rebellious subtext that is clearly an angry protest. A woman may be outwardly accommodating to her male dance partner, as she is in "The Waltz," but inwardly, she is seething over having to play this degrading role, wishing instead to murder her partner rather than to placate his desires. What is potentially subversive about Parker's polyphonic monologues is that she gives a public hearing to the woman's private anger--"The Waltz" was published in *The New Yorker*--bringing out into the open what has previously been hidden or contained. As Emily Toth describes it, Dorothy Parker "emancipated women from the need to be nice, to hide their anger. . . . In fact, she paved the way for a new openness in humor" (95).

This tension between interiority and exteriority is central to one of her earliest polyphonic monologues, "A Telephone Call" (1928), where a woman talks to herself while she waits for her lover to telephone. The monologue alternates between the woman's proper, controlled voice and her angry, uninhibited voice. The monologue opens with desperate, even infantile language: "Only let him telephone now. Please, God. Please, please, please. . . . I will try to be better, I will, if you will let me see him again. If you will let him telephone me. Oh, let him telephone me now" (81-82). When her pleas

go unanswered, a different voice (still her own) responds with threats and insults. Her hostility is leveled first at the telephone and then at her negligent lover. "Couldn't you ring? . . . You damned, ugly, shiny thing. . . Damn you, I'll pull your filthy roots out of the wall, I'll smash your smug black face in little bits. Damn you to hell" (82). Unlike the supplicant voice, which pleads with her absentee boyfriend, this second voice curses, insults, and threatens the man. In using this aggressive rhetoric, the author claims the right to prohibited speech, to liberate herself from feminine accommodation and passivity. Violence, anger, hostility or the rhetoric that embraces these impulses are certainly not the exclusive rights of men; but for whatever reason, this type of diction has, in American culture, historically been coded male.

As soon as the woman's aggression surfaces, however, the apologetic voice quickly silences it: "No, no no. I must stop. I must think about something else. . . . I'll be sweet to him, if he calls me. I'll be the way I was when I first met him. Then maybe he'll like me again. I was always sweet, at first. Oh, It's so easy to be sweet to people before you love them" (82). These two voices, aggressive and apologetic, go back and forth in a verbal tug of war. When one voice lashes out, the other silences it. In the longest section of the story where the belligerent voice speaks, the focus is on the stifling of the female voice:

They don't like you to tell them you're unhappy because of them. If you do, they think you're possessive and exacting. And then they hate you. They hate you whenever you say anything you really think. You always have to keep playing little games. Oh, I thought we didn't have to; I thought this was so big I could say

whatever I meant. I guess you can't ever. I guess there isn't ever anything big enough for that. (83)

The woman is angry because she is not permitted to verbalize what she honestly thinks: to do so would signal the end of their romantic relationship. After this final outburst, the ameliorative voice takes over for the rest of the story, counting by fives as she waits for the phone to ring. The apologetic voice has won the battle, suggesting that if the woman wants to retain a relationship with this man, or with any man, she will have to sublimate her own desires and thoughts. The monologue is framed by the apologetic voice just as the woman is hemmed in by her own willingness to subordinate herself. Nevertheless, Parker has publicly articulated a woman's volcanic rage, her (temporary) refusal to be contained, and gives this voice prominence in the monologue.

Writing was not a hobby for Dorothy Parker; she was not part of the leisure class, and she did not rely on a husband to support her financially. Because she had to earn her living like any other working woman, she would naturally have to be sensitive to restrictions placed on her by editors. Early in her career, in 1920, she was dismissed from *Vanity Fair* for writing too many harsh theatre reviews, so she knew there were limitations on how brutally honest she could be in print.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, if she were to voice the hostility and rage a woman might feel after a lifetime of being suppressed or objectified, she would likely not find a market for her writing. But if she were to mask that rage in humorous discourse, then she would not risk offending readers. Men would not feel threatened by a violent outburst of anger because it is presented in a humorous framework, a source of laughter and not of rebellion. At the same time, women might celebrate the angry discourse because even though it is presented in a humorous

framework, the woman's hidden fury is disclosed. This masked hostility is found throughout much of Parker's writing; and in fact, an entire book has been devoted to the topic. In *Dorothy Parker and the Rhetoric of Rage* (2003), Sondra Melzer argues that this angry rhetoric is not only symptomatic of Parker's own, personal unhappiness but of "the hidden discontent and buried conflicts in women's lives" (3). Parker's angry women are emblematic of a larger social problem: how do women publicly express the frustration they feel over sexual, emotional, or literary containment without immediately shutting out their audience? As Parker discovered, humor provides an ideal framework within which to express this rage.

A woman's indignation is what drives the narrative in "The Waltz" (1933), a polyphonic monologue that describes a young man and an older woman who waltz together at a public dance. The narrative is told in two distinct voices, the woman's public voice and her interior voice, which Parker differentiates by using italic type for the public voice and regular type for the private. The woman's public voice is polite and acquiescing: "Why, thank you so much. I'd adore to. . . . Oh, no, no, no. Goodness, no. It didn't hurt the least little bit. And anyway, it was my fault. Really it was. Truly. Well, you're just being sweet, to say that. It really was all my fault" (209). She consents to dance when she doesn't want to, takes the blame for her partner's clumsiness, and agrees with his dull observations. "Yes, it's lovely, isn't it? It's simply lovely. It's the loveliest waltz. Isn't it? Oh, I think it's lovely, too. . . . Tired? I should say I'm not tired. I'd like to go on like this forever" (211). In contrast, the private voice is sarcastic, hateful, and violent: "I'd love to waltz with you. I'd love to have my tonsils out, I'd love to be in a midnight fire at sea" (210). Violence and insults dominate the interior speech. She calls

her partner cannonball, Butch, a hulking peasant, Double-Time Charlie, Mrs. O'Leary's cow, and Swifty. While she's dancing with her partner, she thinks: "I wonder what I'd better do—kill him this instant with my naked hands" (210). The waltz is compared to a "danse macabre" (212); the woman would rather be in "a cement mixer in full action" (212) than on the dance floor with this man. She complains that the exertion has caused her to look like "something out of 'The Fall of the House of Usher'" (211), a story featuring a woman who is buried alive and that ends with cataclysmic violence. This angry interiority makes up the bulk of the monologue, but it is the courteous exterior voice that makes this protest possible. If the woman's fuming speech were extracted from this framing, the piece would not be funny, and likely, would not be published. But Parker is careful to place the accommodating rhetoric at regular intervals throughout the woman's lengthy diatribe so that the humorous effect is maintained.

Part way through the monologue, the woman proclaims, "I am Outraged Womanhood" (210). The woman now speaks on behalf of womankind, and the dance becomes a metaphor for a male-female relationship based on female subordination, not freedom and equality. The first admission the woman makes is to say that she doesn't want to dance with this man, or with any man but agrees to do so only because it is expected of her. Everyone else at the table has paired off. This arrangement leaves her feeling "trapped. Trapped like a trap in a trap" (209). It is clear that the woman bitterly resents not only the forced pairing but also the conditions of the dance, that she must follow the man's lead. She wonders, "Why can't he let me lead my own life?" (209). Because she feels like she is "chained" to a "creature" she hates (211), she fantasizes about "blowing the sides right out of the building" (210), a dramatic image to express the

desire to break free from this containment. What drives a woman's anger, according to this narrative, is the feeling of being trapped by a heterosexual relationship that is predicated on a woman's subordination.

The exterior voice is apologetic and the language is syntactically simplistic, relying on questions to indicate the woman's deference. In contrast, the interior voice is complex, using literary allusions, jokes, and figurative language.<sup>24</sup> In addition to the dance and trap metaphor, Parker uses a football metaphor to convey the woman's hostility. She calls the man "Jukes," meaning, "to fake out a position as in football" ("Jukes," def. 4). Then as the couple heads out onto the dance floor, the inner voice says, "All right, Cannonball, let's run out on the field. You won the toss; you can lead" (209). When the man accidentally kicks the woman's shins, she describes a punter: "Ow! For God's sake, don't *kick*, you idiot; this is only the second down" (210). As they make their way through the dance crowd, the couple is described as defensive backs muscling their way downfield:

Look at him—never a thought of the consequences. Never afraid of his face, hurling himself into every scrimmage, eyes shinning, cheeks ablaze. And shall it be said that I hung back? No, a thousand times no. What's it to me if I have to spend the next couple of years in a plaster cast? Come on, butch, right through them! Who wants to live forever? ... Two stumbles, slip, and a twenty-yard dash. . . (211)

Certainly the incongruity and surprise in this rhetorical strategy is used for comic effect: older, sophisticated women typically do not use football terminology to express their displeasure over a dance. But, at the same time, Parker adopts this masculine rhetoric to



critique the dance's (and life's) enforced femininity; in this case, the expectation that women should accommodate men and sublimate their own interests. The speaker puts aside her femininity, so to speak, and adopts a masculine idiom in order to adequately express her outrage at this arrangement. For a while, this rebellious voice gains ascendancy. But in the end, despite all her protests, the woman in actuality agrees to the terms she so despises. She clings to the man and follows him throughout the waltz and then immediately consents to his request for the next dance. Like the woman in "A Telephone Call," the speaker in "The Waltz" seems unable to break free from the inequitable terms of this male-female pairing. But because Parker articulates a woman's hidden anger over the social script and states it dramatically in a public forum, this subtext becomes subversive. The monologue itself rebels against limitations even if the character in the piece does not.

In the American humor tradition, violence, like scatology, has been associated with male writers and comics. In *Punchlines: Violence in American Humor*, William Keough theorizes that the prevalence of violence in American humor stems in part from the disillusionment over the American dream and that this humorous expression is a socially acceptable way to convey aggression. Keough's discussion is limited to male writers like Ambrose Bierce, Ring Lardner and to male silent film and stand-up comedians. He briefly discusses only one woman, Lily Tomlin, thereby reifying the notion that violence in American humor is the byproduct of masculine culture. By way of explanation Keough writes, "I realize, too, that there are few women to be found in these pages, though that, I feel, is the subject of another book, one more attuned to the sociology of sexual politics than this. Nor have I dealt at length with *The New Yorker*

school of James Thurber, Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, and S. J. Perelman. But their work does not concern itself with the themes of this book” (xx).

Dorothy Parker is excluded from Keough’s discussion on the basis of her gender and of her association with *The New Yorker* even though she worked for that magazine for a very limited time in her career and even though her satiric fiction and poetry is saturated with dark humor and violent imagery. The titles of her first two volumes of poetry, *Enough Rope* and *Sunset Gun*, and her signature poem, “Résumé” clues readers as to her fondness for violent imagery:

Razors pain you;  
Rivers are damp;  
Acids stain you;  
And drugs cause cramp.  
Guns aren't lawful;  
Nooses give;  
Gas smells awful;  
You might as well live. (*CP* 52)

The speaker’s nonchalance towards self-annihilation is the source of the absurdist and incongruous humor, but the violence is nonetheless unmistakable here, as it is in many of her stories and poems.

Disciplines outside literary studies corroborate that violence in humor is largely the product of masculine culture. Studies in anthropology, sociology, and psychology indicate that men participate in many more forms of aggressive humor such as sarcasm, put downs, verbal duels, hostile jokes, and slapstick comedy than women and that this

difference is directly linked to status (Martin 2006, Ziv 1998, Kotthoff 2006). A recent study titled “Humorous Communication Among Orchestra Members” reveals that only the conductor felt free to make sarcastic remarks about the musicians’ performances because of his elevated status: “Sarcasm is seen in this study as an aggressive form of irony and as indicative of unequal power” (Kotthoff 11). Similarly, in a study on humor in the workplace, sociologists determined that only high-ranking male employees felt free to use aggressive forms of humor and that this accurately reflected the existing power structures in that work environment (Kotthoff 9). In “The Waltz” Parker openly uses aggressive, sarcastic rhetoric not so much out of a desire to use male language as a desire to use prohibited language. It is a rebellion against boundaries. These rhetorical strategies draw attention to the artificiality of social norms regarding speech, both by making fun of those restrictions and by co-opting the language of privilege. Gallows humor (humor in the face of pain or death) and violent imagery is a key characteristic of Parker’s writing, and yet this aspect of her work has been downplayed or ignored perhaps because as Regina Barreca puts it, “The female satirist makes some people nervous. They don’t feel all that easy around a woman who puts her ‘femininity’ aside in order to make a point or a joke” (xiii). This strident mordancy radically upends the cultural stereotype of the playful, genial wit of a woman humorist.

Not all of Parker’s polyphonic monologues involve the binary of public/private speech. “Lady with a Lamp” (1932) relies on silence as a secondary text. The story centers on Mona, a woman recovering from an abortion, and her unnamed friend (the titular lady) who talks incessantly. The word *abortion* is never mentioned in the story, but like Ernest Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” the dialogue makes the meaning

clear. The humor in the story is conveyed through the incongruity and irony of the visitor's ridiculous speech; although she has come to comfort her friend, she only compounds Mona's grief by bringing up children. Loquacious to a fault, the lady twice calls Mona a child and sermonizes about how a woman's happiness must be linked to domesticity and motherhood:

Oh, Mona dear, so often I think if you just had a home of your own, and could be all busy, making pretty little things like this for it, it would do so much for you. I worry so about you, living in a little furnished apartment, with nothing that belongs to you, not roots, no nothing. It's not right for a woman. . . . No, but really, I'm serious. I've said to Fred so often, "Oh, if we could just get Mona married!" Honestly, you don't know the feeling it gives you, just to be all secure and safe with your own sweet home and your own blessed children, and your own nice husband coming back to you every night. That's a woman's life, Mona. (146)

The lady reminds Mona that while she's recuperating in bed, Garry, the baby's father, is not out of town on business as presumed but is out carousing with other women:

He's away? He's what? Oh, he went to Chicago two weeks ago. . . . He's not back yet? Mona, what are you trying to tell me? Why, just night before last---Said he'd let you know the minute he got home? Of all the rotten, low things I ever heard in my life, this is really the—Mona, dear, please lie down. Please. . . Dear, Garry isn't in Chicago. Fred and I saw him night before last at the Comet Club, dancing. And Alice saw him Tuesday night at El Rhumba. And I don't know how many people have said they've seen him around at the theatre and nightclubs and things. (147-48)

This story sheds light (hence the title) on the sexual double standard that existed in the 1930s: while Mona is in her apartment recovering from an abortion, Garry is dancing at the Comet Club. The story elucidates how at the time men were given sexual freedom without much responsibility and women, responsibility without much freedom. Here the author uses a literal frivolous voice to expose the gravitas of gender bias. The speaker, through her mindless and insensitive chatter, does shed light on the injustice of the situation.

While this monologue doesn't employ two distinct articulated voices, it nonetheless can be considered polyphonic if silence is viewed as a text. Writing about the silences in the fiction of Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and others, Patricia Laurence argues, "silence in women has been viewed as the place of oppression, the mark of women's exclusion from the public spheres of life and from representation as speakers in a text" (156). Linguists have shown that this silencing tends to arise because women are more restricted in their speech than men and because their words are treated less seriously than men's (Meyerhoff 210). Mona's narrative--her name sounds like moan, suggesting pain--is best expressed through silence. A woman like Mona who rejects the traditional role of mother and wife is without voice while the woman who follows a conventional path is free to speak so long as she uses a socially sanctioned language. Because this monologue was published in a public forum (*Harper's Bazaar*), Mona's silence becomes the text that is heard. In fact, the relentless babbling of the lady only magnifies Mona's silence. Her muteness is the focal point of the story; the abortion becomes a metonymy for unuttered speech, the purposed void that nonetheless remains a powerful statement. The incongruity between the jabbering lady and the silent Mona supplies the humor,

however grim, but it also supplies the social criticism intrinsic in this monologue, a criticism that extends to the confinement of women's sexuality.

Perhaps the most complicated polyphonic monologue in Parker's repertoire is "Sentiment" (1933), a piece with four distinct voices: a woman's public and private speech and then two gender-specific voices (the author herself tags them male/female) within the private voice. The narrative is simple: A jilted woman talks to herself while she's being taxied around the city. She gives instructions to the driver at the beginning and end, and these lines frame the story: "Oh, anywhere driver, anywhere—it doesn't matter. Just keep driving" (195) and "Driver, what street is this? Sixty-Fifth? Oh, No, nothing, thank you. I—I thought it was Sixty-Third" (199). The rest of the piece records the woman's inner monologue, which is interrupted first by an imaginary dialog between the woman and man and then by the woman quoting fragments of poetry. Because the speaker is heartbroken rather than angry, there is no violence in this story except for one brief simile where the speaker compares a rumpled hat to a "dead cat, a cat that was run over and pushed out of the way against the curbstone" (195).

In "Sentiment" the satirist not only draws attention to the reciprocal relationship between language and gender construction, she also critiques the way in which men, and later the male literary tradition, dismiss women's linguistic processes and denigrates them particularly when they express unhappiness, misery, or any other emotion that does not placate male fantasy. The woman's speech has a distinctive melancholy lilt to it with an emphasis on emotion, and the man's is characterized by short words and a hectoring tone. Each voice has its own unique speech patterns: one purposefully poetic (female) and the other purposefully discordant (male). The first voice starts out with this description:

“There is always a glimpse through a crowd of someone who looks like him—someone with his swing of the shoulders, his slant of the hat. And I think it’s he, I think he’s coming back. And my heart goes to scalding water and the buildings sway and bend above me”(195). When arranged like poetry, these lines reveal the author’s use of alliteration (“someone, swing, shoulders,”), internal rhymes (“he,” “me”), half-rhymes (“hat,” “back”), and iambic pentameter:

There is always a glimpse through a crowd  
Of someone who looks like him,  
Someone with his swing of the shoulders,  
His slant of the hat.  
And I think it’s he, I think he’s coming back.  
And my heart goes to scalding water;  
And the buildings sway and bend above me. (195)

Throughout the sketch, this voice is poetic to an obvious degree. She uses internal rhymes (“He’s always with me, he and all his beauty and his cruelty,” “Scarlet red for a love that’s dead”), frequent alliteration (long leash, sorrow ceaseless, sitting, staring, suffering), and polysyndeton (“and I think,” “and my heart,” “and the buildings”), giving the discourse a rhythm that is more poetic than fictive. When arranged in stanza form, this description of flowers, for example, reveals another use of alliteration: “That’s where he used to stop to buy me primroses,/ little yellow primroses massed tight together/ with a circle of their silver-backed leaves about them, /clean and cool and gentle” (198). Remembering that Parker was a painstakingly precise writer and a skilled poet, it is safe to assume that these details are here by design.

In contrast to the woman's lyrical language, the imagined male speaker uses clipped, dissonant speech and short, truncated sounds: "Oh, for heaven's sake! Can't you stop that fool sentimentalizing? Why do you have to do it? . . . You don't have to insist that everyone's sad. Why are you always so sentimental? Don't do it, Rosalie" (196). Entire lines are monosyllabic, dotted with harsh consonants: "No, I don't know just when—I told you that" (196). In poetry, monosyllabic diction "comes across with considerable force" (Kinzie 114) and monosyllabic lines of poetry "tend to be overstressed" (Kinzie 136); this overstressed or spondaic meter conveys force and severity. One well-known example of spondaic meter is a passage in John Milton's *Lycidas* where the poet conveys St. Peter's condemnation of the corrupt Anglican clergy. Many of these are written in monosyllables and punctuated with harsh double-consonant sounds: "What recks it them? What need they? They are sped;/And when they list, their lean and flashy songs/Grate on their scrannel Pipes of wretched straw" (l. 122-124). This type of sound and rhythm, used in Milton's poem and in Parker's story, appropriately conveys the speaker's anger and disapproval.

Not only does the male speaker in "Sentiment" speak in discordant tones, everything he says is either condemnatory or patronizing: "Ah, Rosalie, don't go making a national tragedy of it. It'll be a few months, maybe—and if ever two people needed a holiday from each other! It's nothing to cry about" (196). He uses the words *sentimentalizing* and *sentimental* with denunciatory intent. Forms of the word *sentiment* appear four times in this piece, and the author is careful to show that the man and woman use these politically charged words in different ways. When Rosalie sees an elderly cleaning woman and feels pity for her, the man tells her to "stop that fool



sentimentalizing” (196). When Rosalie starts to cry, the man snaps, “Why are you always so sentimental?” (196). From his perspective, being emotionally demonstrative is foolishness, a sign of emotional excess. However, when the woman speaker uses the word “sentimental,” it is to question why people devalue empathy, or deep feelings of any kind. “I wonder why it’s wrong to be sentimental. People are so contemptuous of feeling” (196). The author again draws attention to and questions the validity of the gender-coded divergence in meaning of a politically charged word.

The author next introduces allusions to poetry, adding more layers to the polyphony. At the height of the woman’s distress, she directly quotes the first stanza of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poem, “Sorrow.” The quotation is set apart from the body of Parker’s monologue and is further bracketed off by quotation marks to draw attention to its poetic language and authority. The speaker then talks to herself, wondering how the rest of the poem goes. She is able to recall the last four lines of the second stanza, which Parker again sets apart from the body of her own text adding quotation marks for emphasis: “All my thoughts are slow and brown:/Standing up or sitting down/Little matters, or what gown/ Or what shoes I wear” (197). Parker admired Millay and so perhaps directly quotes this poem as a way to give authority to the woman’s expression of anguish over a recent break-up. This literary allusion is another linguistic layer where the speaker uses words from someone else, perhaps in this case, someone more authoritative, to express her own thoughts and feelings. It is important to note that the author is not parodying Millay; if she were, the quotation would be inexact, the imagery and poetic devices exaggerated or distorted.

While the woman speaker in the monologue uses the Millay poem as a way to claim verbal legitimacy, she uses male canonical poets for an entirely different purpose, starting with a fragment from Shakespeare: “Go and buy yourself a big red hat with poppies on it--that ought to cheer you up. Yes--go buy it and loathe it. How am I to go on, sitting and staring and buying big red hats and hating them, And then sitting and staring again—day upon day upon day? Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. How am I to drag through them like this?” (197). The author here deliberately parodies perhaps the most famous soliloquy of despair in literature:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing. *Macbeth* (5.5. 19–28)

Not only is this a parody of a well-known line from *Macbeth*'s soliloquy, it approaches the burlesque where a mundane subject (buying a hat) is treated in an elevated way (appearing in Shakespeare's soliloquy). The parody continues. Next the author manipulates William Wordsworth's famous line about poetry even as she makes fun of

the manipulation: “It’s sentimental to know that you cannot bear to see the places where once all was well with you, that you cannot bear reminders of a dead loveliness. ‘Sorrow is tranquility remembered in emotion’—that’s a nice reversal” (198). In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth describes poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (26-28) and the author’s ‘nice reversal’ is surely done for comic effect. But this tactic might also be seen as a snub of the male-dominated poetic tradition, while exposing a literary double standard: Wordsworth is praised for claiming that poetry springs from strong emotion, but when women express strong emotion, they are dismissed as foolish and sentimental. Either way, Millay is quoted while Wordsworth and Shakespeare are parodied.

While early critics read “Sentiment” as a straightforward parody of sentimental writers (Yates 1968), this ignores the gender-specific polyphony as well as the dissimilar uses of poetic authority. Given the pathos of the language and given the fact that Parker did not write much parody in her fiction, it seems that the author is not imitating sentimentalists but is ridiculing the male inability to hear and to judge a woman’s voice without condescension or self-interest. To this male judge, a woman’s voice is ostensibly a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. With carefully constructed, gender specific discourses and differing uses of literary allusions, the satirist exposes how women’s speech has been trivialized not only for what is said but also for how it has been said. Rather than being a mockery of sentimental writing--the piece is titled “Sentiment” not “Sentimental”--this polyphonic monologue seems to work as a clever, complicated joke about the male tendency to dismiss the female voice just because it isn’t his even as it advocates for the need of human empathy. With its repeated

references to speech and its parody of canonical male authors, this polyphonic monologue challenges not only the restrictive rules of language forced upon women but also the male dominated literary tradition that had, in Parker's time, seriously devalued women's literary contributions.

Linguists who have studied childhood behavior have shown that since childhood, girls are routinely discouraged from using certain types of speech. A girl who speaks roughly like a boy, for instance, is quickly ostracized: "If she refuses to talk like a lady, she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine; if she does learn, she is ridiculed as unable to think clearly, unable to take part in a serious discussion; in some sense, as less than fully human" (Lakoff 40-41). These restrictive norms do nothing to empower women but rather serve only to reinforce a gendered hierarchy that ultimately leaves women marginalized, if not silenced altogether. That women, particularly through the influence of etiquette books and advice columns, sometimes enforce these rules or norms comes as no surprise. As a way to circumvent those restrictions, Dorothy Parker adopts layers of polyphony into her monologue, whether a simple private/public binary, articulated/unarticulated, or a complex multi-voicedness involving parody, allusions, and imaginary dialog embedded in the interior monologue. As a literary form, the monologue has been associated with satire since antiquity; it is a form that by its nature draws attention to the limits and the possibilities of speech. While her predecessor May Isabel Fisk creatively revised the comic monologue by using sight gags and by reversing misogynistic joking patterns, Parker expands the limits of the monologue by shattering the speaker's singular consciousness into discordant, politically charged parts. Recognizing that the incongruity of these different voices was inherently funny, Dorothy

Parker consistently exploited this mode, finding it a safe way to voice dissatisfaction and rage. Violent imagery, slang expressions, iconic metaphors of masculinity creep into these polyphonic monologues as gestures of repudiation, rebellion against restrictive norms of decorous speech that inhibit women's psychological, emotional, and literary development.

### **Satiric Grotesque**

Parker's use of polyphony in her monologues is groundbreaking not only for the way in which she renders layers of consciousness but also for how she draws attention to the notion of language as a contested space, a political arena invested with its own gendered hierarchies and contradictions. Regina Barecca writes about the failure of critics to recognize the "authenticity and lack of pretense in her writing" (xix), and it seems that Parker's genuine creativity as a satirist has been overlooked in the rush to place her within (or without) a particular cannon of feminist literature. Her inventiveness as a satirist extends beyond her polyphonic monologues, however, for another aspect of Parker's originality is her use of the satiric grotesque, a literary sub-genre that explores "tedium, disenchantment, scatology, machination, and blackness" (Clark 2). One of the few essays that touch on the topic is Catherine Keyser's "Dorothy Parker, Macabre Humor and the Female Body." Relying on a reading of "The Waltz," Keyser posits that Parker devised her own writing persona in macabre terms not only as a repudiation of the stereotype of the glamorous, devil-may-care flapper but also as a way to signal her role as a cultural elitist (136). However, Keyser flattens macabre humor to mean a generalized preoccupation with death and does not distinguish between macabre humor (humor using ghastly, horrible imagery) and gallows humor (humor in the face of pain or death), or

between macabre and black humor (humor in the face of a grim or tragic situation), but her point is nonetheless well taken. Parker certainly does seem to be preoccupied with death, as were many modernist writers, and she may have done so out of a desire to appear ultra sophisticated, to “fuel her celebrity” (145) as Keyser puts it. But there’s also a possibility that Parker simply found death funny business, an illogical but nonetheless common characteristic of people who prefer dark, absurdist humor, as studies in psychology indicate.<sup>25</sup>

Keyser does not mention one of Parker’s best macabre stories “The Wonderful Old Gentlemen” where she devotes two full pages to describe the macabre scene. The narrative takes place in a suburban home that would not be featured in *House Beautiful*. The interior resembles a “museum of objects suggesting strain, discomfort, or the tomb” (36). The living room is a “chamber of horrors” (36) with wallpaper resembling “battered heads and tortured profiles, some eyeless, some with clotted gashes for mouths” (36). The author, who had attended parochial schools, even looks to religious iconography to deepen the macabre atmosphere. On the wall hangs an engraving of the Crucifixion, “lavish in ghastly detail . . . the cords cutting deep into the arms writhing from the stake, arrows bristling in the thick, soft-looking body” (37). Next to it hangs a copy of “Mother of Sorrows” with the central figure’s “agonized eyes raised to a cold heaven, great, bitter tears forever on the wan cheeks, paler for the grave-like draperies that wrapped the head” (37). The macabre imagery--and Parker is heavy-handed with it in the opening paragraphs--is especially ironic seeing that the story was published in a 1926 issue of *The Pictorial Review*, whose illustrations and advertisements featured wholesome, cherubic families and Normal Rockwell illustrations.

In discussing the satiric grotesque, however, I wish to clarify that when I use the term *grotesque*, I do not mean the macabre (battered heads, clotted gashes for mouths, grave-like draperies) but a deliberate distortion of the body that incorporates “a violation of harmony, symmetry, and proportion” (Clark 19). So while death, tragedy, and the macabre lurk in the corner of many Parker’s stories, for my purposes I am discussing the satiric grotesque as the author’s deliberate distortion of the female body, or more to my point, her deliberate decomposition of idealized feminine beauty.<sup>26</sup> In his essay, “The Mythos of Winter: Irony and Satire,” Northrop Frye mentions the grotesque in his primary definition of satire: “The chief distinction between irony and satire is that satire is militant irony; its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured” (223). He later writes, “Satire demands at least a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque” (224), and so grotesqueries, no matter what form, are an integral part of modernist satire. John Clark devotes an entire book to the topic, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque*, but like many theoretical texts on satire, his does not include a discussion of women’s writing except for a few paragraphs about Flannery O’Connor and Carol Joyce Oates. Because Clark’s theory is derived solely from the satires of white, Euro-centric male authors, some of the characteristics he identifies, such as scatology, cannibalism, or entropy are not necessarily prevalent in women’s satire.

One way Parker adopts elements of the satiric grotesque is by developing an anti-heroine who quite literally embodies the corruption of the feminine ideal. In Parker’s case, this translates into protagonists who do not conform to popular ideals of physical beauty or acceptable feminine behavior. Her protagonists are bibulous divorcées,

suicidal mistresses, middle-aged Lolitas, or crabby wives who are sexually repressed. Parker's female protagonists have been the source of critical disapproval for decades. Some critics view her women as weak or ineffectual. In his essay "Dorothy Parker's Idle Women," Norris Yates considers Parker's female protagonists "pathetic" (263) and calls them "victims" who are "largely self victimized" (263), while Walker, in "Fragile and Dumb: The Little Woman," views her women characters as hapless victims of a patriarchal society. Rather than see these characters as weak women in a work of realistic fiction, I view them as Parker's adaptation of the satiric grotesque, anti-heroines whose imperfections actively resist the narratives of feminine beauty and virtue. These characters act as a sort of protest against an economic and political system that rewards and advances women not so much based on their talents and abilities but on their visual and sexual appeal. While any number of protagonists might due, I will focus on the central figures in "Big Blonde" (1929) and "Horsie" (1932).

Perhaps the best-known example of Parker's deconstructed heroine is Hazel Morse in "Big Blonde" where Parker uses the satiric grotesque to trouble standards of feminine beauty, from Victorian ideals embodied in the Gibson girl to norms promulgated in the Cinderella fairytale to contemporaneous standards exemplified in the flapper. "Big Blonde" is Parker's most critically acclaimed story, having won her the 1929 O. Henry prize for best American short story, but critics do not typically consider it satirical because of its morose tone and serious subject matter. This, I think, is a result of wrongly viewing satire as a close cousin to comedy but not to tragedy. Classical writers positioned the genre between comedy and tragedy because it takes on elements of both, and modern critics like Northrop Frye also acknowledges satire's tragic elements. Frye



charts six stages of satire, identifying the fourth as a phase where satire takes on the “ironic aspects of tragedy” (236), the fifth, which corresponds to “fatalistic or fifth-phase tragedy” (237), and the sixth phrase, which “presents human life in terms of largely unrelieved bondage” (238). This is a far remove from comedy, but it is within the satiric spectrum. And so while “Big Blonde” can hardly be considered humorous--its central action is the attempted suicide of a chronically depressed woman--it is satiric nonetheless.

The question then remains, what does the story satirize? Rhoda Pettit offers a provocative reading of “Big Blonde” as Parker’s “fictional response” (75) to Anita Loos’ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, a wildly popular satiric novel that was published a few years before Parker’s short story. Pettit correctly points out that “Big Blonde” is not a satire of the proverbial dumb blonde in the same manner as Loos’ Lorelei Lee but is more a repudiation of Loos’ more mainstream vision of women, money, power, and sex. And while there are many, seemingly obvious parallels between Hazel and Lorelei, there are also sharp distinctions that have serious sociopolitical ramifications. Pettit discusses one of the most important differences between these two big blondes:

[both] play the commodities game with their male counterparts, but Hazel, through her physical, mental, and emotional decline, portrays the high price such a game exacts on the vast majority of women who play it. “Big Blonde” answers Lorelei’s well-executed but glib success by offering a much harsher critique of the commodification of women. (84)

In other words, “Big Blonde” critiques a consumer society that objectifies and infantilizes women while *Gentlemen* seems to celebrate that society. In her creative use of the satiric

grotesque, Parker is able to mock the commodities game, particularly the social dictum that women should strive be pleasing to men both sexually and visually. It is a criticism of social norms and their potentially devastating affects on women.

Hazel Morse, the story's big blonde, is first described according to Victorian standards of beauty that emphasize large busts and hips. She was a "large, fair woman" (105) in the day of "the big woman" (105) who ran along with "other substantially built blondes" (105), "big women and stout, broad of shoulder and abundantly breasted, with faces thickly clothed in soft-high-colored flesh" (113). When a physician attends to Morse after her suicide attempt, he remarks, "God, no. You couldn't kill her with an ax" (122) indicating her robust physicality. Morse is a dress model and so embodies the ultimate, or model look, of a bygone era. But as the story progresses, Morse becomes a bloated, boozy divorcee whose descent into despair culminates in a botched suicide. At the climax of the story, after Morse has ingested twenty sleeping pills, the author gives us this detailed description of her unconscious body:

Mrs. Morse lay on her back, one flabby, white arm flung up, the wrist against her forehead. Her stiff hair hung untenderly along her face. The bed covers were pushed down, exposing a deep square of soft neck and a pink nightgown, its fabric worn uneven by many launderings; her great breasts, freed from their tight confiner, sagged beneath her armpits. Now and then she made knotted, snoring sounds, and from the corner of her opened mouth to the blurred turn of her jaw ran a lane of crusted spittle. . . . thick, white legs, cross-hatched with blocks of tiny, iris-colored veins. (121-22)

The author lingers over each unattractive detail in this extended close-up of Hazel Morse's body: flabby arms, matted hair, sagging breasts, legs covered in varicose veins, and a distorted face covered in crusted spittle are brought to the reader's immediate line of vision. This is Parker's first grotesquerie of idealized feminine beauty, a deliberate distortion of Gibson-girl-type beauty, which was one of the first standardized images of feminine beauty reproduced in American mass media.

Morse is also a grotesquerie of Cinderella, which Parker subtly alludes to with repeated references to tiny, translucent slippers throughout "Big Blonde." The opening description of Morse includes details about her feet: "she prided herself on her small feet and suffered for her vanity, boxing them in snub-toed, high-heeled slippers of the shortest bearable size" (105). When the sight of an old, hobbled horse moves Morse to tears, the effect is registered in her feet: "the tightly stored tears would squeeze from her eyes as she teetered past on her aching feet in the stubby, champagne-colored slippers" (116). Later, as her alcoholism and depression escalate, the thought of suicide becomes a source of comfort because then she would never have to put on "tight shoes" (117) again. After a failed suicide attempt, Morse receives a postcard from a former lover telling her to cheer up and be a good sport. She drops the card to the floor, and then feels the pain in her feet:

She dropped the card to the floor. Misery crushed her as if she were between great smooth stones. There passed before her a slow, slow pageant of days spent lying in her flat, of evenings at Jimmy's being a good sport, making herself laugh and coo at Art and other Arts; she saw a long parade of weary horses and shivering beggars all beaten, driven, stumbling things. Her feet throbbed as if she had crammed them into the stubby champagne colored slippers. (124)

The phrase “stubby, champagne-colored slippers” appears twice in the story and calls up the image of the iconic beauty of folklore, Cinderella. But Parker is careful here; her grotesquerie of Cinderella never reaches lampoon because the distortion is not exaggerated or comically rendered. In fact, in “Big Blonde” the image of the translucent shoes is conjured up only at moments of extreme pain and suffering for Morse. In the fairytale, Cinderella’s slippers are the source of joy and wealth for her, but they are the source of misery and limitation for Morse. As a grotesquerie of iconic beauty, Morse is described as Cinderella’s bodily and behavioral antithesis. According to the fairytale, Cinderella’s beauty “struck everybody with wonder” while Morse’s physical degradation repulses those around her. Rather than have the requisite dainty feet that slip easily into a tiny slipper, Morse has large, swollen feet that are crammed--Parker’s word, a verb with violent connotation--into ill-fitting shoes that cause her to stumble.

The author continues the grotesquerie by describing Morse’s deviant behavior, which is ultimately inscribed onto her body. In the 1865 version of the Cinderella myth, Cinderella conforms to prevailing constructions of femininity and is rewarded for it. She is submissive to parents (“dutiful to her parents”), uncomplaining in the face of forced servitude, (“she bore all her troubles with patience”) (3), and obedient to a mystical (fairy godmother) and political (king and queen) order that disallows female autonomy and supports patriarchal domination. Because she scrupulously follows the codes that enforce gender hierarchies, Cinderella is rewarded. First, she grows “more lovely in face and figure every year” (3), and then she is rewarded with marriage to the prince, which means into an elevated social and economic status. As a grotesquerie of Cinderella, Morse does not conform to the constructions of acceptable femininity. She is called a “lousy sport”

(108) and a “rotten sport” (110) because rather than suffer in silence like Cinderella, Morse prefers to “crab, crab, crab, crab, that was all she ever did” (108). Morse frequently gets the “howling horrors” (110), cries obsessively, and allows her model-looks to deteriorate. Morse was “instantly undesirable when she was low in spirits” (115) and is abandoned by both her male and female friends.

Unlike Cinderella, Morse is punished for her unbecoming, rebellious behavior. When her husband Herbie becomes annoyed at her “misty melancholies” (107), he shouts invectives at her, and sometimes there were “sharp slaps” (109). Once “she had a black eye” (109) from him. When the doctor attends to the unconscious Morse after her suicide attempt, his behavior is both callous and punitive: “he flung her nightgown back and lifted the thick, white legs, cross-hatched with blocks of tiny, iris-colored veins. He pinched them repeatedly, with long, cruel nips, back of the knees” (122). With feet too swollen to fit a tiny slipper, a face distended and crusted in spit, and cranky, self-destructive behavior, Morse is ostracized by society. She is abandoned by lovers, slapped around by husbands, and scolded by friends. Allusions to feet and glass slippers link Morse to the fairytale character; she is Parker’s grotesquerie of the Cinderella figure both in body and in practice, having more in common with the wicked stepsisters than with the beautiful princess.

Morse might also be seen as a grotesquerie of the flapper, the androgynous, sexually liberated young woman valorized in the 1920s and epitomized in silent film actress Clara Bow and fashion model Irene Castle. (Both Castle and Bow, incidentally, were petite brunettes, a detail surely not lost on Parker.) In this case, the grotesquerie of

the flapper is not so much in her physical description but in her sexual behavior.<sup>27</sup> The flapper became associated with sexual liberty and experimentation:

The flapper's daring appearance—bobbed hair, cosmetics, short skirts—matched her audacious behavior—smoking, drinking, jazz dancing, and sexual experimentation. Although the flapper stereotype exaggerates the liberation women enjoyed in the decade, sexual mores were evolving. Between the popularization of Freudian notions about sexuality, the movies' portrayal of highly sexualized relationships, changing notions about equality within marriage, and the increased availability of birth control, new sexual patterns emerged.

(Dumenil par. 6)

In Parker's story, men are attracted to Morse because she is a "good sport," a phrase used eight times to describe Morse and which connotes someone who is perpetually cheerful, willing to drink heavily and be sexually accessible. At the beginning of the story, Morse "was a good sport. Men like a good sport" (105), and she had a "couple of thousand evenings of being a good sport among her male acquaintances" (106). One of her male partners, Ed, "insists on gaiety" (115) and tells her to "be a sport" (115) while a later partner, Art, praises her for being "the best sport in the world" (117), a phrase he uses twice to describe Morse despite her frequent crying jags. The fashionable picture of the happy, energetic, libidinous good sport gradually decomposes into a chronically depressed, weary, and frigid Hazel Morse. Parker's grotesquerie of the good sport/flapper is a satiric criticism of a society that punishes women for transgressing culturally determined norms of behavior, especially when they do not gratify male libidinal desire.

The word “sport” has many connotations mostly having to do with entertainment, pleasure, and diversion, but it also means sexual activity. Morse is expected to be a good sport, which in the story involves moving to a different apartment as a convenience to her married lover and being sexually accommodating whenever her male partners are in town. One of the obsolete meanings of the word “sport” is “lovemaking, amorous play; (also) sexual intercourse” (*OED*), and narrative evidence suggests that Morse is doing more than playing poker and stirring martinis in order please her male patrons. When Morse announces that Herbie has left her, her friend Ed “looked at her and played with the fountain pen clipped to his waistcoat pocket” (113), an obvious phallic symbol mentioned as soon as Morse announces her sexual availability. After a night of playing cards and drinking heavily, Ed takes her back to her apartment, and “wrapped her in his big arms and kissed her violently” (113). Later, he is referred to as her “donor” (115) who gives her an “allowance” (115). He has “proprietaryship” (111) of Morse, and so the line between gentleman’s escort and prostitute becomes blurred although the author is never tonally critical of Morse’s sexual practices. Morse, for her part, “was entirely passive” (113) about the men’s sexual advances, and she engages in these dalliances not for pleasure but in order to maintain herself financially. Her frigidity is a reversal of the flapper’s energetic eroticism. Further, Morse’s blondness, a common literary and visual trope for sexuality, becomes an ironic signifier; she is not the proverbial, hyper-sexed blonde bombshell, the “type that incites some men when they use the word ‘blonde’ to click their tongues and wag their heads roguishly” (105) but is instead the embodiment of libidinal non-desire.

In his discussion of bodily disfiguration in satire, John Clark identifies scatology as one of the key themes of the modern satiric grotesque, a way not only to reduce the hero to a “defecating animal before our eyes” (116), but also as way to repudiate polite, genteel society (116). Something similar takes place in “Big Blonde” where the bodily disfiguration of Hazel Morse is much less hyperbolic and dramatic, relying not so much on the repulsive effect of scatology but on the jolting effect of an in-your-face deconstruction of iconic beauty.<sup>28</sup> This decomposition not only reduces the heroine of literary and popular culture to a repulsive rather than hyper-attractive person, it also acts as a repudiation of a culture that objectifies and infantilizes women and then punishes them when they do not conform to unrealistic ideals constituted for them. Parker deconstructs feminine beauty and sexual appeal as a contrapuntal attack on male fantasy and on the images of idealized beauty pedaled in magazines and popular literature, which Rhonda Pettit describes as a “market economy focused on consumers of youth and beauty” (79). It’s important to point out that Parker shows women as complicit in this market economy. When Morse takes to crabbing and crying, even her women friends abandon her: “even her slightest acquaintances seemed irritated if she were not conspicuously light-hearted” (115).

Parker’s focus on the body in this story not only critiques a market economy that objectifies women. It also strikes at the very basis of that economy, the objectification and hyper-sexualization of the female body. If, as Susan Bordo claims, the body is a “text of culture” (2360), then what does Parker accomplish by deconstructing the female body in her satire? In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo writes:



The body--what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body--is a medium of culture. The body . . . is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body. The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture. . . . the body is not only a text of culture. It is also . . . a practical, direct locus of social control. . . . Viewed historically, the discipline and normalization of the female body. . . has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control. (2362-2363)

Bordo discusses how hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia nervosa have historically become for women “pathologies of resistance” (2360), a liberating and at the same time self-restrictive way to respond to enforce constituted standardizations of ideal femininity. Just as hysteria might be seen as a response to strict norms of Victorian self-control and as agoraphobia might be viewed as a retort to the glamorization of domesticity in the 1950s, so too might anorexia nervosa be considered a struggle against late twentieth-century norms of idealized femininity that value hyper-slenderness and so-called male practices like self-control, iron will, and competency. Something similar, I want to suggest, takes place in “Big Blonde” where Morse’s alcoholism might be seen as a pathology of resistance; in this case, a rebellion against the mandate that women should be perpetually happy so as to please both their male partners or their female friends. Not only does Parker weave together and at the same time deconstruct three narratives of iconic beauty in her description of Morse’s body (Gibson girl, Cinderella, flapper), she also puts forward alcoholism as a way to reject those narratives, however imperfect a

solution that may be. If the body is a text of culture as Bordo rightly claims, then Morse's body, on the verge of self-destruction, becomes the site of a near-total rejection of that culture. "Femininity itself," Bordo writes, "has come to be largely a matter of constructing . . . the appropriate surface presentation of the self" (2366); not coincidentally, Morse's life is described as "a blurred and flickering sequence, an imperfect film dealing with the action of strangers" (105). Morse is unable or unwilling to maintain that surface presentation and so chooses to displace herself altogether by retreating into an alcoholic funk.

But is this an act of empowerment as the term pathology of resistance suggests? Writing about the anorectic, Bordo claims that she "desires the male body and the praxis associated with maleness, such as self control, an iron will, and competency" (2372); in other words, in starving herself, the anorectic desires to replace her female body with a male's in her quest for power, control, self-worth in a society that devalues women. I would argue that Parker's concern is not so much with a desire to adopt the so-called privileges associated with male praxis--excessive drinking can hardly be claimed by one gender--as it is a desire to embrace imperfection, chaos, disorder, whether bodily or emotionally. Alcoholism, then, becomes a way to reject the imperative that women are to be perpetually attractive and pleasant, both in body and in behavior, but this is not quite an act of empowerment so much as it is an evasion. Like the women Bordo studies in her analysis of eating disorders, Morse is trapped in a double bind. The central contradiction at work in any pathology of resistance is that even though women believe they have achieved a high level of self-mastery; in actuality, they are trapped in an extreme version of femininity as a "tradition of imposed limitations" (qtd. in Bordo 2374). And so while

Morse may use alcohol and barbiturates to escape the suffering and despair she genuinely feels, she does not free herself from those limitations; she only circumvents them by retreating to a state of non-feeling. Absence of feeling is not quite the same thing as being free to express a wide gamut of emotions. In writing a character like Hazel Morse into existence, Parker expurgates the stereotype of the accommodating, happy female that has been perpetuated in literature and popular culture for generations. The role of the satirist then becomes paramount to actualizing resistance of this sort; what is satire, after all, but a type of literary pathology that celebrates the deconstructive, the chaotic? For a woman satirist like Parker, writing on the edge of tragedy, that resistance is doubly felt given the tendency of Americans to honor women humorists who make us laugh without making us feel pain first.

Dorothy Parker again uses an anti-heroine and elements of the satiric grotesque in one of her most subversive yet overlooked stories, "Horsie." The central figure is a homely nurse, Miss Wilmarth, who is hired to attend to a beautiful, rich woman, Mrs. Camilla Cruger, during her six-week postpartum confinement. As in "Big Blonde," the female body is the focal point of the story although in "Horsie," the focus is on the bodily contrasts between Wilmarth and Camilla. The author uses a subtle form of the satiric grotesque in her descriptions of Wilmarth where the woman's physical ugliness is emphasized through magnification. The first description of Wilmarth reveals her distinguishing characteristic: "Her face was truly complete with that look of friendly melancholy peculiar to the gentle horse. It was not, of course, Miss Wilmarth's fault that she looked liked a horse. Indeed, there was nowhere to attach the blame. But the resemblance remained" (170). Throughout the story Wilmarth is described in

unflattering, asexual terms. Wilmarth has a “long mouth and flat bosom” (173). She is “tall, pronounced of bone, and erect of carriage. . . her long face was innocent, indeed ignorant of cosmetics . . . Her mild hair was pinned with loops of nicked black wire into a narrow knot, practical to support her little high cap, like a charlotte russe from a bake-shop” (170). Wilmarth wears nondescript, functional clothing like “ample oxfords” (172) with rubber soles and a “long brown coat and a brown rubbed velvet hat of no definite shape” (179). She is the antithesis of Camilla, who is a renowned beauty: “Motherhood had not brought perfection to Camilla’s loveliness. She had had that before” (174).

The author draws out the bodily contrasts between these women through repeated references to their hands, a symbol for functionality or work. Camilla’s hands are always “limp, fragrant” (174); she moves her hands as if they “hung heavy from her wrists (174); her hands are compared to “heavy lilies in a languid breeze” (174). These images emphasize inactivity and the ornamental. In contrast, Wilmarth has “big, trustworthy hands, scrubbed and dry” (170); her nails are groomed for work, “cut short and so deeply cleaned with some small sharp instrument” (107), while her fingertips are compared to a kitchen utensil: “spatulate finger-tips” (107). Wilmarth is “skilled and rhythmic in her work” (171). These images emphasize activity and utility. Camilla’s lifeless hands represent beauty without function, an apropos description of a social class devoted to leisure and display, while Wilmarth’s scrubbed hands represent a type of homely pragmatism, reflective of a social class accustomed to physical labor. With this metaphor, the author highlights the disparity between leisure and working class women and their functions in society.

Wealthy enough to employ three maids and a chauffeur, the Crugers make many cruel remarks about Wilmarth's homeliness behind her back. Cruger sounds like *cougar* and calls up animus. Gerald Cruger nicknames her "Horsie" and says things like "She might take herself a moonlight canter around the park" (173), or "God help me, when she asks for another lump of sugar, from holding it out to her on my palm" (178). Gerald is especially insulting, commenting to dinner guests, "Wait till you see Seabiscuit" (175) and then whistling the tune "Old Gray Mare" when Wilmarth sits down to dinner. The reader is privy to these cruel, yet witty inside jokes, but Wilmarth is not. For her part, she thinks her employers are kind, equitable people, and she genuinely enjoys working for them.

This type of behind-the-back joking pattern continues throughout the narrative not only in the couple's dialogue but also via Gerald's free indirect speech. Talking to himself at the dinner table, he says, "Will you for God's sake finish your oats, Miss Wilmarth" (172). Later, he thinks of "proffering her an apple" (172). The source of his resentment towards Wilmarth is partly revealed in an opening paragraph, "For him, women who were not softly lovely were simply not women" (170). With her hands that "feel like straw matting and smell of white soap" (170), Wilmarth is a grotesquerie of Gerald's version of femininity. Merely looking at this homely creature is an affront to "his beautiful manners" (170). As the narrative unfolds, however, it becomes evident that Gerald also resents Wilmarth because she represents his wife's sexless six-week confinement. Once Wilmarth is gone, Camilla is medically cleared to engage in sexual intercourse. Invective is usually the by-product of hatred or hostility, and in this case Gerald's resentment is projected onto the body of Miss Wilmarth not only because he

finds her ugly but also because she temporarily upends the gendered social order.

Wilmarth's status as a professional irks not only Gerald but also the female servants who do not think employees should eat meals with their employers.

Gerald's resentment extends to another female in the story and for similar reasons. His infant daughter, Diane, is also blamed for Camilla's inaccessibility: "It was her doing that Camilla had stayed so long away from him in the odorous limbo of the hospital" (173). Later, this resentment takes a violent turn: "'If that brat every calls you 'Mummy,' he told Camilla once, fiercely, 'I'll turn her out in the snow' " (175). As an effete member of the leisure class, Gerald Cruger uses ridicule and invective to respond to two females who do not meet his definition of bodily femininity: a homely, working class woman and a baby who is "pink and undistinguished and angry" (172). A shapeless newborn and a homely spinster are grotesqueries, or distortions, of his version of feminine appeal, and men like Gerald cannot endure their existence in society because they disrupt male fantasy. What's more, women who economically support themselves pose a threat to Gerald's social footing. In fact, when Camilla's childhood nurse Nana returns to take Wilmarth's place, she is welcomed by Gerald precisely because she does not disturb the socioeconomic order: "Nana was a round and competent Scottish woman who had nursed Camilla through her childhood and was scheduled to engineer the unknowing Diane through hers. She was a comfortable woman, easy to have in the house; a servant, and knew it" (179). Nana, Gerald knows, will perpetuate the imbalance of power between men and women, between servile and leisure class.

It's important to note that the insulting descriptions of Wilmarth are filtered through Gerald's consciousness. During a brief party scene in the story, Wilmarth is described as Gerald sees her:

She had discarded her linen uniform and put on a frock of dark blue taffeta, cut down to a point at the neck and given sleeves that left bare the angles of her elbows. Small, stiff ruffles occurred about the hips, and the skirt was short for its year. It revealed that Miss Wilmarth had clothed her ankles in roughened gray silk and her feet in black, casket-shaped slippers, upon which little bows quivered as if in lonely terror at the expanse before them. She had been busied with her hair; it was crimped and loosened, and ends that had escaped the tongs were already sliding from their pins. At the length of her nose and chin was heavily powdered; not with a perfumed dust, tinted to praise her skin, but with coarse, bright white talcum. (177)

This description evokes images of poverty (dated dress, rough stockings, coarse powder) and death. Not only is Wilmarth the antithesis of feminine beauty and charm--she is rough, coarse, unlovely, unstylish--she also resembles a corpse. Wilmarth wears "casket-shaped" slippers and "bright white face powder," conjuring up the grainy talcum powder brushed on the face of a cadaver at a funeral. Her bows become anthropomorphized and "quivered as if in lonely terror at the expanse before them," a possible allusion to someone facing the unknown realms (expanse) of the hereafter. Images of poverty and death are inscribed on Wilmarth's body, but they are images drawn from Gerald's consciousness. Parker uses the satiric grotesque in this instance not to ridicule Wilmarth's homeliness, but to draw attention to the man's valuation of feminine beauty.

While Gerald's hostility is aimed at Wilmarth's body, the author's animosity is aimed at Camilla, a caricature of a wealthy, socially indifferent woman. Parker constructs the caricature mainly through ironic description, which focuses on her body. These details connote inertia, decadence, and affectation. Camilla "lay all white and languid on her apricot satin chaise-lounge" (171) and remains there throughout the duration of the story. Because she "lay all day upon her apricot satin chaise lounge" (173), Camilla does not eat her meals in the dining room and only receives guests in her bedchamber. Visitors cluster around Camilla, who lay in "golden chiffon and deep lace, her light figure turned always a little away from those about her, so that she must move her head and speak her slow words over her shoulder" (175). Clothed in "scented chiffon and deep lace" (182), Camilla's perfect loveliness has a "far brightness" and a "delicate disdain" (174). Enveloped in a cloud of pastel-colored chiffons, Camilla is described as the epitome of feminine allure and appeal, but she is nonetheless capable of monstrous behavior. Not only does she hold everyone in disdain, she routinely insults Gerald (calls him "stupid"), and when Wilmarth brings the baby to Camilla in the evening, she holds out one finger and says, "Goodnight, useless" (175) to her infant daughter.

While the author invites derision for Camilla, she evokes sympathy for Wilmarth. Late in the story, the author reveals an important detail: Wilmarth financially supports an elderly mother and aunt, and the three live together in relative poverty. Housing the aunt means that Wilmarth has to sleep on a couch, but she makes the sacrifice because this provides companionship for her mother. This information is only fodder for more nasty jokes by the Crugers. The author gives readers the briefest glimpse, three short sentences, into the dire circumstances of Depression era working class. The year "Horsie" was



published, there were eighty-six breadlines in New York City alone and about a third of its workforce was unemployed (Meade 220), realities that did not seem to touch people like the Crugers. This small detail about Wilmarth's poor living conditions, supplied late in the story, evokes pity, especially when contrasted with the decadence of the Crugers. Camilla's mother gives them a car with a chauffeur and Gerald sends expensive, rare flowers to Camilla every day during her confinement. But the author is careful here. She does not indulge in lengthy Dickensian description of abject poverty in order to work over the reader's emotions. Instead, she makes the Crugers' profligacy the focal point of the story and allows readers to draw their own opinions about the contrast between rich and poor.

What is particularly subversive about this bodily representation of Camilla is that Parker demonstrably codes her beauty as hyper-white, suggesting that this effete version of femininity is the product of a strictly white, if not white supremacist culture. The word "white" or references to whiteness occur nearly a dozen times in this short story and always in reference to Camilla. The first description of Camilla depicts her "all white and languid" (171). Cruger buys Camilla white flowers, like gardenias and lilies (174); her hands are compared to lilies (174); they are "long, white" (181) hands. She lay on a "white satin sofa" (174); her complexion is "pale as moonlight" (174). Visitors who see Camilla after childbirth comment on "how white she was and how lifted above other people" (174). The syntax here is suggestive. "How white" and "how lifted" are parallel structures linking Camilla's extreme *whiteness* to superiority, at least as it is viewed from her peers' perspective. In carefully coding Camilla's bodily perfection white, the author suggests that the current feminine ideal is underscored by white supremacist thinking.

I have been arguing that Parker uses the female body as a site of satiric critique in “Horsie” and that this critique extends to the disparity between social classes, and possibly, to white supremacist attitudes. Parker’s satire of the leisure class is inscribed on the body of Camilla while the Crugers’ mockery of a working class woman is inscribed onto the body of Miss Wilmarth. Parker’s characterization of Wilmarth evokes the reader’s sympathy while and, at the same time, portraying this financially independent woman as a threat to the Crugers’ social order. It’s significant that Cruger hates Wilmarth’s hands above all else, not only because they are coarse and unfeminine, but also because they remind him of Wilmarth’s independence as a working woman. She is a threat to male authoritarianism and to a patriarchal order, which requires women’s economic dependence. Wilmarth does not eat dinner with the servants and instead takes her seat at the table with Cruger. Though this infuriates Cruger, he is too afraid to confront her. Her presence at the table suggests a social equality between the working and leisure class that Cruger adamantly wishes to resist. His anger is only compounded because it is a woman who lays claim to this social equality.

I would like now to extend this discussion of the body and whiteness by considering where this story was first published. “Horsie” appeared in the December 1932 issue of *Harper’s Bazaar*, which at that time called itself “the fashion magazine of America.” Per the beauty standards of the day, this issue is filled with drawings of impossibly tall, thin, white women who unilaterally convey an aura of wealth, privilege, and boredom. Most of the illustrated figures are exaggeratedly elongated with the women’s face fixed in a cold stare; or more commonly, her face is averted with eyes either looking down or out into the distance. One full-page color drawing, for instance,

features a woman whose torso-to-leg ratio is nearly 1:4. A realistic ratio for a woman is approximately 1:1.5. Photographs of models feature similar characteristics: ultra slender bodies, unsmiling faces, eyes that look directly at the camera with a blank stare or away at some unfixated object. An attitude of *hauteur* prevails. Not by coincidence, Camilla Cruger resembles the listless white women depicted on the pages of *Harper's Bazaar*.<sup>29</sup>

It is hardly revelatory to learn that a mainstream fashion magazine like *Harper's Bazaar* would hold up thin, wealthy, white women as paragons of beauty, allowing no room for bodily diversity or deviance. But it is subversive for Parker to satirize the very women the magazine seeks to enshrine. It's hard to say, of course, if subscribers read the fiction published in the magazine, or if they did would even recognize themselves in the satiric descriptions of Camilla Cruger. As Jonathan Swift has noted, "Satire is a kind of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own" (*Preface*). Assuredly, the satiric jest must have been lost on some. It's even possible that readers would share the Crugers' perspective and think that the story mocks homely women like Miss Wilmarth. But the author's target is clear. Given the economic conditions of the time, "Horsie" offers a powerful counter discourse to the narrative of wealth and privilege relentlessly promoted in a magazine like *Harper's Bazaar* and inscribed onto the female body. The Crugers may scoff at Miss Wilmarth; Parker scoffs at the Crugers. Through mockery, the author denigrates Camilla and all the economic and racial injustice she represents.

Dorothy Parker's contempt for the rich--she once said "rich people should be taxed for being alive" (qtd. in Meade 251)--and her sympathy for the poor are evident in many stories, particular those written during the Great Depression like "Horsie," "From

the *Diary of a New York Lady*,” “Mrs. Carrington and Mrs. Crane,” and others. One of her more creative moves as a satirist is to draw out the contrasts between rich and poor by holding the rich under merciless scrutiny. As she does in “Horsie,” rather than describe the sorrows of poverty in maudlin detail, she depicts the callousness of the rich with a biting candor.<sup>30</sup> A political activist and a self-proclaimed socialist, “my heart and soul are with the cause of socialism” she once wrote (qtd. in Meade 186), Parker did not approve of the imbalance of wealth in the United States or of those who were indifferent about it. Stories like “Horsie,” “The Custard Heart,” and many others attack the wealthy bourgeoisie not because they are rich but because they have no political or social conscience. As her biographer notes, “Dorothy appreciated the rich for their houses, cars, servants, and clothes, but, with a few exceptions, she invariably found them dull, silly, and almost totally ignorant” (Meade 187).

Even though she socialized with a circle of wealthy people, Dorothy Parker herself had known lean times. Raised in relative affluence, after her father passed away she inherited nothing and so supported herself first as a piano accompanist for silent films and then as a writer. Having only an eighth-grade education and no training in journalism, Parker struggled in the early years of her career, often having to rely on the generosity of friends to pay rent or to buy food. Frequently invited to the decadent house parties on Long Island because of her entertainment value, Parker developed a keen eye for the hypocrisies of the smart set and smoothly satirizes them in her finest stories, like “Horsie.” As one critic wittily puts it, “When Parker goes for the jugular, it’s usually a vein with blue blood in it” (Barecca viii).

Dorothy Parker wrote about taboo subjects like abortion, she routinely used prohibited speech, she noisily protested the silencing of the female voice, and she peopled her stories with disquieting women who even today manage to annoy readers. Nancy A. Walker has written that “a study of the witty but world-weary verse of a writer such as Dorothy Parker can provide insight into changes in literary taste as America became a more urban than rural country by the 1920s” (*What’s So Funny* 6), but Parker’s writing does much more than simply reflect cultural trends in literature based on a geographic shift. Using anti-heroines as the focal point of her narratives and embracing the discourse of discontent, Parker was a writer who did not allow outdated codes of chivalry or popular tastes dictate her subject. Though she did not write a novel or even many quality short stories, she did make important strides in the aesthetic development of American literary satire. As one writer put it, in Dorothy Parker we find that rare thing, a “coupling of brilliant social commentary with a mind of devastating inventiveness” (Capron 74).

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<sup>22</sup> Other stories that satirize domesticity and suburbia include “The Wonderful Old Gentleman,” “Mr. Durant, and “Here We Are.”

<sup>23</sup> Marion Meade states that *Vanity Fair* editor, Frank Crownshield, never told Dorothy Parker why she was released from her duties as theatre critic other than that P.G. Wodehouse was returning to this post. But according to Meade, there seems to have been other reasons. Parker had recently panned several Broadway musicals, and the producers had called Crownshield to complain. Parker had also written a particularly insulting review of Billie Burke, Florence Ziegfeld’s wife, and she, too, had called to complain about it. Meade suggests that these reviews offended powerful Broadway producers whose advertising dollars supported *Vanity Fair*, and that is the reason Parker was fired from her job as theatre critic.

<sup>24</sup> Parker makes this joke when the woman compares the man to a barn animal: “I bet they had to throw him on his back to get shoes on him” (210).

<sup>25</sup> In his excellent study of humor and personality, Avner Ziv describes how different types of humor appeal to different types of people. Extroverts with a lower IQ, for instance, tend to like slapstick humor and practical jokes while introverted people with higher IQs tend to like dark or absurdist humor.

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<sup>26</sup> Though related, this differs from caricature, which typically distorts one particular character trait so as to make it obviously reprehensible. A grotesque instead focuses on the physical body.

<sup>27</sup> Parker's biographer Marion Meade draws out the many parallels between Hazel and the author; so perhaps this depiction of Hazel as a big blonde is Parker's red herring, a way to mask the painfully obvious autobiographical parallels. Parker was also a tiny brunette, barely five feet tall. See *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell is This?* (p 195-6).

<sup>28</sup> This purposed decomposition of beauty starts to blend with another genre, southern gothic, in the later part of the twentieth century and is evidenced in works by Flannery O'Connor in particular. The distortion of female beauty has always been a mainstay in comic personae from Moms Mabley to Phyllis Diller to Roseanne Barr. Sarah Silverman seems to have changed that formula, ushering in a new era of comediennes who are valued not only for their comic ability but also for their Hollywood good looks: Tina Fey, Amy Sedaris, Amy Poehler, Wanda Sykes, and others. Even stand-ups like M'Onique, whose obesity was an integral part of her performance, has dropped weight in order to meet industry standards of feminine beauty.

<sup>29</sup> Not only is the detachment of the rich valued in this magazine, so is whiteness. A Guerlain perfume advertisement epitomizes how bodily whiteness becomes synonymous with the chic. This provocative drawing depicts a woman whose white skin and white gown are indistinguishable. The figure lies in a limp, seemingly post-coital exhaustion, her eyes closed, her head exaggeratedly tipped back, one hand apparently touching the nipple of her breast. The other long, slender white arm drapes over the white flower she appears to be laying in. The tagline reads, "Magic spell of the east... the enchantment of Shalimar," suggesting that the perfume will transport the wearer to some erotic reverie. The subtext, however, hints at the white supremacist's fantasy of the exotic-primitive as erotic captor, a reification of Depression era racial stereotype. Looked at closely, the figure's white body seems to be enveloped in a thin frame of blackness. Like Camilla Cruger, this figure embodies ultra-whiteness.

<sup>30</sup> This device is used effectively in "Horsie" but comes to a brilliant culmination in her 1939 "The Custard Heart," a withering satire of a self-absorbed leisure class woman, Mrs. Lanier, sarcastically called the "denied Madonna" (259). Parker deftly paints the portrait and allows readers to draw their own conclusions about the economic gap between working and leisure class.

## CHAPTER 4

### SATIRIC AND TRAGIC ELEMENTS IN JESSIE FAUSET'S

#### 'COMEDY: AMERICAN STYLE'

Jessie Redmon Fauset's fourth and final novel, *Comedy: American Style* (1933), is a mixed genre work that has exasperated critics for decades. Part passing novel, part changeling story the ironically titled *Comedy: American Style* is not comedic but is infused with elements of romance, melodrama, satire, and tragedy. Elizabeth Ammons adds "fairy-tale witch plots"(159) to the list of narrative modes at work in the novel. *Comedy* also revises the tragic mulatto motif; it is conspicuously structured like a Greek tragedy; and at times, the novel approaches allegory with its highly symbolic characterization. Attuned to the inherent problems of this mixed narrative form, Alain Locke, one of Fauset's harshest critics, condemns the novel for missing "the deep potential tragedy of the situation on the one hand, and its biting satire on the other" (qtd. in Davis xvii). And while critics have some basis upon which to criticize the novel's narrative inconsistencies, they have also overlooked the book's narrative successes.

While the novel is not a satire, *per se*, it has satiric elements that are creatively deployed. Fauset makes use of caricature, parody, and irony to satirize the lingering effects of white supremacy, the hypocrisy of a monochromatic American cultural nationalism, and hypocrisies surrounding miscegenation. *Comedy: American Style* also satirizes an essentialist notion of race, challenging the prevailing theory of race as a classification system based on physiognomy. In its place, Fauset offers a more fluid understanding of race as relational, a series of performances, presaging Stuart Hall's concept of the floating signifier. At the same time, Fauset incorporates tragic elements

into the novel, including a six-part classical structure and a tragic hero who dies of a fatal flaw, in order to frame American racial politics in a tragic, and not comic light. Taken together, these satiric-tragic elements reveal a sardonic Jessie Fauset that does not fit neatly into the role cast for her as the prim, fustian midwife of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>31</sup>

Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882-1961), literary editor of *The Crisis* from 1919 to 1926, managing editor of the children's magazine, *The Brownies' Book*, essayist, poet, novelist, and Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Cornell University spent the majority of her literary career advancing the principles of racial uplift, particularly the importance of education for African Americans and the power of the arts to transform society. Historian David Levering Lewis describes Fauset's expectations for the literary arts in particular: "Her literary ideas hewed closely to her social code. Literary creation was both the highest measure of a race's achievement and the most effective present tactic to advance her own race" (*In Vogue* 123). Her role at *The Crisis* gave her the opportunity to exercise this tactic. Fauset was one of the most influential editors of the Harlem Renaissance, the first to publish up and coming writers like Langston Hughes, an editor who advanced the writing careers of many black poets, novelists, and playwrights, particularly women. But she resigned from *The Crisis* in 1929 for reasons that are still unclear.<sup>32</sup> Fauset left *The Crisis* and returned to teaching high school, using the summers to complete her last two novels, *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) and *Comedy: American Style*. Though she lived nearly thirty more years, Jessie Fauset did not publish anything of significance after *Comedy: American Style*. The reason for this authorial silence is also unclear. Levering Lewis charges that in the 1930s, Fauset "remained oblivious to the profound political and artistic changes under way" (*HR Reader* xxxviii) and that she retired from writing with



her husband to “a neat little house in Monclair, New Jersey, where she lived silently and not very happily thereafter” (*In Vogue* 295). This seems improbable. While she might have been discouraged about the sea changes taking place as the renaissance was winding down, it seems unlikely that a woman of Fauset’s intelligence and political engagement would suddenly become oblivious to the world around her and would, instead, choose to turn her considerable energies to the quotidian. More likely, Fauset’s high hopes for the New Negro movement had changed from a guarded optimism to a resigned pessimism, a pessimism reflected in the satiric and tragic strains of her last novel.

### **Satiric Elements**

*Comedy: American Style* has commonly been viewed as a satiric portrayal of the black bourgeois, particularly of women of mixed-race origin who deny their African heritage and embrace white cultural values instead. To date critics have interpreted the novel after this manner, as a critique of intra-racial prejudice. Fauset’s biographer, Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, notes that while her other novels focus on the racial discrimination of white Northerners, Fauset’s last novel deals with the pathology of intra-racial prejudice: “In its picture of American race discrimination *Comedy: American Style* is thorough in showing a certain kind of Black prejudice against Black” (215). Thadious Davis likewise considers the novel a satire of “the black bourgeoisie through Olivia’s conceptions of class” (xxi), while Jacqueline McLendon calls the portrait of the novel’s protagonist, Olivia Blanchard Cary, “the most scathing indictment of a black mother written by a black woman up to this time” (70). Cheryl Wall sees Olivia at the quintessential anti-race woman, a “self-hating woman, a conniver, a shameless traitor to the race, and most shockingly, an unloving mother” (88). And without question the novel

tonally critiques internalized racism and its damaging consequences. This reading of the novel pivots on viewing the protagonist, Olivia Blanchard Cary, as a black woman.

### **Caricature**

But there is another possibility: that the character of Olivia might be read as a white woman and that *Comedy* then takes on a different meaning. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson is perhaps the only critic to date to mention the possibility of a dual-readership and dual-interpretation although she does not elaborate on the ramifications: “For white readers [the novel]. . . is a disturbing account of how fixed notions of race, class, and gender upheld by Anglo American capitalism and replicated within the black community destroys lives” (xxxvi). Fauset’s audience was mixed even though she wrote primarily for African American readers. So her main character might function on two levels. Even though Olivia is bi-racial, she looks phenotypically white and spends her life passing as a white woman. In fact, Olivia has “one consuming passion and that is to be white” (23). As a “confirmed Negro hater” (23), Olivia shuns anyone who is dark-skinned, she raises her children to loath blackness, and she even comes to adopt a white supremacist attitude. Olivia then might be read as a caricature of a white woman, and she embodies most of the negative stereotypes about white women that have been propounded in the western literary tradition: she is emotionally cold, sexually frigid, and without empathy; she is manipulative, ruthless, and individualistic to a terrifying degree; she is an indifferent mother, a class obsessed social climber and hypocritical clubwomen whose worldview upholds a strict racial hierarchy. Olivia is also a sly caricature of the quintessential wicked white witch, called both a “she-devil” and a “murderer” late in the novel. In a tongue-in-cheek reference to Olivia, Fauset even manages to include an allusion to the

famous line from *Snow White*: “There were none fairer than she” (200). Olivia not only passes as white, so thorough is her racial conversion that she ostensibly becomes a white woman. Even her surname, Blanchard, contains the French word *blanch* meaning “white,” Fauset’s clever pun supplied in her second language.

Olivia is not only a caricature of white women, as a signifying caricature, Olivia conveys a broader social critique that extends to a white supremacist worldview. While I don’t discount the possibility of a first level of satiric critique, that is to say, that the novel exposes intra-racial prejudice in a narrow segment of African American culture, the novel also functions as a blistering critique of eugenics-fed white supremacist thinking and its insidious effects on individuals and families.

### **Parody**

Olivia doesn’t simply use racial passing as a convenience; she embraces whiteness with the zeal of the ardent Aryan. From a young age, she is “rabid about color” (81). As a way to expose Olivia’s internalized white supremacist perceptions about race, Fauset cleverly weaves into Olivia’s speech patterns the distinct rhetoric of the eugenics movement. Just as there is indirect and direct attack in satire, so too is there direct parody, which stands apart from the main text, and infused parody, where the parody become part of the text. Edith Wharton’s parody of gossip columns in *The Custom of the Country* is an example of direct parody where the imitation is apparent and the parodic speech is supplied through Mrs. Heeny’s readings of newspaper clippings. But Wharton also makes use of diffused parody to mock the romantic literary idiom via the speech patterns of Ralph Marvell; in this instance, Marvell’s purple prose is cleverly woven into the body of the narrative as a form of gentle mockery. In *Comedy*, Fauset likewise

parodies the distinctive jargon of the eugenics movement via exterior dialogue and interior monologue of Olivia Cary. Though more difficult to detect than direct parody, diffused parody is still effective. In order to appreciate how Fauset uses this diffused parody, it first becomes necessary to recall some of the uniquely appalling rhetoric of the eugenics movement.

Popularized in the first decades of the twentieth-century and based on unsubstantiated claims made by scientists, biologists, anthropologists, and university professors, the eugenics movement in the United States--the belief that the human species could be improved through human selection--was marketed to the American public as an inevitable and necessary step towards social progress but in reality was no more than a wide scale effort to cloak institutionalized racism in a mantle of scientific respectability. A foremost critic on social policy and race, William H. Tucker writes about the economic and political ramifications of the eugenics movement:

What began as the study of hereditary characteristics thus quickly burgeoned into a presumptuous field marked by immodest pronouncements on the limits of democracy, the necessity of racial segregation, the futility of education, the biological inevitability of vast socioeconomic disparities, and the necessity for controlling the birthrate of certain groups. (6)

For a eugenicist, there was one route to human progress: selecting the best human specimens for procreation. This also meant limiting or cutting off altogether the propagation of “inferior” peoples, which according to the pseudoscience of the day, meant anyone who was not of a white, eastern European descent. As one of the movement’s founders, Charles Davenport framed it, “Our only hope . . . for the real

betterment of the human race is in better matings” (qtd. in Tucker 59). Tests, charts, and classification systems of humans arose with frightening urgency, resulting in bizarre designations used to categorize people such as the “idiot-imbecile-moron” index, designed by Harvard professor and eugenics leader Henry H. Goddard (Tucker 78). Not surprisingly, the results of Goddard’s test mirrored the racist belief systems of the testers: everyone who was not part of the Nordic aristocracy fell below the standards. For instance, Davenport’s influential and widely read study “Race-Crossing in Jamaica” concluded that the darker a person’s skin pigmentation, the more prone he would be to “crimes of larceny, kidnapping, assault, murder, rape, and sex immorality” (qtd. in Tucker 47).

While American eugenicists were concerned mostly with stemming the rising tide of immigration of eastern Europeans who were deemed inferior to their northern European counterparts, they also vigorously upheld the widely accepted belief about racial difference--that blacks were an inferior race determined by an unalterable genetic predisposition. Using the rhetoric of the times, Edward M. East, a Harvard professor of genetics wrote, “Gene packets of African origin are not valuable supplements to the gene packets of European origin; it is the white germ plasm that counts” (qtd. in Tucker 68). As critics of the eugenics movement have since pointed out, this racial hierarchy has no scientific basis whatsoever; but in the early half of the twentieth-century, such claims were received, by and large, as good science. The rhetoric of the day reflects this. Phrases like “better stock,” “breeding from the best,” “ideal race purity,” “undesirable blend of bloods,” “stock of the Nation,” “pure Nordic type,” filled eugenics journals and crept into everyday speech. Charles E. Wiggam’s “The New Decalogue of Science” made

eugenics science accessible to the general reader. In 1923, the book was a bestseller (Kevles 59) suggesting the movement's popularity in the United States. By the 1920s, the eugenics platform began to weave its way into American law. Virginia's "Racial Integrity Act of 1924," which made interracial marriage illegal, was underwritten by eugenics supporters, as was the 1927 Virginia state law, which allowed for the compulsory sterilization of patients in mental institutions so that their "weak genes" might not be passed on. Strict immigration policies, anti-miscegenation laws, state-mandated sterilizations--all were social policies founded on eugenics principles.

Today, scientists know that hereditary characteristics are not conveyed via the blood system but in a person's DNA, but in the early decades of the last century, it was believed that blood conveyed racial characteristics, which in turn contained its own discrete moral and intellectual properties. The notion of good or bad blood was a commonplace. Persons of mixed racial heritage were disparagingly called "half-bloods" or "half-breeds" because it was believed that racial admixture would always result in an inferior type of hybridization. Eugenicists also advanced the one-drop rule of race, the longstanding belief that if an individual had just one drop of black blood, this would corrupt the person physically, mentally, and morally; moreover, the proportion of "tainted" blood in the individual, whether black, Jewish, Eastern European, and so on, would be reflected in his or her antisocial behavior. According to Alain Coros, a geneticist working today, "the 'one-drop' rule persisted throughout World War II. It was this rule that the Nazis used to exterminate Jews" (39). So widely accepted was this belief that the American Red Cross during World War II kept blood supplies from black donors separate under the assumption that their undesirable traits would be passed on

through blood transfusions (Coros 39). The rhetoric of good and bad blood found its way onto the pages of popular literature of the time period and is used satirically by Fauset in *Comedy: American Style*.

Olivia Blanchard Cary uses the eugenics rhetoric *de jour*: “She could, she was sure, imbue her offspring with precept and example to such an extent that it would never enter their minds to acknowledge the strain of black blood which in considerable dilution would flow through their veins” (37). Through careful breeding, Olivia will make certain that her offspring’s blood will be sufficiently diluted. Describing the features of her very fair son, Christopher, Olivia thinks, “He had, she felt, a look of ‘race,’ by which she meant of course the only race which God, or Nature, for hidden, inscrutable purposes, meant should rule” (38). Olivia judges that because he is white enough, Christopher is now part of the dominant race, and she congratulates herself for her careful genetic planning. Similarly, she expects that her third child will be the whitest of all and therefore also a “member of the dominant race” (40). Fauset uses an elaborate, yet familiar metaphor to ridicule the theory behind the one-drop rule, a theory Olivia upholds:

As enough water in a vessel absorbs and dissolves a stain, so that eventually one thinks there is nothing there but the liquid itself, so she had been positive that all her Negro blood had been wrought by her white blood to a consistency as pure, as limpid as that which flowed through the heart of the whitest woman she knew.

(205)

By degrees, Olivia comes to espouse a hard-lined eugenics doctrine. Ironic passages such as the following reveal Olivia’s viewpoint:

For she belonged to that group of Americans which thinks that God or Nature created only one perfect race--the Caucasians. . . . The idea that there were more unwhite than white people in the world had for her no significance. Chinese, Negro, Indian, Malay. . . all of them as far as she was concerned were imperfections, base metals, misfits, garbage. Any union with them meant the introduction into the social order of something corrupt, repulsive. (206)

With diction like “one perfect race,” “strain of black blood,” “the only race . . . meant should rule,” “dominant race,” Olivia repeats the white supremacist propaganda of the day. Referring to people as “imperfections, base metals, misfits, garbage” echoes the jargon of the eugenics movement and anticipates the propaganda of the Nazi regime. Fauset, of course, is highly sarcastic in these references inviting readers to ridicule and thereby reject Olivia’s eugenics ambitions, but it is clear that Fauset wishes to uncover the influence of eugenics on Olivia’s type of racism. Fauset unmask the ruinous forces behind a white-is-right worldview with its talk of “superior bloods, racial admixtures, hybridizations and all the sociological and biological generalizations of the day” (83), as one character in the novel sarcastically puts it. *Comedy: American Style* satirizes the lingering effects of the eugenics movement in the United States and depicts how this plays out in the lives of young adults who are now left to navigate the murky waters of this pseudoscience.

Not only does Olivia espouse the jargon of the eugenics platform, she also eerily takes part in a eugenics experiment of her own. Part of Old Philadelphia’s comfortable middle class, Olivia strategically sets out to marry the lightest black man possible. She selects the extremely light-skinned, Harvard-educated physician, Christopher Cary, only



because she is certain that “they would have white children” (29). Through this careful selection process, Olivia now is certain that her highest ambitions will be realized:

With a background such as this, to what heights might not their children attain?  
And she as dowager would share all their triumphs, their opportunities, their  
advantages. They should know from the very beginning, and quite naturally, the  
desires of which her young life had been balked. (29)

Her first-born, Christopher Jr., turns out to be as fair as his mother had hoped, but he wants no part in his mother’s pretense, refusing to pass as a white person. In a brief comic aside, Christopher remarks to his sister that he takes particular pleasure in bringing home the darkest person he can find, just to goad his mother. Olivia’s second child, the very fair skinned Teresa, is far more compliant than Christopher. Seemingly raised under a nineteenth-century code of femininity, Teresa is “uncomplaining, studious, and contented” (71). According to Olivia, Teresa’s primary goal in life should be to marry a white man so that she can “take her place in the white world” (142). Olivia carefully orchestrates her own and her daughter’s marriages to bring about her master race, which she believes will provide her with the social and economic status she deserves.

Everything is going according to plan until Olivia’s third child and namesake, Oliver, is born. While expecting this child, Olivia anticipates that he will be even more white than his siblings, “in appearance, in rearing, in beliefs . . . completely, unrelievedly a member of the dominant race” (40), the phrase “dominant race” again sarcastically supplied her by Fauset. Olivia’s dream disintegrates, however, when the dark-skinned Oliver is born. Even though this is a genetic impossibility--a couple will never produce offspring darker than the darkest partner--Fauset introduces Oliver in order to upset

Olivia's grand eugenics plan. To her, Oliver was "the totality of that black blood which she so despised . . . . To her Oliver meant shame. He meant more than that; he meant the expression of her failure to be truly white" (205). Her ambition now ruined, Olivia rejects her son not only by refusing him any maternal affection but also by shunting him from grandparents to grandmothers so as to avoid associating with her dark-skinned son. Fauset here investigates the psychology of race mania and reveals how Olivia's desire to pass as white originally emerged as a defense against cruelty but now has become a full-blown, mad obsession for wealth, power, and prestige. Olivia has realized her one ambition, to become white, but she has also become a eugenics enthusiast in the process. Through a signifying caricature and diffused parody, Fauset constructs the novel's most powerful critique--against the absurdity of white supremacy.

### **American Cultural Nationalism**

Like other long, satirical works, *Comedy* targets more than one aspect of culture. Indeed, there are a number of other contemporaneous issues under scrutiny in *Comedy: American Style*, including the notion of a monochromatic American cultural nationalism. As the novel's title suggests, the book is grounded in a nationalist critique; and while the story alternately follows the lives of three different individuals, the larger context of the narrative is the nation's racial policies and practices. Fauset would have us to understand that her race drama plays out on the national stage. American national identity was still a key concern for many writers during the Harlem Renaissance. As George Hutchinson describes it, "alongside the diasporic aspect of the renaissance was an investment in some versions of American cultural nationalism through which the 'Americanness' of African American culture seemed a central and potentially powerful resource" (4). The promotion

of black cultural nationalism, along with a realization that blacks were inextricably part of American culture, were central themes emphasized in *The Crisis*. W. E. B. Du Bois articulated the magazine's views in a 1919 editorial: "Once for all, let us realize that we are Americans, that we were brought here with the earliest settlers, and that the very sort of civilization from which we came made the complete adoption of western modes and customs imperative if we were to survive at all. In brief, there is nothing so indigenous, so completely 'made in America' as we" (qtd. in Hutchingson 146).

Fauset takes up this concern in *Comedy: American Style* where she consistently challenges why white Anglo Saxons have the prior claim to cultural and political legitimacy. In the first pages of the novel, a teacher, Miss Baer, comments to one of her less-than-lily white students, "you Italian children are quite as good as us Americans" (6) and then later congratulates herself for showing such magnanimity to the new student. Fauset is alert to such hypocrisy, having just revealed that Miss Baer herself was a recent immigrant whose grandfather "under a difficult name ending in ewski was at that moment painfully tilling a field in a far-off town in Poland" (6). Despite her relatively new citizenship, Miss Baer considers herself a genuine American simply because she has a lighter skin tone than someone like her "Italian" student. Similarly, Olivia's mother, Janet Blanchard, is called an "honest-to-God American" by her boss because she is a diligent factory worker, in contrast to the "wops" who worked alongside her (11). The pejorative label used here reflects the boss's prejudice and his perception about national identity, rights and privileges. Janet's race qualifies her to be an American--at this point, she is passing as a white woman in order to get a high paying job--but the dark-skinned Italian immigrants are not bona fide Americans. The irony, of course, is that if the boss

knew Janet's true racial identity, he would likely not consider her an "honest-to-God" American.

Like Janet Blanchard and Miss Baer, the white men whose daughters attend Christie's Academy, a New England preparatory school, are also described as "thoroughly American" (70), a tag with a double meaning. By their own light, these powerful, wealthy men are the ultimate Americans, and everyone else--meaning Jews and African Americans as the context states--is mere imitation. By Fauset's discerning light, however, these men are also "thoroughly" American because they are thoroughly racist protectionists, the very sort of men who believe their rights and privileges come by some divinely apportioned racial and religious hierarchy.<sup>33</sup> Claims to authenticity, which carry with it social and political advantage, have been part of American history since its inception and a frequent target of its satire. In *The Power of Satire* Robert Elliott writes, "Each newly arrived immigrant group in America became a butt of ridicule for older groups who had risen to power and who therefore were able to set standards of Americanization. The immigrant is always a challenge, even a threat, to established customs" (85). In these scenes, Fauset unmasks the xenophobic attitude towards national authenticity and rights as newly arrived immigrant groups posed a threat to the established power structures, especially regarding the division of labor.

But Fauset's greatest concern is to reveal the hypocrisy of defining cultural nationalism devoid of the African American. Perhaps the most significant passage regarding claims to American-ness involves Henry Bates, a minor character whose physical characteristics are described in admiring detail throughout the novel. After a lengthy interior debate about American racial prejudices, Teresa Cary wonders to herself

why the “chestnut brown” Henry Bates, with “his clear, hard mind, his straight, supple body, his sense of humor, his beauty” (123) might not be labeled a “typical American” (123). If national character signifies intelligence, vitality, beauty, and humor as Fauset’s laundry list here suggests, then aren’t such qualities apparent in all citizens, especially African Americans? In *Comedy*, Fauset points out the absurdity, not to mention hypocrisy of a monochromatic standard for Americanization. “If Fauset had anything to do with it” George Hutchinson writes, “the standards of American art would be Negro standards” (421), a theme traceable in all her novels. Fauset confronts the practice of advancing a national identity without its millions of African American citizens or its immigrant population. While Claire Oberon Garcia has recently called for an awareness of Fauset’s transnational feminist consciousness as evidenced in her essays and short stories, in *Comedy*, Fauset focuses more on questions of cultural nationalism, as the title and these satiric references to American-ness suggest.<sup>34</sup>

### **Miscegenation**

In addition to this critique of a vexed nationalism, the novel also targets hypocrisies surrounding miscegenation, still a touchy subject in the 1930s. By the time *Comedy* was published, twenty-nine states had made interracial marriage illegal. Interracial couples were still controversial, if not verboten in most states. Du Bois himself advised against racial intermarriage in a 1920 editorial because he did not deem it “socially expedient” (“Social Equality” 16). Yet despite the desire to keep the races sexually segregated, there were millions of bi-racial and multi-racial individuals living in the United States, undeniable proof of miscegenation. In a 1934 article in *The Crisis*, Nancy Cunard, editor of *Negro: An Anthology* (1934), describes the people of Harlem as

a mixed-race community, displaying “every diversity of bone-structure, of head-shape of skin colour; mulattoes of all shades, yellow, ‘high yaller’ girls, and Havana-coloured girls, and exquisitely fine, the Spanish and Negro blends. . . more than two-thirds of the race now being mixed with white” (54). Writing at the same time period, anthropologist Melville Herskovits, a contemporary of Franz Boas, puts the percentage of racially mixed blacks in the United States a bit higher, at about eighty percent.<sup>35</sup> And yet despite the white ancestry of most African Americans, if Herskovits’s estimate is correct, many whites continued to show intense racial discrimination towards persons with a brown or tan skin tone. Jessie Fauset obliquely confronts this hypocrisy in *Comedy: American Style*.

While she does not go so far as to create a black and white couple in *Comedy*, she does the next closest thing: Fauset creates pairings who appear to be mixed. The romantic plotline follows these three young couples that eventually separate because of racial prejudice. In a scene early in the novel, Nicholas rides on a bus with Phebe, who has fair skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. Phebe identifies herself strictly as a “Negro,” but two male passengers assume she is a white woman and therefore spit insults at Nicholas as he departs from the bus. Later in the novel, Nicholas wonders about the illogic of prejudice based on skin tone:

More than once in Phebe’s company he had winced under the surprised or curious, gaping stares of white people in streetcars, or theaters, or parks. It was an ordeal which never failed to arouse within him a perfect fury of rage and exasperation. What group of people could there be, he often wondered,

within the United States, who were totally unaware that the admixture of whites and blacks had been going on, covertly to say the least, for centuries? (253)

In this scene, Nicholas points out that it is white people, not blacks, who disapprove of racial intermixing and seem willfully ignorant of past centuries of miscegenation.

Because Phebe appears to be a white woman in the company of a black man, everywhere they go, Phebe and Nick meet with disapproving looks or insulting comments. When they are in a white part of Philadelphia, the couple meets with rabid racism and threats of violence, as evidenced in the bus scene mentioned above. But when Phebe and Nicholas are in Greenwich Village, no one pays them any attention except to admire how good-looking they are. While Greenwich Village in the novel appears to be an accepting enclave regarding mixed race couples, there is evidence that this acceptance was not entirely widespread, even in the northeast. In a report published in 1919, two school teachers from New York City, a white woman and a black man, were married in Philadelphia but were coerced and tricked into resigning from their teaching posts once their marriage was discovered. School authorities eventually relented--miscegenation was not illegal in New York--but the incident suggests that even in a supposedly liberal place like New York City, interracial unions were still highly controversial.<sup>36</sup> In Fauset's novel, it is white people who are portrayed as hypocrites; they are the ones offended by the appearance of a mixed race couple and who act as if they are "totally unaware" of centuries of miscegenation.

Fauset goes to lengths to establish that the sexual attraction between each couple is based, in part, on physiognomy. In a highly descriptive scene of a summer party, Fauset uses erotically charged language, as well as many exclamation points and ellipses

to convey heightened emotion, to describe the couples dancing together. The dance itself also acts as a sexual metaphor. The “chestnut brown” Nicholas can barely contain his teenage hormones while standing close to the “white colored girl” Phebe Grant: “At the neck was a palely gilded clasp which Nicholas fastened. He looked from the clasp to Phebe’s gilt hair and for a moment his heart caught in his throat. The spell of the summer night and Phebe’s fairness and sweetness and his demanding blood lay thick about him for a moment” (61). It is Phebe’s *golden* hair and *fairness* that arouse Nicholas sexually. Phebe, for her part, is equally infatuated with “her Nicky”: “She was thinking no one, just no one in the world looked like Nicholas. . . . his dark face with that Apollo-like look, which the sculptured waviness of his hair bestowed upon him, was finely silhouetted against the moonlight with the softness of the black night for an immediate background. His careless beauty, his masterfulness made her heart turn over” (62). It is Nicholas’s *dark* face, not his chiseled face, or sculpted face, etc., that gives him a godlike quality. His physical beauty, including the “waviness of his hair” mesmerizes Phebe. When Teresa watches Phebe and Nicholas dance together, she admires their contrasting skin tones: “Phebe’s ethereal fairness . . . and Nicholas Campbell’s statuesque darkness” (58).

Similarly lusty descriptions occur between the white-skinned Teresa and the darker Henry. Teresa finds him “hopelessly, heartbreakingly, attractive, the possessor of that same devastating masculinity, just as he possessed that same combination of color, recklessness, hair, manner which marked Nick” (93). It is Henry’s unique skin-color, admirably described many times in the novel, that accounts for his sexual allure: “It is a combination which belongs to one special type of American Negro of mixed blood, the chestnut brown. And there is no other species of mankind which possesses just that same



fatalness of charm. . . Such men begin to know their power early” (93).<sup>37</sup> Fauset makes it evident that the sexual attraction between Teresa-Henry and between Phebe-Nicholas is inextricably linked to physiognomy. And in these cases, opposites attract. However, none of the novel’s original “mixed” couples--Theresa-Henry, Christopher-Marise, Phebe-Nicholas--stay together or marry because of their own or their family’s or society’s prejudices. Nicholas rejects Phebe because she appears to be too white and because he does not want to cope with a lifetime of bigotry and animosity. Theresa breaks off her engagement to Henry because he is too dark for her mother’s liking. And light skinned Christopher marries the equally fair Phebe. It is a troubling, politically charged outcome in the novel that lights only marry lights and darks only marry darks, despite their strong desire to do the opposite. Fauset pushes boundaries with her racially ambiguous couples, forcing readers to consider the possibility of black-white sexual attraction. At the same time, she confronts white America’s hypocrisy and denial of its sexual past.

### **Irony**

Jessie Faust is not typically considered a satiric wit, and she does not possess the intellectual cynicism of Nella Larson, the vernacular-driven humor of Zora Neale Hurston, or the iconoclastic bombast of George Schuyler. Still, her last novel is far more satiric in tone than her previous three novels. And while tone is subjectively interpreted, when compared to the tone of her other novels, *Comedy: American Style* is markedly different. Because this arch tone has not been discussed in any length, I wish to take the time to illustrate several passages where this type of absurd humor and irony is on display.

In a scene early in the novel, eight year-old Nicholas Campbell asks his mother how the blonde, blue-eyed Phebe is considered “colored.”

‘But, Ma, how can she be?’

‘Well, she just is. Lots of colored people look like that. But they’re colored right on.’

‘But if she ain’t white, why ain’t she white? She’s whiter than lots of those white girls at our school. What makes her colored and makes those white girls white?’

‘Well, son, I can’t tell you that. You’ll have to wait till you’re grown up....’ (49)

This scene is a microcosm of the farce Fauset is trying to set forth: If race labels are so random, why do they have so much influence over a person’s destiny? In this scene and others, Fauset draws out the arbitrariness of what constitutes race, as well as the absurd nature of prejudice based on biological constituents. In another scene, Phebe wonders why whites, who say they despise dark or black skinned people, spend so much time trying to darken themselves every summer. This type of absurdist humor, occurring sporadically throughout the novel, draws attention to the illogic of a view of race based strictly on physical characteristics or traits.

Jessie Fauset also makes use of irony and sarcasm when she describes white clubwomen, starting with the Peace Conference in Switzerland where Olivia and her fellow clubwomen are in attendance:

The conference itself was a marvel since it was planned and developed by several of the world’s cleverest and most distinguished women. Women of brains, of poise, of undoubted equipment, of great sincerity. Their ideas were splendid, their plans of execution rational. Save for their tendency to disregard the human

equation which itself has no notion of disregarding war--all their suggestions were even feasible. Add to this, some extraordinary oratory and the appearance of a score of the greatest publicists and thinkers of the age and one has some concept of the value and merit of the gathering. (104)

Surely it is with extreme irony that Fauset refers to this conference as a “marvel” because it likely mirrors the historical Geneva Conference of 1932, which was, by all accounts, an unmitigated disaster. The conference was attended by thousands of clubwomen, many from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, as well as high-profile activists. Despite their numbers and efforts, none of the women’s resolutions were adopted, and no effort was made to disarm: “Most of these arms control discussions became moot after October 1933, when Hitler withdrew Germany from the League of Nations and from the disarmament talks in Geneva. The conference dragged on into 1934 but produced no result” (“Geneva” par. 11). Olivia participates in the Lake Geneva peace conference not out of political conviction or social conscience, but because it elevates her in the eyes of her fellow (white) clubwomen. Fauset takes the time to describe some of the women who attend the conference in order to reveal the xenophobia and racism that underscore their charitable endeavors. Diana Heflin disapproves of a restaurant’s integrated seating, saying, “Wouldn’t you think that Nigras would come to know their place and keep it?” (104). Heflin is from the American south, and Fauset refers to her twice as a Georgian in one brief scene to call attention to the particular acrimony of southern racism.

Olivia sits on committees, attends luncheons and teas, and ingratiates herself with the more important delegates or chairwomen. She attends the Convention of Welfare

Workers in Chicago, perhaps an ironic allusion to the real-life Chicago Women's Club, which was a very powerful organization comprised entirely of white women. Elsewhere in the novel, the wealthy clubwomen are described in sarcastic terms: they uphold "stupid traditions of themselves and their kind" (213) and meet in "waste spaces of impersonal parlors of some rich woman whom lack of success in life at home had driven to a vaster, less demanding field outside" (152). Fauset unilaterally portrays these women as racist busybodies. While Edith Wharton ridicules clubwomen out of her own anxiety over women functioning in the public arena, especially as intellectuals, Jessie Fauset mocks this sort of clubwoman because she is a social do-gooder who hides her racial hatred behind a veil of good works.

Fauset's most brilliant use of ironic wit is saved for her sketch of the New England preparatory school, Christie's Academy of New Hampshire, an elitist institute that, despite its integration policy, is a breeding ground for racism, xenophobia, and white supremacy: "while the school had no objections to foreigners, Negroes, nor Jews, it happened that none had ever registered within their portals" (70). Olivia insists that Theresa attend Christie's to advance her social standing and to improve her chances of marrying a white man. At the academy, rubbing shoulders with children of wealthy families is valued more than knowledge: "Christie's Academy, the prospectus said, catered to a small select group of girls; girls whose parents felt that the contact of young minds with superior and highly cultivated mentalities was more educative than the assimilation of the contents of many volumes" (69). Like many schools that accommodate the socially ambitious, Christie's advertises that its curriculum is unsurpassed, but the high selectivity of the school is based more on astronomical tuition

and boarding fees than on any real educational value, as Dr. Cary sarcastically points out. The student body is comprised of white, Anglo-Saxon social climbers:

Most of the students were the children of people belonging to the upper middle-class; people whose names never appeared in the papers, who took themselves and their positions seriously and sensibly. The men of this group were probably pillars in their respective communities, thoroughly American and for the most part New England American. (70)

The school is attended by “Yankee” girls with good Protestant names like Phyllis Morrison, Maud Parker, and Ellen Ware. Historian Daniel J. Kevles has documented that eugenics supporters in the United States were mostly comprised of “middle and upper middle class, white, Anglo-Saxons, predominantly Protestant and educated” (64), and the student body at Christie’s reads like a who’s who in the Knights of Nordica.

During a discussion about what might happen if a black girl attended their schools, several of Teresa’s classmates reveal their deep-seated biases, not to mention parochial ignorance. One student admits that she’s never spoken to a black person and would not know how to respond, as if the girl were an alien species. A second says, “they’re all right. . . My mother had a colored cook. She has two children, a little black boy and a little brown girl. And they are the funniest! You ought to see them dance!” (76). This speaker reveals a perception of race that cannot move beyond stereotype: to her, blacks are either cooks, comics, or dancers. A third girl worries about someone “dancing around here like Topsy” (76), a reference to the young, illiterate slave girl of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Nearly forty years had passed since the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, and yet this student takes an image from a mid-nineteenth-

century work of fiction to express her expectations regarding race. In referencing Topsy, this student propounds a view of blacks as children, illiterates, and slaves. Another student, the socially conscious Ellen Ware counters, “It would still be our duty to teach her deportment and neatness. It’s our fault that they’re here. We brought them” (76). Fauset here reveals a more subtle form of racism than the cook-comic-Topsy reference, one that blends a social conscience (“it’s our fault”) with a racial superiority (“it’s our duty to teach”).

Fauset maintains the detached stance of the satirist in this account of Christie’s Academy, allowing dialogue and description to reveal the girls’s constricted views. Rather than lapse into didacticism as she sometimes does in earlier novels, Fauset, like Dorothy Parker, instead relies on ironic description to reveal the reprehensible behavior and attitudes. During another debate, Maud Parker reveals not only racial prejudice but also class bias. She insists that darker African Americans are “the working class” while those who are “very fair, almost as white as we are” (77) live more comfortable middle-class lives. From Maud’s perspective, skin pigmentation somehow determines social class. Marian Tilbury offers her own racist views by suggesting that even if this hypothetical black girl did attend Christie’s, she wouldn’t allow the girl’s “black blood” to bring her down to some imagery debased level. Only one student, Jenny Hastings, seems to speak with any reason, confronting the illogic of the good blood/bad blood doctrine: “You don’t think you’ve got one-half or two-thirds of your veins filled with one kind of blood, do you, And the other filled with another? And that you can let one part of it govern you and the rest not affect you at all?” (78). In this depiction of an elite, New England preparatory school, Fauset uncovers the rabid racism of its students. Despite its

promise of a having a progressive curriculum, Christie's, in reality, is an institute still entrenched in outdated, antebellum concepts of race; the student body can only conceive of blacks in stereotype and are motivated by an obnoxious sense of *noblesse oblige*. Jessie Fauset suffered a lifetime of prejudice and insult at the hand of white educational institutions. Denied access to Bryn Mawr as well as other Philadelphia-area teachers' colleges, disallowed housing in the dormitories at Cornell University where she was matriculated, and later ignored for teachings posts at integrated high schools in Philadelphia for which she was arguably over-qualified, Fauset's indignation over discriminatory policies within higher education is, in part, what fuels this satiric depiction of Christie's Academy. She unmasks how educational systems in the United States contribute to entrenched racism.

### **Tragic Elements**

In his essay, "The Mythos of Winter: Irony and Satire," Northrop Frye charts six phases of satire arguing that in the last four phases, the "ironic aspect of tragedy" emerges whilst the satire recedes (236). And so while a novel may be predominantly satiric in tone and intent, the conventions of tragedy may also be woven into its narrative, giving it an air of inevitability, despair, and resignation. Fauset's final novel follows this pattern, and it is to *Comedy's* tragic aspects to which I now turn. For ease of discussion, in this essay I divide the satiric and tragic modes; but in the novel, the satiric-tragic conventions are not so neatly separately but are more interwoven.

### **Classical Analogues**

*Comedy: American Style* is a curious title for a novel about the destructive forces behind racial hatred in the early twentieth-century. There is nothing comic in this novel,

no buoyant humor or genial tone, and no literary convention normally associated with comedy like a happy ending where loose ends are tied up or where a chaotic order is restored. The novel's title is a red herring; a bitter joke of sorts, for the narrative adapts numerous conventions of Greek tragedy, not comedy. At Cornell, Jessie Fauset studied what she described as a "chiefly classical" (qtd. in Sylvander 29) curriculum, including four years of Latin and two of Greek, so it is certain that she was deeply knowledgeable of the conventions of Greek drama. In her third novel, *The Chinaberry Tree*, Fauset incorporates numerous Greek dramatic elements, making mention of the Furies and Muses, incorporating the family curse into the plotline, and adapting an overall air of fatalism or inevitability (Sylvander 198).<sup>38</sup> While these classical parallels might not be used as extensively in *Comedy*, Fauset nevertheless adapts several conventions from Greek tragedy to achieve the desired bleak tone. She structures her novel according to a formula set forth by Aristotle in *Poetics*. Aristotle writes that tragedy is comprised of six parts, "plot, characters, diction, reasoning, spectacle, and song" (95), and rather than numbering or titling the chapters, Fauset arranges the story in six parts. The first two sections are "The Plot" and "The Characters," mirroring Aristotle's formula exactly, followed by "Teresa's Act," "Oliver's Act," "Phebe's Act," and "Curtain." These last sections are labeled "act" and "curtain" to further connect the novel to drama.

To strengthen the classical ties, the action starts *in medias res*: a white neighbor insults the young Olivia when she accidentally hits her in the face with a snowball, and the race drama is set in motion. Fauset includes an invocation of the muse: "If only a god could have intervened! If he could have set his stern lips to the rosy ear of Olivia's new, young and completely unobservant teacher. If he could have said to her with the awful



gravity of a god: ‘Refrain from those words, for in them lie Pain, Death, Weariness and Utter Futility!’ (5). The ironically titled *Comedy: American Style* adopts the structure of Greek tragedy to draw attention to the tragic consequences of racial hatred in the United States, especially how it can destroy families. Obsession over skin pigmentation may be comic in its absurdity, but how this plays out in the lives of individuals, families, and the nation is more akin to tragedy. Fauset doesn’t seem to do much else with these analogues to Greek tragedy; perhaps Cheryl Wall is correct when she writes, “Fauset’s reach exceeds her grasp; the scaffolding is more impressive than the narrative it supports” (81). But she does adopt these few conventions to give the novel a tragic air.

Fauset also borrows the idea of a tragic hero from Greek tragedy. The central action of the novel is the violent death of the young man Oliver Cary, who not only functions as the novel’s tragic hero but also as its representative artist. Oliver is a beautiful, gifted musical prodigy, and yet despite all his “fine looks and accomplishments”(195), Oliver has “no conceit” (195). Seemingly devoid of any faults or even the normal immaturity one would expect from a twelve year-old boy, Oliver is supremely humble. In places, this rosy characterization tries the reader’s patience, especially as it seems counterintuitive to the novel’s overall sardonic tone. While it’s understandable that Fauset wishes to counter degrading stereotypes of African Americans in literature, to construct such a flawless person--and Oliver is relentlessly virtuous--has almost an adverse effect. However, I want to argue that Fauset emphasizes Oliver’s humility not because she is incapable of shaping a realistic character but because she is constructing Oliver as a tragic hero in a classical drama. It therefore becomes imperative

that Oliver does *not* possess the usual fatal flaw of the classical hero, pride. It is his brown skin-tone that is his undoing, as seen from the Negro-phobic Olivia.<sup>39</sup>

Fauset casts Oliver in the role of the tragic hero who dies because of his tragic flaw. Despite the love and support that surrounds him, Oliver is inwardly miserably because he doesn't understand why his mother spurns him. One day he reads a letter written by Olivia and discovers the reason: "If it just weren't for Oliver. . . Oliver and his unfortunate color has certainly been a mill-stone around our necks all our lives" (221). His first response is shame and then rage. He writes to Teresa asking to live with her and Aristide in Paris, but Teresa explains that this is impossible because Aristide does not know she is a "Negro." Teresa's concluding statement eerily echoes Olivia's letter: "So, darling, you see with your tell-tale color..." (225). Placing the two letters on the bureau, Oliver then looks into the mirror and contemplates his predicament. Realizing that it is the one thing he cannot change, his color, and that this separates him from his beloved sister and mother, Oliver commits suicide. He shoots himself in the head with a pistol, "the light of the declining day athwart his smiling face" (226).

From a realistic standpoint, his suicide is highly improbable. Oliver has many other options available to him, including living with his adoring grandparents, who are all financially well off, or confiding in his father or brother. But the suicide serves a purpose for the tragic subplot--the death of the hero because of his fatal flaw, at least as perceived by Olivia. Fauset chooses to adopt the mantel of the tragedian when portraying the promise of the black artist as a way to signal her despair over the efficacy of the arts to accomplish anything of value, and perhaps, as a way to signal her own departure as an artist from the political scene. Capturing the zeitgeist of the times, Fauset depicts her

promising artist in a tragic light. Adapting the structure of a Greek tragedy and constructing a tragic hero who dies of his fatal flaw, Fauset imbues her last novel with the deep strains of tragedy.

### **Death of the Artist**

And yet Oliver's death is also important to consider because he is the novel's representative artist. In the early years of the New Negro movement, many writers, including Jessie Fauset, considered the arts to be a powerful tool to help transform racist thinking and policy in the United States. David Levering Lewis explains the rationale behind this strategy: "Although the road to the ballot box, the union hall, the decent neighborhood, and the office was blocked, there were two untried paths that had not been barred, in large part, because of their very implausibility, as well as irrelevancy to most Americans: arts and letters" (xxiv). Many of the writers and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, especially during the early years, had high hopes for the ability of art--literary, performing, visual--to effect social change, especially by countering degrading stereotypes on the stage and in print. When Langston Hughes wrote, "It's the way people look at things, not what they look at, that needs to be changed" in *The Crisis* magazine in 1926, he was speaking about the potential of literature to transform a prejudiced and discriminatory culture. Many writers articulated their ideas about art and politics in newspaper and magazine essays and in fiction. Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, George Schuyler, Charles Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset, James Weldon Johnson and others wrote about the transformative potential of art, and most, at least initially, were optimistic. For example, in the introduction to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), James Weldon Johnson has this sanguine assessment:

The status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race than of actual conditions. And nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art. (par. 4)

Similarly, Alain Locke's introduction to *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) is filled with forward-looking optimism. Locke writes of a "new order" in American life where "new mental attitudes" regarding African Americans would replace old ones, where the New Negro is a "new augury of a new democracy" and so forth. When Locke writes, "[our] more immediate hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective" (8), he is not speaking for a small minority of intellectuals and writers.

W. E. B. Du Bois, a prolific writer, also understood art's political potential. In 1926, Du Bois published "Criteria of Negro Art" in the October issue of *The Crisis* sparking a debate on art and racial politics that swept Harlem. In "Criteria of Negro Art" Du Bois considers it the artist's duty to tell the truth, to undo the harmful stereotypes of the literary past, and he denounces art that denies the struggle for racial equality, that suggests, "there is no color line" (292) as he warns about the dangers of patronage. The essay climaxes with his now-famous thoughts on the political function of literature:

Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped silent. (296)

The essay concludes with Du Bois calling for blacks, and not whites, to publish, review, and judge their own art and literature. Later in the year, Du Bois published a list of questions in *The Crisis* under the title: “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed? A Symposium.” The seven questions, repeated in subsequent issues of *The Crisis* in 1926, touched on a variety of topics: what constitutes the artist’s ideal subject matter, what role might white publishers play in black literature, how might cultural stereotypes be countered, and should the underworld be valorized in literature while educated blacks be ignored under the assumption that they are merely imitating white society? A number of publishers, editors, and writers, black and white, responded to the questions.

Jessie Fauset’s response appears in the June 1926 issue. Fauset saw no reason to limit characterization in literature except when an author might depict “the worst types” (71) out of personal malice; and she criticizes white publishers who might refuse to print novels that portray educated, accomplished blacks because they were deemed uninteresting. Fauset saves her longest answer for question four: “What are Negroes to do when they are painted at their worst and judge by the public as they are painted?” She answers, “They must protest strongly and get their protestations before the public” (71) and then goes on to advocate a type of writing—filled with *pathos*, humor, and sincerity-- that will please both reader and publisher. Her harshest words are for white publishers who are misguided about what readers might find interesting:

And here I blame the publisher for not being a ‘better sport.’ Most of them seem to have an *idée fixe*. They, even more than the public, I do believe, persist in considering only certain types of Negroes interesting and if an author presents a

variant they fear that the public either won't believe in it or won't 'stand for it.'  
(72)

Though guarded, these pointed comments confront the conservatism and narrow-mindedness, *not* of the reading public or of a specific type of writer, but of white publishers. Fauset's energetic support of and enthusiasm for new authors are articulated in her reviews, columns, and essays in *The Crisis*. She praises a wide range of literary works, but she consistently disparages fiction that was what she considered to be overly didactic or filled with propaganda. For instance, when she reviewed Rene Maran's novel, *Batouala*, she praised its lyricism and verisimilitude, adding "there lies its strength. No propaganda, no preachments, just an actual portrayal of life" (qtd. in Wall 57).

Countering degrading stereotypes, writing realistic stories about the black middle class, and refusing to politicize her fiction seem to be some of Fauset's priorities as an author.

With all the attention given to arts and letters during the early years of the Harlem Renaissance, it is perhaps no surprise that all of Fauset's novels concern themselves with the role of the African American artist in society. In *There is Confusion*, Joanna Marshall is a dancer who, despite the discriminatory performance culture, performs three key roles in a spectacular dance piece titled "Dance of the Nations:" as "Indian America," as "Black America," and wearing a mask, as "White America." During her encore, the audience demands she remove her mask. When she does, Joanna delivers a speech about how "there is no one in the audience more American than I" (232). In *Plum Bun*, Angela Murray is disinterested in the limited roles available to women--wife, mother, nurse, or teacher--and instead wants to become an acclaimed artist. She studies painting in New York City and wins an art prize to further her studies in Paris. In *The Chinaberry Tree*, a

novel filled with detailed descriptions of clothing and make-up, Laurentine Strange struggles with race and family loyalties but finds some measure of satisfaction in her creative dressmaking. In these novels, Fauset focuses on the vicissitudes each artist faces, and despite the hardships--and there are many--in the end, each one's artistic ambitions are either realized or are inchoate, with the promise of opportunity and fulfillment imminent.

A radical shift takes place in *Comedy: American Style*. The representative artist in this novel is a male, Oliver Cary, a gifted musician who dreams of composing original musical scores. Not only is Oliver's gender a departure from the Fauset script, his life's work is never realized because of his precipitous death. On face value, Oliver's suicide acts as a stern rebuke to those within the African American community who might have internalized the white racist order, who may reject someone in their own community or family for simply having a dark skin tone. Taken to its extreme, this sort of rejection can destroy lives, and perhaps Fauset, who claims she based the story on real people, wants readers to be alert to this possibility. But it cannot be ignored that on a less literal level, Oliver's death also signals the end of the emerging artist.

Oliver Cary is a representative type, a one-dimensional, near-allegorical figure that lacks realistic complexity or interiority or even any discernible human failings. Oliver is extraordinarily beautiful, talented, brilliant, devoted, and charismatic. Sherrard-Johnson considers this character to be "the transatlantic figure of the black dandy as embodied by W. E. B. Du Bois" (xxvi), but Oliver is more Fauset's aesthete, fashioned after the image of the nineteenth-century apolitical artiste. In the very brief "Oliver's Act," the word *beauty* and *beautiful* appear more than a dozen times and almost always in

association with Oliver. The writing is highly descriptive in “Oliver’s Act” as if to underscore the idea of an aesthete overwhelmed by his senses. Effeminate, highly sensitive, Oliver virtually swoons when he reads poetry: “The beauty of his readings lay about him always. That quite other beauty of people and of places to which he was so receptive carried him by analogy back in his thoughts to this loveliness” (215). As a boy of twelve, he gets lost in introspective reveries at the slightest provocation, whether it is the eerie shadow cast by the corner streetlamp, the tired faces of laborers returning home, or the soft feeling of his undisturbed pillow. A brilliant student who quotes Wordsworth from memory, Oliver is “richly endowed by the fates at birth with beauty, ability, and intellect” (189). He spends hours practicing his piano, has the gift of perfect pitch, and can flawlessly sight-read a complex musical composition. He turns everything “into a thing of beauty” (202).

This portrait of the artist continues apace throughout the novel. “You’re such an artist” (202) a friend remarks while listening to him play the piano. Oliver has an “instinctive artistry” (215) and “artistic leanings” (216). People often stop to admire him for his unusual beauty and tell him, everyone is “waiting for you to do something great” (202). A visionary, the boy announces to his grandfather that he will one day become a musician who will create new, important melodies:

He would write, not the kind of music one usually heard, not simply a medley of sweet sounds, he explained in his childish terms, but music that told something, that drew pictures, that would make you see all this. He pointed to the forms milling about the vicinity in which they happened to be. (193)



The pair has just passed through a neighborhood near Franklin Square in Philadelphia, which is, according to the description, “teeming with unwashed Negroes and Jews” (192). However inelegantly described, Oliver’s artistic ambition is to give voice to a commoner class of people than his own well-heeled Philadelphia family. The Cary’s are wealthy enough to own a three-story house in an exclusive part of the city, employ a maid, take vacations in Europe, and purchase a baby grand piano. Certainly Fauset’s descriptors smack of class snobbery--previously she labels these people as “picturesque and primitive” (192)--but it is significant that her visionary artist wishes to express the experiences of everyday, working class, and downtrodden people, and not of the *haute bourgeoisie*. Angela Murray, the artist in *Plum Bun*, has a similar artistic vision when she spends time people-watching on Fourteenth Street, in New York City. Oliver’s emerging artistic vision is further clarified as he watches people on Eleventh Street and Woodland Avenue, in Philadelphia:

. . . the song, the rhythm, the grunt of the colored men whom he had seen working one day on Woodland Avenue near the University where he had been waiting for Christopher.

And there was something else too that he must get into melody. . . the calmness, the peace, the utter satisfaction that he had glimpsed on early summer mornings on the faces of laborers trudging serenely to work in the cool of the day before the sun had made a fiery furnace of the city. . . . They seemed so happy. (198)

No doubt Fauset romanticizes the working class with the phrase “they seemed so happy,” but despite the patronizing view, it is working class folk that energizes Oliver’s desire to create music, to “tell to the ear the vision which his eyes had seen” (199). Much has been

made of the artistic chasm that existed between the older generation of writers of the Harlem Renaissance like Jessie Fauset and the younger, more avant-garde contingency like Langston Hughes. Certainly their literary preferences and differences are well chronicled. So it is perhaps surprising that Fauset constructs her emerging artist, both in *Plum Bun* and in *Comedy*, as someone inspired by what Hughes would call the folk. Oliver likes all kinds of people, but he draws his inspiration from the “rough working folk” on Front Street (198). In *Comedy: American Style*, as in all her other novels, Fauset constructs a detailed portrait of a young, emerging artist, a portrait with political significance.

The question remains: after painstakingly constructing a portrait of this gifted young artist whom everyone loves and admires, why would Jessie Fauset suddenly kill him off, and by such violent means? In a 1930s novel, a sixteen year-old shooting himself in the head would cause a stir, but does the author create this scenario for the sake of sensationalism, or might his suicide serve a political end? “Oliver’s Act” is the shortest act in the novel--roughly one-third the length of the other acts--and it alternates between the high promise of Oliver’s future and the miserable reality of his present life, which is hemmed in by his mother’s hatred. Oliver’s potential is never realized; he is destroyed before he can articulate his artistic vision. Why Fauset does this is hinted at in the description of Oliver’s dead body. His brother, Christopher, finds him “lying on the floor of an upper room, smiling through a veil of blood” (263). In this highly symbolic and final description of the representative artist, Fauset conjures up the dominant metaphor in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the vast veil of race, a metaphor surely familiar to readers of *Comedy: American Style*. This veil, Du Bois famously wrote, results in the "double-

consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (9). Oliver looks at himself through this veil, from the warped perspective of his white supremacist mother. To a lesser degree, this is Teresa's perspective; she, too, will not cross the color line. Oliver's final judgment is that the veil can never be lifted. Rather than repudiate this way of thinking and rebel against it as Phebe, Marise, Christopher, Henry and other black characters in the novel do, Oliver surrenders to it. In putting to death her young artist, Fauset repudiates not only an art for art's sake aesthetic theory, always problematic for those not part of the leisure class, but also the notion that art can transform the political landscape, not because of any lack of talent on the part of African Americans, but because of entrenched, implacable hatred from the white world. Fauset seems to suggest that the artist cannot create in this rabidly racist world order; and even if he could, it would change little. Du Bois, as Levering Lewis notes, had already reached that conclusion.<sup>40</sup>

This pessimistic, or perhaps realistic view of art's potential is especially apparent when compared to Fauset's views in *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral* (1929), a novel focused on art and society. *Comedy* extends many of the themes and ideas found in *PB*, but there is a radical shift in outlook regarding the promise of the African American artist. To appreciate this shift, it is worthwhile to consider how Fauset treats the subject matter in her second novel.

Though consistently viewed as a *bilingsroman*, *Plum Bun* is more a *kunstlerroman*, or artist's novel where the central action is between a young artist and her art, revealing Fauset's complex working out of the role of the artist in society. Fauset, at least at this time in her writing career, was influenced by Walter Pater and his theory of

aestheticism. Cheryl Wall was the first to make a connection between Fauset and Pater, stating that as a critic, Fauset's "probable model" (57) was Walter Pater, but Wall does not discuss Pater's influence in any detail. In an advertisement for a writing contest, Fauset lists a number of what she considers to be great writers and stylists, including Walter Pater, whom she describes as "that old master of exquisite phrase and imaginative incident" (qtd. in Sylvander 107). So it is certain that Fauset read and admired this theorist.

In his concluding essay in *The Renaissance* (1873), Pater advocates the now-famous notion of "art for art's sake" arguing that art exists for the sake of truth and beauty alone, and, as such is not a venue for moralizing. His approach to art was what he called "appreciative" or "impressionist," and he stipulated that art must answer the question, "what does this mean to me? What impression does it leave with me and how then, might I begin to appreciate its beauty?" (11). There are traces of Pater's influence in *Plum Bun*, particularly in the scenes where Angela considers her ideal subject matter.

Initially Angela chooses her subjects primarily because of the feelings they evoke and not necessarily because they are obvious political metaphors. The first people she feels inspired to draw are the "Fourteenth Street Types":

the Square was full of rusty specimens of mankind who sat on the benches, as did Angela herself, for hours at a stretch, . . . They remained the same, drooping, discouraged down and outers. . . .she said, I'll make a great picture of these people some day and call them "fourteenth Street types" and suddenly a vast sadness invaded her. (89)

Days later, she returns to Fourteenth Street and watches a group of people who are standing outside a storefront window, listening to a player piano: “The listeners might be as varied as fifteen people may be, yet for the moment they would be caught in a common, almost cosmic nostalgia” (91). She watches as men, women, and children respond to the music; and again, empathizing with these people, she is moved to draw them in her sketchbook. Fauset, who champions universalism in *The Gift of Laughter*, seems to be advancing the idea that art should create a universal feeling, a *pathos* for the alienated, the lonely, the poor, rather than to propagandize. Significantly, there are no racial descriptors in this scene; the portraits focuses on the misery and loneliness of the crowd, the feeling evoked, the impression of cosmic nostalgia, of a unifying sadness. Much later in the story, Angela returns to this same area where she feels an undeniable connection between herself and the down-and-outers. Eventually, she turns these sketches into a painting and wins a prize for her “Fourteen Street Types.”

Another important image Angela sketches is a spectral figure of Life, personified as a race-less and faceless woman, “a mass of lightly indicated figures passing apparently in review before the tall, cloaked form of a woman, thin to emaciation, her hands on her bony hips, slightly bent forward laughing uproariously yet with a certain chilling malevolence” (282). Angela explains the ghastly image to her friend, Anthony: “I’m not sure yet whether I’ll develop it. I,—it’s an idea that has slowly taken possession of me since I’ve been in New York. The tall woman is Life, and the idea is that she laughs at us; laughs at the poor people who fall into the traps that she sets for us” (282). Fauset here gives us an avenging fury straight out of classical mythology, a feminized deity who laughs at rather than sympathizes with suffering humanity. Taken together, these

drawings suggest that Fauset's view on the role of art was one that advocated a sort of humanist universalism, rather than a racial radicalism. There is nothing overtly political about her chosen subject matter, which would be in concert with Fauset's estimation of art's function at this time. Angela's anxious working out of an artistic sensibility captures the conflict that naturally arises between opposing views on art: one which argues that art should exist for truth and beauty (Pater); and the other, that truth and beauty in art should be used to combat racial inequality (Du Bois).

*Plum Bun* ends with Angela having learned that if she is going to produce "Art with a capital A" (78), as a black artist, she cannot be hemmed in by white standards, especially those set by white patrons, and as a female artist, she cannot rely on the so-called protection of marriage, having learned that marriage, is in fact, "a mirage." Rather than devote her energies to finding an ideal husband as many of her peers have done, Angela instead turns her attention towards her art, sails for Paris, and by the end of the novel, is attending art school in the French capital. Angela has come full circle: she is living out her mother's dream and is studying art in Paris, recalling that "this was her life, and that her one ambition, was to become an acknowledged, a significant painter of portraits" (375). Fauset's ideas about art's relation to politics seem to be summed up in the adage, "you cannot fight and create," a phrase repeated several times in *Plum Bun*. In order for artists to create, they have to be unencumbered by internalized racism, free from racist patrons, given equal opportunity, and be resistant to a sexist society that privileges men. Fauset never describes any of the artwork Angela produces in her two years in Paris. She leaves the canvas blank, her aesthetic vision inchoate. But *Plum Bun* ends on an upbeat with the promise of Angela's artistic abilities stretched before her. In *Comedy*,

the emerging artist never expresses his artistic vision. His potential is destroyed. The tragic undertones of the novel and its sobering subplot suggests a writer who had lost faith in the rhetoric of uplift and in the efficacy of art to bring about any lasting political or social change, a powerlessness only magnified by the Great Depression.

The grimness of Oliver's suicide hangs over the remaining pages of the novel. Jacquelyn MacLendon views the novel as having a classic comedy ending where the conflict is resolved and there is a "(re) establishment of order and the villains' getting their just dessert" (69). While the wicked Olivia does seem to meet with an appropriate punishment, the story's central conflict--systemic racial prejudice and its consequences--is hardly resolved. Fauset closes the curtain on her race drama on a bleak note and leaves the players suspended in a modernist malaise, a textbook satiric ending where nothing is resolved. Dr. Cary and Christopher are numbed by Oliver's death; Teresa is imprisoned; and Olivia, exiled. Two of the three acts end in tragedy. Only the race-proud businesswoman Phebe has found a modicum of success and happiness.

The novel's grim outlook is carried out to its final section. "Curtain" is very short, describing Olivia's exile in France. Dr. Cary provides his wife with enough money to live on but not enough to book a return passage home, so she is forced to live there permanently. Living in a dilapidated boardinghouse outside Paris, Olivia has accomplished her goal in life, to become white. So thorough is her racial conversion that even in small details, her race-change is manifest. Olivia refuses to play the card game "Black Jack" and can only smoke one brand of French tobacco, "Miss Blanche" (321), two witty, sardonic jokes supplied late in the narrative. Unlike "Oliver's Act," which is told in florid detail, the writing in this section is tightly controlled, the imagery perfectly

grim. Olivia wears a “slightly shabby dress” (321) and passes by a “horrid little stuffed larks reassembled in the window with their miserable feathers” (322). Her room is light by a “shabby light” that only emphasizes its “shabby neatness” (322). The pension offers “horrid meals” and is filled with “decayed and frigid gentlewomen” (326). Even the sunshine is “thin” and “watery” (327). Olivia has landed in a white wasteland.

The closing scene is chilling. Friendless, sitting alone in her room, Olivia looks out the window and sees a boy and mother sitting on a park bench enjoying a book together: “It must have been a very funny story, for they laughed a great deal; once, the mother, resting her dark head against his fair one, looked and laughed long and clearly at something he was pointing to on the printed page” (327). Even this late in the story, Fauset mentions the dark/light pairing. But Olivia has no pang of regret, no wave of grief as she watches the mother and son. She stares impassively out the window. The curtain closes on the image of the boy: “He was a slender, rather tall lad, but young. About the age of Oliver in the days when he used to come running up to his mother’s room to confide in her about his algebra” (327). The last image recalls Oliver’s tragic death, and the novel ends on this sobering note. Impotence and despair become distinguishing characteristics of modernist satire of this time period, and in this regard, *Comedy* is similar to Nathaneal West’s morose satire, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, a book published in the same year.

### **Race as a Performance**

While Fauset’s outlook in the novel is undeniably bleak, she does offer a somewhat forward-looking concept of race through repeated references to performance. In the novel’s closing passage, Olivia looks out onto the mother and son through the



window's frame, just as an audience member would look out at a scene on a stage. In *Comedy: American Style*, Fauset portrays race as relational, a series of performances, rather than as a fixed classification system based on physical characteristics. References to acting, pretense, roles, and performance occur throughout the novel. Racial passing is a type of performance, and Olivia takes up the role with a vengeance. As a young girl, Olivia performs a maternal role--she pretends to be her siblings's mother--because she believes it is "the incontestable proof of her white womanhood" (37). Even in private, when she sits with the twins at home, the scene is described like a tableau: "She really made a very nice picture in the evenings, sitting there, the firelight loitering upon her young, serious face with its great thick mane of chestnut hair" (24). Olivia insists that Teresa enroll at Christie's Academy as a white girl. Unable to stand up to her mother, Teresa complies, but she refers to racial passing as a "sorry performance" (90) and a "sorry role" (149). When the neighborhood children play-act at Mrs. Davies's, Teresa prefers to be the audience (46).

One of the most disturbing performances in the novel involves Oliver. Eager to keep up with her fellow socialites, Olivia wishes to hire a butler who can attend to the ladies during teatime: "These Filipino butlers come very cheap" (208) she says to her husband, hoping to convince him of the added expense. When Dr. Cary refuses, Olivia turns to her youngest son, noting that he "was just the color of that Filipino butler at Mrs. Berkleback's" (208). She tricks him into dressing in livery and pretending to "play at being butler" (101) while she hosts teas for her fellow committeewomen. Thinking his mother's interest in him is genuine and that it is all a grand game, Oliver innocently goes along with the charade. Sherrard-Johnson correctly points out that "Olivia's disturbing,

imperialist fantasies indicate how deeply she has internalized white supremacist hierarchies of inferiority” (xxiv), and it is clear that Olivia equates darker skinned people with a servile class, just as the students do at Christie’s Academy. In this episode, Oliver convincingly performs the ethnicity of a colonized people just as Olivia convincingly performs the race of an imperialist people. The scene draws attention to the ways in which race might be seen as a kind of performance, and acting out of expectation.

In his book, *The Social Construction of Race and Ethnicity in the United States*, Prince Brown, Jr. traces the history of race doctrines in the United States, showing how its meaning has changed over time, from a classification system based on shady science to a more nuanced understanding of race as “a social and legal construction” (136).

While she might not have used a phrase like social construct, Fauset nonetheless recognized that race was more than the sum total of physical traits, or any admixture of tainted or pure blood. Aware of the political motives behind upholding a strict racial binary, Fauset moves beyond the narrow parameters of commonly accepted views and towards a more fluid understanding of race, depicting it as relational, a series of performances, presaging Stuart Hall’s concept of the floating signifier.

In his 1996 lecture given at Goldsmith’s College, London, Hall asks how racism is cultivated in our minds and suggests that the answer involves looking at race’s “discursive position,” meaning that it becomes necessary to analyze metaphors, antidotes, stories, jokes in order to understand the shifting meaning of race. Hall argues that there is “nothing solid or permanent to the meaning of race. It changes all the time. It shifts and slides” (2). This moving signifier is evident throughout *Comedy* where a character’s racial identity is mostly relational. Phebe, for instance, is considered a white woman

when she is on the bus with Nicholas, but she is a black woman when she is back home with her mother in a “Negro” neighborhood. Similarly, Teresa is as an African American when she is with neighbors in Philadelphia but is a member of the Anglo-elite at Christie’s Academy. Race, Stuart argues, is more than “fixed biological characteristics,” and one of the reasons Fauset spends so much time describing people’s skin, hair, and eye color is to emphasize the limitations, if not the horrors of this essentialist approach to race. Because race is more than biological configurations, it becomes imperative, Hall argues, to substitute the scientific basis of race for a “socio-historic or cultural” one (6). In this way, race becomes a sign or signifier and racial behavior becomes discursive, and not genetic or biological. In short, “Race works like a language” (8). Hall continues:

And those things gain their meaning, not because of what they contain in their essence, but in the shifting relations of difference, which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field. Their meaning, because it is relational and not essential, can never be finally fixed but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation. (8)

While Fauset might have argued against an essentialist interpretation of race, which in her day was couched in rhetoric of bad or good blood, it is likely that she would have done so because she subscribed to universalism, and not necessarily because she viewed race as a construct that is informed and is informed by a constantly shifting sea of discursive meanings. However, her perception of race as relational, a series of performances was progressive, especially in the face of accepted theories of the day.

## The Gift of Laughter

In *Comedy*, Jessie Fauset draws on analogues to drama and puts an emphasis on performance and acting not only to float the concept of race as more of a performance than a concoction of good and bad blood, but also, I want to suggest, to dismantle the degrading racial stereotypes left over from the minstrel tradition. Although Fauset was not a playwright, she loved the theatre and was deeply concerned with the representation of blacks on the American stage, even hinting at how easily *Comedy: American Style* would lend itself to film adaptation (Sherrard-Johnson 15). Her contribution to Alaine Locke's influential *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) was the essay, "The Gift of Laughter," published in the drama section. Because that essay articulates Fauset's views on the limitations of the American stage and because *Comedy: American Style* concerns itself, in part, with acting and roles, I want to close this essay by considering the two works in tandem.

In the essay, Fauset writes at length about stereotype. She opens by castigating white writers and playwrights for stereotyping black stage actors as "the funny man" or "end man" of the American stage and for judging the entire race by that stereotype:

Popular preconception in this instance refers to the pressure of white opinion by which the American Negro is surrounded and by which his true character is almost submerged. For years the Caucasian in America has persisted in dragging to the limelight merely one aspect of Negro characteristics, by which the whole race has been glimpsed, through which it has been judged. . . . The medium then through which the black actor has been presented to the world has been that of the "funny man" of America. . . . In passing one pauses to wonder

if this picture of the black American as a living comic supplement has not been painted in order to camouflage the real feeling and knowledge of his white compatriot. Certainly the plight of the slaves under even the mildest of masters could never have been one to awaken laughter. And no genuinely thinking person, no really astute observer, looking at the Negro in American life, could find his condition even now a first aid to laughter. (161)

Here Fauset astutely points out how humor can be used as a mask, in this case to camouflage white America's culpability for slavery. She goes on to say that as minority artists, early black performers had little recourse to change this pattern, and so "artist and audience alike were in the grip of the minstrel formula" (162). However, despite these limitations, Fauset credits *comedians* with paving the way to a more equitable representation on the American stage, beginning with Ernest Hogan, whom Fauset suggests was the first black comedian to break out of the "end man" mold. She also praises the groundbreaking work of comedy teams Williams and Walker, and Cole and Johnson. Building on this foundation, she believes, future actors will be able to transcend derogatory type.

At the same time, the essay also exposes the racial double standard on the American stage. Williams, who studied in London and became a world class mime, could not imitate white people on the stage, especially in a comic context, and yet anyone could imitate blacks: "There is an unwritten law in America that though white may imitate black, black, even when superlatively capable, must never imitate white. In other words, grease-paint may be used to darken but never to lighten" (164). Humor, with its clever masking devices, can convey more incendiary and subversive material than serious

drama, as humor theorists from Henri Bergsen to Mahadev Apte have argued. To ridicule someone is an act of defiance, and Fauset very astutely notes that the racial double standard on the stage is especially true amongst comedians no doubt because of humor's subversive potential. Looking to a more enlightened future, Fauset sees a blurring of the color line on stage and a movement towards what she terms "the universal rôle" (167) where African Americans represent humanity rather than a limited racial group. Fauset writes, "the Negro actor must come finally through the very versatility of his art to the universal role and the main tradition of drama, as an artist first and only secondarily as a Negro" (168). When the black stage actor comes to represent the universal condition, then he will have transcended the limitations of minstrelsy.

Fauset's observations have direct bearing on *Comedy: American Style*. While the novel is not without racial stereotype, especially regarding sexuality, in *Comedy*, Fauset revises this unwritten law of representation by creating black characters to speak for the universal condition and by using a black woman to caricature whiteness.<sup>41</sup> Theatre historian David Krasner has argued that eliminating the effects of minstrelsy was the "primary goal" of playwrights during this time period of the Harlem Renaissance (57), and this seems to be one of Fauset's chief objectives in *Comedy*. Fauset sometimes obscures racial identity when the romance plot develops to claim for African Americans the right to universal representation, a right she clearly valued. But in a more radical gesture, Fauset reverses black face minstrelsy in the central character, Olivia, a woman figuratively wearing whiteface on the stage of Fauset's own choosing. In effect, Fauset uses caricature to counter the legacy of being caricatured. In a novel filled with analogues to drama and structured like a Greek tragedy, Fauset creates her own standards

of racial representation where black does represent the universal rôle, as she might have put it, and where a black woman is a powerful caricature of whiteness. In her last and most political novel, Fauset indulges in some well-deserved literary payback. Creating her own dramatic universe, Fauset upends racial stereotypes and performance traditions and troubles narrow modes of representation in the process.

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<sup>31</sup> Jessie Fauset has frequently been called the “midwife” of the Harlem Renaissance because of a quote made by Langston Hughes in *The Big Sea*: “Jessie Fauset at the *Crisis*, Charles Johnson at *Opportunity*, and Alain Lock in Washington, were the three people who midwived the so-called New Negro literature into being” (218).

<sup>32</sup> Carolyn Wedin Sylvander suggests fatigue; Levering Lewis claims that Fauset developed a “deep emotional attachment” to Du Bois, and so perhaps this influenced her decision; George Hutchinson refers to a “rift” between Fauset and Du Bois over magazine content; and Cherene Sherrard-Johnson alludes to unresolved money matters that may have caused a disgruntled Fauset to terminate her editorship.

<sup>33</sup> Other references to American-ness include the following: Oliver’s elegant manners are contrasted with the rudeness typical of the “American child of twelve” (99); a divorcee is described as a “slender, typical American figure in her well-cut but slightly shabby black dress” (321), perhaps an indirect reference to how commonplace divorce had become by the 1930s.

<sup>34</sup> See Garcia, Clair Oberon. “Jessie Redmon Fauset Reconsidered” in *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters*. Ed. Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> This statistic is given in George Schuyler’s 1929 pamphlet, “Racial Intermarriage in the United States,” p.55.

<sup>36</sup> See Schuyler, “Racial Intermarriage,” p. 58.

<sup>37</sup> This light-dark pairing occurs between Christopher and Marise described in similarly erotically charged language (see pages 58-59).

<sup>38</sup> See also Feeney, Joseph. “Greek Tragic Patterns in a Black Novel: Jessie Fauset’s *The Chinaberry Tree*,” *CLA Journal* (Dec 1974): 211-215.

<sup>39</sup> Sherrard-Johnson raises an interesting point in suggesting that Oliver is rejected not only for his dark skin color, but also for his “questionable sexuality” (xxxii). While I do not discount the possibility of Oliver’s queerness, his role as an emerging artist, and not his sexual orientation, dominates the pages of “Oliver’s Act.”

<sup>40</sup> Levering Lewis writes that by the 1930s, Du Bois was already “deeply alienated from the Renaissance” (*In Vogue* xxxviii).

<sup>41</sup> Fauset’s novels are not without racial stereotype. Dark-skinned black women in *Comedy* are either very libidinous (Marise) or very maternal, little more than mammy figures (Mrs. Davies). Dark skinned men are portrayed as sexually alluring (Henry, Nicholas), but white or light-skinned men are impotent and weak (Dr. Cary, Aristide).

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