

“IT’S JUST A JOKE”: TRACING PORTRAYALS OF WOMANHOOD IN WOMEN’S  
HUMOR

A Thesis  
by  
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## **Abstract**

### **“IT’S JUST A JOKE”: TRACING PORTRAYALS OF WOMANHOOD IN WOMEN’S HUMOR**

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The aim of this project conducts a comparative study of three female authored humorous works to investigate portrayals of female identities and womanhood. I conduct a genealogical study using the humorous sketches of nineteenth-century satirist Marietta Holley, Elaine Dundy’s *The Dud Avocado* (1958), and Torrey Peters’ *Detransition, Baby* (2021) exploring how women’s humor evolves with the complex construct of womanhood. Because I look towards three distinct authors from different periods, I take into consideration the historical context within which each author publishes to compare and contrast the issues, barriers, and ideologies these women face. The issue of the “woman’s sphere,” a nineteenth-century buzzword that labeled women’s physical “place” in society, is the connecting and evolving thread of each work and author in this study. This “outdated” buzzword points to a continued separation of men and women demarcating the “proper” “rules” women must “follow” well into the twenty-first century. Double consciousness applies to the “sphere” and its outcomes by linking continuities of ideological barriers attached to womanhood. These outcomes and an analysis of double consciousness should be explored in a tradition of women’s humor. Each author in my study

wrestles with the complexity of womanhood, aware that there is split in feminine performance constructed by the male gaze. However, each author approaches this issue through varied styles of humor. A changing and varied style points to an evolving humorous form; therefore, I ultimately argue that women's humor and identity should not be understood as separate entities, but parallel features that evolve together.

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## Introduction

A historical and sexist phenomenon continues working against women's humor. This phenomenon comes neatly packaged in the common expression, typically from the mouths of men, that "women just aren't that funny." Whether this phrase is directed towards female stand-up comics, female-led comedy blockbusters, or female-authored humorous literature, these critics seem to have figured out why they do not like this humor. But when it comes to women's humor, these male critics seem to forget that, perhaps, these works are not made *for* them. Yes, any person can enjoy any type of media, but humor's subjective nature comes from the audience's ability to laugh *with* the comic. To laugh *with* the comic means that this humorist has a natural authority to make the audience laugh. However, this audience does not find the humorists' authority intimidating, but rather, the comic and audience are somewhat equal, both needing each other to laugh at the absurdity of institutions around them. The individual who claims, "women just aren't that funny," see themselves as having a greater authority than the female comic and so the message behind the humorous work is lost on the critic.

Authority works as the driving force behind humor and its intent. In her foundational work in women's humor, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (1988), Nancy Walker explains the notion of an authoritative difference between male and female humorists, stating that the male humorist writes with the authority of the insider, the person who is potentially in a position to change what he finds wrong." But women "have largely been external to this circle of power, their humorous writing evidences a different relationship with the culture, one in which the status quo, however ludicrous, exerts a force to be coped with" (11). This gendered difference in authority distinguishes women's humor as an outsider from men's insider, thus drawing varied audiences. But rather than consider male and female humor as



opposites, we can consider these forms parallel to each other. Where the male humorist can speak on any issue (or feels entitled to), the female humorist speaks from a different perspective and relationship to the problem, rather than not at all. This relationship the female humorist has to authority comes from a place of marginalization. In a patriarchal culture, women speak from different experiences from men, even when these differences are minute.

These differences between male and female experience have historically resulted in women not being able to speak as freely or easily as men, especially in a male-dominated comedy realm. Probably the most famous example is Joan Rivers. On the *Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*, Rivers, who credited Carson as her mentor, guest-hosted his late-night show ninety-three times. But when Carson retired, Rivers was left out of the discussion of who would be the next late-night host and it came down to a choice between two men, David Letterman and Jay Leno. When Rivers decided to create her own show following this decision, Carson banned her from NBC for almost thirty years. Not only did Rivers go through obstacles to appear as a *guest* on Carson's show, but when she proved a comedic force, she was overlooked. Largely, what made Rivers overlooked was her polarizing comedy that spoke from a woman's experience. The woman's experience, in the case of *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*, is the minority point-of-view that the "national audience" does not relate to—despite women making up roughly half of this population. "Male" humor is considered the standard and more encompassing tradition, so no matter how funny and popular Joan Rivers was, she would always be overlooked in favor of her male contemporaries.

This theme of overlooking humorous women has a longstanding history. Scholars in humor "forgot" nineteenth-century satirist Marietta Holley, named "The Female Mark Twain" based on her sheer popularity, for almost fifty years after her death. It was not until prominent

scholars of the 1980s, like Jane Curry and Nancy Walker, that Holley's works began being analyzed and anthologized in studies of humor, but Holley is not an outlier. As a college freshman in 2018, my American literature survey course used Nicholas Bakalar's anthology *American Satire: An Anthology of Writings from Colonial Times to the Present* (1997). Out of the thirty-one satirists and humorists in this anthology, only four were women—Fanny Fern, Dorothy Parker, Molly Ivins, and Edith Wharton. Although this anthology was already out of date, as it was published twenty-one years before the actual “present” it claims to consider, the large difference between the number of females compared to male humorists is staggering. Additionally, this statistic cannot be blamed on a limited number of female humorists or nonexistent scholarship at the time Bakalar edited his anthology. Before Bakalar's 1997 anthology, Nancy Walker released three books, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (1988), *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s* (1988), and *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women* (1990). Of these three books, two take a theoretical and analytical approach to women's humor, and *Redressing the Balance* anthologizes fifty-five female humorists. So, Bakalar not only overlooks female humorists in his anthology, but a deeper oversight of one of the leading, female, scholars in the field of humor. Based on this obvious inattention, it seems that even if female scholars do the work for these men by creating their own anthologies, male humorists will continue to be favored over female humorists.

This growing phenomenon that overlooks female humor influence scholars, such as Nancy Walker and Regina Barreca, to abandon the standard canon of humor—dominated by men—and seek to establish a separate tradition for women. In Walker's book *A Very Serious Thing*, she attributes the differences in male versus female humor to the varied statuses of men

and women under a patriarchy, influencing gendered perspectives and identity. This perspective creates contrasting intents between men and women's humors, as the issues of male and female identities are often not similar. Similarly, in *They Used to Call Me Snow White... but I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (1992), Barreca looks at the key differences that separate male and female humor but places a larger emphasis on psychology and feminist theory as an attempt to "define" womanhood and female experiences in this humor.

This connection between overlooked female humor and identity caught my attention while planning my MA thesis. Early in my research, while watching a clip of Joan Rivers on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* in 1986, I began seeing questions of identity and how women's humor genuinely portrays it. During this interview, Rivers claimed she wished to look like the "beautifully figured" and pretty woman who, in River's words, "did not have a lot going on upstairs." Carson questions this claim by asking "don't you think men really like intelligence more when it comes right down to it?" and Rivers doubles down stating "Are you kidding?... no man has ever put his hand up a woman's dress looking for a library card." All within a single punchline, Rivers brings up the issue of an awareness of a male gaze and feminine performance— an issue that binds the tradition of women's humor.

Female humor and comedy have always been a special interest of mine, but it was only when I read Elaine Dundy's *The Dud Avocado* (1958), that I began to realize the complexity of this humor. When I first read this novel two years ago for a class, I made a comment— the gravity of which at the time I did not understand— that *The Dud Avocado* sounded like it was written by a woman. Now, after completing my research, I understand this to really mean Dundy brings forth a relatable and complex portrayal of womanhood through her protagonist Sally Jay Gorce. Perhaps it is because of the male-dominated fields of film, television, and canonical

literature, or maybe because I just found *The Dud Avocado* funny, but at the time I read this novel at the end of my undergraduate career, the most popular works I read regarding womanhood seemed unrelatable or written by men. When I revisited this novel last summer for research into women's humor, not only did Sally Jay's search for a sense of self *still* feel relatable, but the awareness of belonging in the world fit like a puzzle piece in the tradition of women's humor.

In Walker and Barreca's work on women's humor, along with the scholarship that followed, inklings of a "double vision" in status, identity, and authority appear relevant to the tradition of women's humor. In Walker's *A Very Serious Thing* (1988) and Claire Barwise's article "'You Make Everything into a Joke': The Forward-Looking Feminism of Elaine Dundy and Barbara Pym" (2022), terms like dual consciousness, double vision, and doubled text or message were used interchangeably describing complicated meanings behind women's humor. In my own research, I intend to elaborate on this idea of a "doubled" meaning in women's humor by applying theories of double consciousness in conversation with scholars such as Walker. I took theories of double consciousness from W.E.B. Du Bois and, influenced by the scholarship of Dickson D. Bruce Jr., I traced this concept further back to transcendental origins in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Du Bois' theory and his metaphor of the veil help explain how a marginalized identity acts doubly in the face of the oppressor. Beyond marginalized identities, Emerson's definition of double consciousness explains a splitting of the soul, as the "impurity of humanity" corrupts "innately pure soul." Although I use Du Bois' ideas more consistently throughout my chapters to assess split performances of womanhood, Emerson's framework of the soul in relation to humanity contextualizes how an overarching and infectious male gaze influences a feminine identity.

In this thesis, I use the humorous sketches of late nineteenth-century satirist Marietta Holley, Elaine Dundy's *The Dud Avocado* (1958), and Torrey Peters' *Detransition, Baby* (2021) to understand the complexity of womanhood and conduct a genealogical exploration of how women's humor evolves. I connect these three authors and their works by applying theories of double consciousness on the narratives of their female protagonists and the barriers each face. I define these barriers in my first chapter as the "woman's sphere." The "woman's sphere" was a nineteenth-century buzzword in the debate of women's suffrage used by conservatives to insist that a "woman's sphere" was inside the home, a marriage, and with her children. Holley's work directly challenges this sphere with the help of her female protagonist Samantha Allen who questions the accuracy this sphere has on labeling womanhood. This "sphere," although intended to limit women to physical and private spaces such as the home and kitchen, has intangible barriers that prevent women from reaching an ideological liberation that men are granted in their public worlds. The "sphere," outside of its nineteenth-century origins and throughout my three chapters, link the continuities of women's marginalization outside physical restraints such as "staying in the kitchen." The continuing existence of the "sphere," I argue, is where a female double consciousness is formed and sustained, as a patriarchal control over women's movement in society creates a split in performances of femininity. This analysis creates a unifying thread between my three chapters, as each of my chosen authors wrestle with the tensions of being a woman controlled by the male gaze but does so through varied approaches and types of humor.

In what follows, I have three distinct chapters, each devoted to one of the chosen authors: Marietta Holley, Elaine Dundy, and Torrey Peters. In chapter one, I explore the satirical sketches of Marietta Holley and her female protagonist Samantha Allen. In this chapter, I will use these late nineteenth-century works to establish a framework connecting theories of double

consciousness and a budding tradition of women's humor. Holley's approach to writing satire, that distinctly places her relatable female protagonist in a sea of literary stereotypes which ridicule womanhood, highlights where double consciousness, and the awareness that comes with such, is found in women's humor. Holley's female protagonist, Samantha Allen, uses satire to explore womanhood within the rigid boundaries of the woman's sphere, setting a precedent for the funny female character in humorous work to come. In my second chapter, I will retain the terminology of the "women's sphere," updating and redefining it, to understand how Elaine Dundy's female protagonist, Sally Jay Gorce, born in a new and liberating age after World War II, continues facing obstacles based on her sex. To examine these obstacles, I similarly consider double consciousness, but I take into consideration the anticipation of second-wave feminism that begins to form which constructs an acute awareness of male control over women, and thus prompts a fight for agency. In Sally Jay's fight for this agency, she employs a varied style of self-deprecating, self-enhancing, and observational humor to claim control over her own narrative, image, and identity. My final chapter, I will shift focus from what will have been a largely heteronormative study of womanhood, and look at Torrey Peters' novel *Detransition, Baby* and its transgender and detransitioned protagonists who both have different takes on "womanhood." This shift in identities also changes how I apply theories of double consciousness and its relationship to women's humor. To make the argument that Peters' contemporary novel fits within this established tradition of female humor, I look towards her use and awareness of irony. Peters uses irony to point out absurdity, as well as the complexity, that all women, even queer ones, continue validating their femininity with a heteronormative framework constructed by the "woman's sphere." As I complete my chapters and move into my conclusion, I consider our current state of fourth-wave feminism and what this means for women's humor in literature.

Although literature and women's *written* humor will always remain a vital means of communicating issues of womanhood, I begin questioning the place multimodal, adapted, and digital media has in the canon of women's humor. Through these questions, I humbly ask if a distinction between written and digital expressions of female humor can or should be sustained.

## Chapter One

### Suffrage and Satire: Marietta Holley's Approach to Understanding Nineteenth-Century

#### Womanhood

##### Introduction

At the climax of Marietta Holley's satirical sketch, "Wimmen's Speah," from her 1873 volume

*MY OPINIONS  
AND  
BETSY BOBBET'S  
DESIGNED AS  
A BEACON LIGHT*

*TO GUIDE WOMEN TO LIFE LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS,*

*BUT WHICH MAY BE READ BY  
MEMBERS OF THE STERNER SECT,  
WITHOUT INJURY TO THEMSELVES  
OR THE BOOK*

*BY  
JOSIAH ALLEN'S WIFE,*

Samantha Allen, the protagonist in most of Marietta Holley's work, listens as her foil Betsy Bobbet recites her sentimental poem "Wimmen's Speah: Or whisperin's of nature to Betsy Bobbet," in which Betsy soars with high-strung emotions and repeatedly defines woman's proper sphere. In one of the middle stanzas, Betsy declares:

A rustic had broke down his team;  
I mused almost in teahs,  
"How can a yoke be borne along  
By half a pair of steers?"  
Even thus in wrath did nature speak,  
"Heah! Betsy Bobbet, heah!



It is matrimony! it is matrimony

That is a woman's speak." (40)

According to Betsy, she has received awe-inspiring revelations from Mother Nature herself that a woman's only place in the world is married to a man. Matrimony, she declares, is a woman's "natural" "sphere."

Samantha refuses to be moved by "nature's debates" and rebukes Betsy's claim that women must confine their ambitions to marriage:

Women's speak is where she can do the most good; if God had meant that wimmen should be nothin' but men's shadders, He would have made gosts and fantoms of 'em at once. But havin' made 'em flesh and blood, with braens and souls, I believe He meant 'em to be used to the best advantage. (43)

The key difference in Samantha's and Betsy's passages is each character's definition of the "woman's sphere" that tried to delimit the natural, proper, and possible roles women could play in society. While Betsy claims nature told her that a woman's duty was to marry and remain hidden from man's public domain, Samantha insinuates something different when she says, "if God had meant wimmen to be nothin' but men's shadders, he would had made gosts... of 'em" (43). Her use of "shadders" (shadows) is noteworthy because of the term's deeper connotations that transcend a simple conversation of women's duty to marry. By comparing women to shadows—a formless, attached, darkness—in their relationship to men, Holley suggests women's imprisonment in a darkness defined by men's greed for social power. Samantha, then, does not simply use logic to dispel Betsy's argument that women *need* to be married, but that a continuation, or better yet, a *forced*, relationship based on an imbalanced partnership prevents women from escaping towards a "light" or an *enlightenment*. Holley seemingly calls for an enlightenment that can only be achieved if women are acknowledged as independent subjects

away from men. On the surface, this dispute between Samantha and Betsy seems to concern itself with the question of marriage, but Holley uses their relationship as foils to imply that this question of marriage is a cog in a much larger machine of women's issues.

Even the volume title for Holley's book—*My Opinions and Betsy Bobbet's Designed as a Beacon of Light to Guide Women to Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness*—pits Samantha and Betsy against one another and brings light to the larger nineteenth-century debate of the "true woman" and the "new woman" that demanded a rethinking woman's sphere. The "true woman," championed by Betsy, represents a Victorian ideal of the virtuous, pious, and submissive woman; whereas, the "new woman" was modern, independent, and did not stay within women's tradition simply because of expectation (Stroup 25-6). Holley stereotypes Betsy to uphold and enforce values of "true" womanhood that is virtuous, pious, child rearing, dedicated to their domestic duties and accessorize their male companions, despite a changing time for women. The obvious assumption, then, is to understand Samantha Allen as the "new woman" based on her logical and feminist ideas regarding women's suffrage and their rightful place outside the home. Yet Holley purposefully creates Samantha to not be an identical or "complete" embodiment of the "new" woman; rather, she is a diluted version of the "new" woman making her more digestible to nineteenth-century female readers finding themselves stuck between the "true" versus "new" woman binary. With Samantha's methodical intelligence, despite Holley's dialect humor suggesting otherwise, she aligns her character with suffragettes, yet Samantha stays committed to her marriage, has a child, and graciously allows her husband to have the dominant voice in their relationship, as seen in Holley's pen name, "Josiah Allen's Wife." These specific and strategic characteristics placed onto Samantha, makes her a non-

controversial figure who has potential to resonate with readers lost in “true” or “new” woman binary.

The woman’s sphere, although demarcated physical limits where women could exist, extended to women’s feminine performance, sparking Holley’s critiques on the “true” versus “new” woman binary and debate. The phrase “woman’s sphere” predates the nineteenth-century “true” and “new” binary, appearing in women’s “casual” marginalization, but it seems that men began articulating and enforcing the sphere when women started challenging, and thus becoming aware of, these barriers. According to the traditional side of the debate, voting was not part of the “woman’s sphere” because women’s place was relegated to the home and everything in it, but nothing outside of it. Initially, this debate of the “sphere” seemed largely geographical, meaning, the common discourse only considered the physical sphere that kept women in private spaces (the home and kitchen) and men in the public. The sphere, however, also had intangible and ideological consequences, meaning this construct did not simply discourage women from leaving the home, but also prevented women from moving outside the ideology of a patriarchy, obstructing women’s views on identity, their voice, and knowledge. To better visualize the physical and ideological consequences, and explain the relationship between them, table 1 shows how the physical and ideological “spaces” overlap. This “overlap” can be defined as physical spaces men argue women should (or should not) occupy (see table 1), but in doing so, women are kept from understanding and acting upon a sense of self. Keeping women from these spaces, then, enforces ideological obstacles that prevent women from creating their own beliefs or being equal to men.

Table 1.

Physical and Ideological Spheres

Physical Spaces	Physical and Ideological Overlap
Home	Voting
Kitchen	Education
With children	Marriage
Among other women	Politics
Domestic work	Banking, Economy, and Financial Independence

Holley presents this overlap between physical and ideological barriers by displaying nineteenth-century women’s marginalization. For instance, Holley seemingly argues that the topic of women’s suffrage is both a physical and ideological barrier for women. On the one hand, voting requires women to physically leave the home. However, withholding suffrage keeps women from forming their own opinions and representing themselves in a government representative of *all* people. Thus, the lack of voting rights for women is an ideological issue that reduces and silences women from human beings into, as Holley states, shadows hoping to be represented by the voices given to their assumed husbands. In the process of questioning the “woman’s sphere,” Holley’s works begins asking *why* women are forced to remain in a private, isolated, realm when women are just as complex and intelligent as their fellow man.

Holley, however, does not limit her message of suffrage to “exceptional,” smarter or wealthier, woman but extends her voice to the average woman. To make this point, Holley uses dialect humor that appeals to the rural woman who might have less access to education compared to her urban and/or wealthier counterpart. This dialect humor points to Holley’s intended audience of the “common” woman who feels failed by the binary of “true” versus “new” woman and the woman’s sphere. So, Holley makes these women aware of the structures in place that

hold them back. Holley uses satire as a rhetorical strategy to question women's marginalization and highlight patriarchal hypocrisy that Samantha and average American women face. In her works, Holley's satire can best be defined by William Harmon and Hugh Holman: a mixture of censoriousness "humor and wit for improving institutions [and] humanity" and through laughter she seeks "not so much to tear down as to inspire a remodeling" (453). Arguably, Holley's goal is to critique and offer solutions to redefine womanhood for the common nineteenth-century women. By exploring this critique with satire, Holley makes these issues of identity, and her solutions, more approachable to audiences.

Holley's approachability starts with satirizing the sentimental genre, producing her most effective rebuke to a patriarchal ideology. Women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used the sentimental genre to persuade audiences on current events and issues through emotional testimonies and female protagonists. One of the most controversial examples of these emotional and "influential" female characters is Ophelia St. Clare from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Harriet Beecher Stowe's female character Ophelia works as a "relatable" and emotional female character who wrestles with her racist prejudice. This character is meant to influence a very specific audience of white female northern readers, who oppose the idea of slavery, but cannot rid themselves of a deep-seated racism. Similar to the sphere, this emotional female archetype restricts women to a particular genre and a stereotyped female protagonist. Betsy's ridiculously antifeminist poem showcases a satirized sentimental genre as she uses an overwhelming sense of emotions to try and persuade Samantha on the need for women to marry men. In her satire, however, Holley does not make Betsy's poem in "Wimmen's Speah" the voice of reason, nor the "right" answer to the question of woman's sphere; rather, Samantha's feminist logic reads as the resolution.

This satirized genre not only applies to written form but the male and female characters of Holley's works. In the sentimental genre, women exhibit emotional and illogical traits and men possess logical, calm, and collected characteristics as the text's voice of reason. In "Wimmen's Speah" Betsy's overzealous thoughts on suffrage couples Josiah's "silent" character. However, Josiah's presence is more than just a satirized stereotype of a common man, instead, he is a symbolic representation of an immovable patriarchy. In "Wimmen's Speah," where Samantha and Betsy are at the center of the "woman's sphere" debate, Josiah's presence, although mostly silent, remains a constant and invasive force. Josiah represents this invasive patriarchy by interjecting in Samantha and Betsy's dispute on the "woman's sphere" because men are given a natural dominance over all issues, whether it concerns them or not.

Holley's works repeatedly uses personifying features allowing her characters to embody issues of the nineteenth-century. Chiefly, this personification works through the satirized characters of Samantha and Betsy who represent the opposing sides of the "true" and "new" woman. Betsy acts as a mocking rendition of the sentimental female character but also represents the "true," virtuous and pious woman. As Betsy's foil, Samantha's logic points out the flaws in this "true" woman. However, in a literal, hypocritical, sense, Betsy points out these flaws herself as she is not married, despite her crying plea that all women should be legally attached to a male partnership. Additionally, Holley insinuates in "Wimmen's Speah" that Betsy tries to have an illicit affair with her minister, when she writes that her "shawl ketchd on to one of the buttons of his vest, and he could not get it off- and I did not try to, I thought it was not my place- so we was obliged to walk close togetheh" (35). Here, Betsy obviously fails to "catch" a man, reducing her to a humiliating role as she convinced herself the "true" woman, who is required to have a husband, is the only ideology she can believe. The message embedded in Betsy's satirized

character, that the “true woman” is flawed, hypocritical, and failing, becomes more easily consumed by a reader who may resist Holley’s progressive statements. Through satire and the personification of the debate of the “true” and “new” woman and the “woman's sphere” Holley wrestles with the tensions of womanhood, confronting the unpleasant reality that women have never been given the opportunity to reflect and construct an existence outside of the labels created to divide them into designated groups.

The notion of double consciousness helps us understand Holley’s satirical awareness of women’s split images and binaries of identity. Holley’s use of satire that comments on the hypocrisy that subjugates women presents these theories of double consciousness. In Nancy Walker’s work *A Very Serious Thing*, she explores women’s “dual consciousness” claiming this humor provides a doubled understanding to identity. Although there is a distinction between “dual” and “double” consciousness, these ideas can equally contextualize the “doubled meaning” behind Holley’s characters, their satirical stereotypes, and her embedded intent. The “doubled” meaning behind Holley’s work points towards an exploration of womanhood and its performance within a male gaze. Holley’s early portrayals of this complex identity and her “doubled” meanings can be seen as a moniker for understanding the future possibilities for portrayals of womanhood in humor. Through Holley’s protagonist, Samantha Allen, who makes this this doubled meaning visible, she marks the metaphorical beginnings for the canon of women’s humor and the funny female protagonist.

### **The Woman’s sphere: The Debate and Reach**

Holley was neither the first nor last writer to confront the “woman’s sphere” as this debate swept the nation, consuming conversations in newspapers, magazines, and the nineteenth-century American home for decades. To characterize this debate, I used a small sample of ten

newspapers to find patterns in late nineteenth to early twentieth-century uses of the phrase “woman’s sphere.” For this study’s criteria, each newspaper needed to include “woman’s sphere” in the title, and each must come from a different state and author. The peak of this debate took place in the 1910s with about 15,000 mentions of “woman’s sphere.” At first glance, there was a repetition of names, such as suffragette Nixola Greely-Smith and writer Barbra Boyd, who continuously published varying perspectives resisting the barriers of the woman’s sphere. In my small study, despite these repetitive names, an even split appeared between male and female writers discussing the “woman’s sphere,” with most women supporting an expansion of the sphere while men upheld rigid parameters. This even split highlights the continuous back-and-forth discourse this topic caused. Women authors such as Greely-Smith and Boyd sought to “redefine” the “woman’s sphere” to be more inclusive of women’s capabilities beyond domestic housework. In contrast, male authors exhibited a pattern of providing reasons to keep women in their “sphere.” By either reviewing a sermon or speaking as a minister, these male authors used the Christian Bible to justify that a woman’s “sphere” should be the husband and home. Although each male author brought up different points, such as politics, housework, or female employment, each used religion as the key defense to a strict separation of men and women. Based on this approach, it seems men attempted to equate female subjugation with morality to pressure women into being a “good Christian” and stay at home. However, the female writers did not want to eradicate the sphere (at least not yet), rather, they wanted to expand the physical boundaries of the home and kitchen into the public sphere, looking towards jobs, education, and voting. In this study, the dates range from 1894-1915, but the woman’s sphere debate was much more extensive, arguably taking off in the 1840s with Margaret Fuller.



In her 1843 essay, “The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Woman versus Women,” Fuller argues that because of the limitations gender binaries offer, men and women cannot truly be enlightened. She states that there is “no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (418), and so refutes the term “sphere” that describes the limited roles offered to women. In her critique of this binary, Fuller articulates the different expectations, roles, and opportunities among the genders, noting the physical and ideological restrictions for women to perform “ideal” femininity. Similar to Holley in “Wimmen’s Speah,” published approximately thirty years later, Fuller uses the term “woman’s sphere” and presents a debate between a feminist and a patriarchal man not unlike the debate between Samantha and Betsy:

“Is it not enough,” cries the sorrowful trader, “that you have done all you could to break up the national Union, family union, to take my wife away from the cradle, and the kitchen and thus destroy the prosperity of our country, but now you must be trying to break up hearth, to vote at polls, and preach from a pulpit? Of course, if she does such things. she cannot attend to those of her own sphere. She is happy enough as she is. She has more leisure than I have, every means of improvement, every indulgence.”

“Have you asked her whether she was satisfied with these indulgences?”

“No, but I know she is. She is too amiable to wish what would make me unhappy, and too judicious to wish to step beyond the sphere of her sex. I will never consent to have our peace disturbed by any such discussions.”

“‘Consent’ —you? it is not consent from you that is in question, it is assent from your wife.”

“Am I not the head of my house?”

“You are not the head of your wife. God has given her a mind of her own.”

“I am the head and she the heart.” (390-1)

The similarity in Fuller’s and Holley’s display of the woman’s sphere discourse, despite the thirty years difference, shows the debate’s substantial history. Among men’s long-standing public justification of the sphere in newspapers and magazines, their argument ultimately falls short, as they only concern themselves with physical nature of the sphere, rather than the overlapping ideological limits. Fuller’s definition of the woman’s sphere begins making the connection between the physical and ideological problems of female subjugation. She articulates the confining physical parameters of the home—much like the male argument affirms—while also pondering the ideological, yet tangible, consequences that prevent women from obtaining their unalienable rights and a sense of self outside of the domestic domain. Like Holley, Fuller also uses the example of voting to make this connection, where women must go through physical barriers to vote, such as leaving the private home, the ideological barriers will linger once outside. These systemic and patriarchal reasons against women’s suffrage limited women's access to education, representation in government, choice of laws and policy, and so forth. Fuller’s explanation of women’s suffrage appears in Holley’s writing approximately thirty years later, however with a crucial distinction between the two.

The different intended audiences of Fuller and Holley’s cannot be ignored. Although both authors seem to want a similar outcome, women’s suffrage and change in status, Fuller, as one of the most prominent authors and proto feminists of the nineteenth-century, explicitly argues against the “spheres” physical and ideological barriers. Additionally, because Fuller’s education and outspoken reputation on this topic, many described her messages as a “sermon.” Holley, however, hides herself behind the name “Josiah Allen’s Wife,” sneaking her similar message into her work and to the “unwary reader,” while not being “uppity” like Fuller (Winter 39).

Holley seemingly tones down her discontent with women's status and their "sphere" to reach a specific and impressionable audience, not to specifically persuade, but allow the reader to ask these ideological questions themselves. Holley writes her humorous and unseemingly sketches to *actually* influence the common nineteenth-century woman, rather than pander to the female and male intellectual who *may* already agree on this topic, which arguably is what Fuller's does. Holley's specific form, style, and genre, all of which are executed through a satirical lens, remain key factors to influencing the "unwary" female reader.

The sentimental genre acts as an ideological sphere that contains female authors and limits representations of womanhood in their works. Nina Baym claims that by the mid nineteenth-century the public equated the sentimental genre with "women's fiction," a tradition "written by women, is addressed to women, and tells one particular story about women" (22). During the late eighteenth and nineteenth-century, publishers, widely and enthusiastically, released female writers' works if they wrote within the sentimental genre about the trials and tribulations of womanhood in the domestic sphere (Byam 23). Female writers, although they could have female protagonists embark on issues of womanhood, resorted to using stereotypical characteristics of the overly emotional, tender, and virtuous woman to persuade female readers. The sentimental genre allowed women to write and persuade readers about turmoil in domestic roles but only by associating emotion and tenderness with its female protagonists. Examples of this genre, female characters, and livelihood in the domestic setting are seen in texts such as *Little Women* (1868) and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

The sentimental genre personifies Fuller's claims of female status in a patriarchy though its stereotyped female characters and limited influence. Fuller makes a similar, but more explicit, statement than Holley, that women and men are being held back from enlightenment because of

an adherence to rigid gender binaries that, although are meant to “keep women in their sphere,” lead to restrictions of any gender performance. The sentimental genre played part in this restriction and creates a double-edged sword for female writers. Although this genre provided women the opportunity to publish their work and include female protagonists whose central ideas resonate with audiences, it required female characters and their authors to perform stereotypical expressions of femininity and womanhood. Based on Baym’s work that recovers women's fiction, the sensationalized sentimental genre actualizes Fuller’s argument as this genre only promotes women *if* they remained in their literary and womanly sphere, enforcing strict expectations for women. These types of barriers prevent an enlightenment of ideas, politics, and ideology, as the connotation of the sentimental genre trapped female authors and readers to believe the only chance for women to read about their specific issues is if they wrote in this genre.

While sentimental writing acts as an extension of the sphere that confines women to men’s desired ideal woman in literature, the rising popularity of satire in the nineteenth-century, represented by authors such as Mark Twain and Artemus Ward, gave female writers a way to escape from the sentimental genre and the sphere. Humor has special characteristics of awareness and authority that, according to Nancy Walker, gives humorists the opportunity to point out hypocrisy and faults in an institution; however, Walker clarifies a distinction between the male and female authority:

Even when the white male humorist adopts for his own purposes the stance of the outsider—the naive bumpkin who nonetheless sees the follies of the legislature, the “little man” bewildered by bureaucracy or technology—he writes with the authority of the insider, the person who is potentially in a position to change what he finds wrong....

Because women—like members of racial and ethnic minorities—have largely been external to this circle of power, their humorous writing evidences a different relationship with the culture, one in which the status quo, however ludicrous, exerts a force to be coped with, rather than representing one of a number of interchangeable realities. (*Very Serious* 11)

While also claiming in a later chapter, “women’s humor arises from their understanding of the domestic world” (Walker 46), which is reminiscent of the sentimental genre and its setting in women’s private spaces. So, ironically, women’s place in the “sphere” allows female humorists to find their authority on issues specific to them. The difference in authority among female and male humorists leads to interpretations of double consciousness based on Walker’s claims of how women dually perceive themselves in the reflection of a male gaze. We can understand women’s humor and theories of double consciousness as an intimate relationship by creating a parallel between Du Bois’ metaphor of “the veil” to the construct of the “woman’s sphere.” To differentiate marginalization between race and gender, which has a large distinction, “the veil” can be *likened* to the “sphere” but does not replace it. By making this connection, we can explore the woman’s sphere as a physical and ideological barrier with looming consequences that persist after women win the right to vote. Arguably, a direct, satirical, lineage of response to the sphere exists in women’s humorous tradition, starting with Holley’s collection of Samantha stories.

### **Double Consciousness and Women’s Humor**

Theories of double consciousness illustrate key differences in men and women’s humor. The female humorists’ authority to speak out on hypocrisy comes from a different, marginalized, place in society than men. A patriarchal ideology obstructs women’s awareness and understanding of their own identity, as this perception reflects, and so is formed, by a male and

patriarchal gaze. This perception makes women aware of their marginalized status and their physical and metaphorical proximity to the dominant group. The male gaze's expectation of feminine performance keeps women from behaving and acting more authentically, but because of heteronormative convention, women's forced proximity to men (father or husband) allows for them to imagine what this authenticity looks like. Double consciousness in women's humor exists in this split between women's expected performance versus the imagined authentic.

Dickinson D. Bruce Jr. claims he found transcendental origins for Du Bois' theory of double consciousness, which allows room for considering women's humor in this theory. Historically, W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness is the most popular theory for discussing and understanding the complex identities of Black Americans, but Bruce Jr. argues he found evidence of two origins, a figurative and medical, to Du Bois' theory. Firstly, the medical origin refers to the emerging psychology of the nineteenth-century, where double consciousness referred to split personality, which would now be referred to as dissociative identity disorder (DID). Bruce Jr. argues, however, the "figurative origins," or where the metaphorical connotations of the sphere come from, are found in Ralph Waldo Emerson's early transcendental essays (299-300). Although Du Bois' metaphor of the veil chiefly defines my analysis of women's humor, Emerson's interpretation illustrates the depth of double and the argued relationship it has to consciousness, women's humor, and feminine identities.

Du Bois first elaborates on his theory of double consciousness and the metaphor of the veil in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903):

this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings;

two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (3)

This definition illustrates the Black American's split identity comes from their marginalized status within the dominant group. For the Black American, this "twoness," as Du Bois describes, rests on the hyphenated identity of Black and American— which has two different statuses. Interpreted from Du Bois' definition, "American" equates with "whiteness" or the oppressor (which usually takes form in whiteness), and the "Black" as the oppressed, so the Black American splits their identity between the marginalized and the oppressor. On the basis of gender however, American women, who can either be the Black or white American, require a broader definition of double consciousness, along with a reinterpreted metaphor of the "veil."

Transcendentalist applications to double consciousness concerns itself with society's corruption over human's inherently pure soul. Emerson's specific use of "double consciousness" adds a larger context that extends to the "souls" of all people, rather than marginalized identities. Found in two of his essays, "The Transcendentalist" (1842) and "Fate" (1860), Emerson's defines double consciousness in two ways. In "The Transcendentalist," Emerson defines double consciousness as the "two lives of the understanding and the soul which we lead" (311), and in "Fate," he refers to double consciousness as a solution to the "mysteries of the human condition" stating that "a man must ride alternately on the horses of his public and private nature" (41). Emerson interprets double consciousness to indicate society's influences on an individual's soul, whereas Du Bois makes the distinction that the construct of race is the influence. These two definitions broaden the double conscious lens so it can more accurately be applied to women's humor as we look at a patriarchy's corruption that shapes feminine performance or womanhood. For women, and thus women's humor, a patriarchy corrupts women's view on themselves so that

they fit into men's expectations, while also forcing women into the private sphere. This forced confinement into the private and a patriarchy's corruption splits women's identity.

In the canon of women's humor, chiefly constructed by Nancy Walker's *A Very Serious Thing*, this split in identity remains a constant issue. Walker argues in *A Very Serious Thing* that for female humorists and their humorous vision, they require holding "two contradictory realities... simultaneously." These two contradictory realities are the "comic version of life" and the "observable 'facts'" (82). The "observable facts" can be understood as society's apparent rules and regulations that dictate women's livelihoods, such as their adherence to the sphere, designated weaker characteristics, or their lower status. The comic version, then, claims the constructed sexist facts are not true, but simply a (false) construct. By placing Walker's definition of "holding two contradictory realities" in conversation with Du Bois' and Emerson's definitions of double consciousness, female humorists can be understood as having a unique perspective on the gender constructs that uphold a patriarchy.

Because female humorists and women live in close proximity to men, their social status and details of their marginalization become much clearer. The proximity of published female humorists to privilege (e.g., the male publisher and writer, husband, father, etc.) creates applicable definitions of double consciousness because these women see what "true" authority looks like and so they can mimic (and mock) this authority in their work. These humorists accumulate a false sense of authority to humorously point out the hypocrisy in women's marginalization, and in doing so, shatters the importance given to separate spheres and a patriarchal ideology. Holley's works portrays this humorous appropriation of power as she portrays a difference in male and female authority, and so justifies a theoretical application of double consciousness to her works and protagonist. Holley constructs both her own and



Samantha's authority by subtly pointing out the flaws in male logic. Samantha can be understood as a complex character aware of her inferiority, but as Walker argues, Holley creates a comic version of this awareness that undermines the patriarchy and male logic. By briefly looking at Holley's predecessors, arguably, Holley's writing and female protagonist lay at the origins of double consciousness in female humorous work. This argument will lead to the conclusion that Holley and Samantha Allen are the metaphorical beginnings of a canon of women's humor in America.

### **Tracing the "Origins" of Double Consciousness in Women's humor**

The male voice dominates canonical humor, as seen by humorists such as Mark Twain and Artemus Ward, whose writing style publishers and audiences considered outside of women's literary sphere. Men's humor comes from a male authority given in a patriarchy. This authority allows men to publicly critique and comment on the overall human condition or how humans act and interact in an institution. Male humorists, despite other oppressive barriers (such as class, intelligence, and sometimes race), can propose solutions to the human condition and be taken seriously, even in a humorous canon. Since popular male humorists, like Twain and Ward, have a dominant, non-oppressed, identity their overarching critiques can focus on the trajectory of the human condition while having the privilege to disregard complexity of identity in their concerns. Female humorists, however, are born into an oppressive sphere and do not have the same opportunity to think broadly about a human condition when there are more literal and pressing issues surrounding womanhood. These circumstances mean women did not easily thrive in a humorous tradition like men. Therefore, to break into this tradition some of the earliest examples of women's humor can be interpreted as attempted imitations of men's humor in order to be heard.

Unlike Marietta Holley and her protagonist Samantha, Frances Miriam Whitcher, one of the earliest American female satirists of gentility, used flawed female archetypes to dismiss women's issues and awareness of female marginalization. Charlotte Templin argues that because of an inferior identity, women would write their female characters, even their protagonists, as flawed or inept (28). Whitcher's recurring protagonist "The Widow Beddot" (whose spelling varies between title and text) showcases Templin's analysis as this character's foolishness derives from a reductive image of women. Whitcher's sketch "The Widow and Aunt Maguire Discourse on Various Topics" (1856) uses this flawed female protagonist. In this sketch, the Widow Bedott and her sister Maguire discuss the idea of being content:

"I Say sister Magwire—this ere's a miserable mean kind of world, for I've—"

"I don't agree with you, Silly. I think it's a very good sort of a world if a body looks at in a right point o'view. Most o' folks in it used *me* well, and I guess they'll continner to dew so a long as I use *them* well. For my pat I'm satisfied with the world generally speaking."

"Well, s'pozen ye be, that's no sign 't every body else had ought to be satisfied with it. You was always a wonderful satisfied critter. You think every body's default nice and detful velvet.... I know there is a few't ye don't like me—but I mean as a ginerall thing you seem to think the most o' folks is jest about right. For my part, I'd ruther see things as they actually be. I shouldent want to be so awful contented."

"How you talk, sister Beddott! (62)

Linda Morris argues that Whitcher "holds women responsible for their degradation," using satire to point out women's "own foolishness" (100). Whitcher holds Bedott "responsible" by referring to her as "Silly," explicitly dictating her incompetence, while also writing her as

senile and irrational by her idyllic married sister. This sister ridicules and dismisses Bedott who tries to acknowledge an ideological awareness of “seeing things as they truly are.” This contrasting power dynamic between Bedott and her sister, where Bedott’s status as a “widow” negatively implies she isn’t in the idealized marriage and given the named “Silly” while her married sister is described as “content,” forces the audience to read the widow character as flawed. Despite Whitcher’s inklings of the “miserable world around her,” which arguably perceives the miserable condition of women in a patriarchy, she blames Bedott’s attitude rather than the system itself. Whitcher unintentionally keeps women in the sphere by using sexist fallacies to blame Bedott, or women in general, for their own subjugation because these women choose to not act as expected. Whitcher’s work functions as a premature beginning of women’s double consciousness in humor because her female characters express an awareness of female failings but do not blame the institution and so deny patriarchy’s influence in constructing womanhood. This target of blame allows Whitcher to fit into a larger, male, canon of humor that does not uplift, but marginalizes female awareness and identities.

Publishing her first book in 1873, Holley followed in Whitcher’s footsteps, creating a recurring female protagonist but uses her this character to acknowledge women’s double consciousness. Unlike Whitcher, Holley’s awareness of female failings takes an opposite, more progressive, approach that comically blames the institution, rather than women. This distinction further insinuates Holley awareness that flawed female protagonist will only contain women to the sphere, rather than bring change. Therefore, Holley writes her female protagonist to possess ordinary common sense and logic, opposed to “female foolishness.” This unique female protagonist makes Samantha the hero of Holley’s sketches. Holley heightens Samantha’s hero status by satirizing sentimental writing, where she keeps the female protagonist to persuade

audiences, but she reverses the typical characteristics of male and female characters to showcase women's logic and common sense and men as irrational and emotional. Holley uses this reversal of in the sketch "On Being Remembered in Stone" (1892), when Josiah and Samantha disagree about what should be written on each other's tombstone:

'Wall, you won't try it on me!' He hollered as loud as ever. 'You won't try it on me, and don't undertake it.' Why ruther than to have them words rared up over me I would – I would ruther not die at all. 'Josiah Allen, husband of–' No, mom, you don't come no such game over me; you don't demean me down into a 'husband of –'!

'Why,' sez I, lookin' calmly into his face (for I see I must be calm), 'don't you know I have wrote my name for years and years, "Josiah Allen's Wife"?' (59-60)

In this excerpt, Josiah acts hypocritically and (irrationally) emotionally, nulling any logic he may have. Samantha, however, not only remains calm but is aware she "*must* be calm" for her beliefs to be heard. This reversal of characteristics, and Samantha's aside noting that she must be calm, reflect a double consciousness and an awareness of her subjugated female status in a patriarchy. Samantha's consciousness that she "must be calm" illustrates an understanding that women will only be heard and taken seriously if they do not submit to female stereotypes, such as women being irrationally emotional. Samantha's aside breaks the text's flow to consciously explain her calmness is in juxtaposition to the assumed, overly emotional, woman. With this consciousness, Holley shows how these expectations hold women back from an equal status to men. Through Samantha's actions and asides that recognize limits to female expression and image, Holley lifts women's "veil," making female readers aware of their enforced feminine behaviors. Holley manipulates the structures that confine women to her benefit, such as a sentimental genre. This

manipulation lets Holley remain in her proper sphere while revealing an awareness that these structures inhibit growth in identity.

These interpreted moments of double consciousness and female awareness not only drive the intent of Holley's work but forms the moving target for the inevitable canon of women's humor. The topic of women's suffrage seemed at a turning point by the time Holley began publishing her Samantha Books. Due to this imperative period in American history, Holley urgently writes to her readers about women's right to vote. Therefore, Holley's Samantha stories contain repetitive themes, topics, and characters creating a sense of familiarity and urgency among readers about topics such as suffrage. This type of urgency and repetition, then, urges readers to discuss these issues in their homes, with friends, and among communities. Holley's urgent themes and topics differ from Whitcher who urged women to alter their behavior for changes in status. These differences between Holley and Whitcher's writings create varied subtexts. For Whitcher, blaming women for their own oppression implicitly confirms that to be equal to men, women must assimilate to a male gaze. In Holley's subtext however, she displays a larger contempt towards the sphere and institutions that subjugate women beyond the right to vote. In order to publicly, yet subtly, critique institutions and thus "lift the veil" for women, Holley uses the explicit and recurring topics of suffrage and popular debates as a trojan horse to inform women of systemic and "intangible" issues that affect womanhood. These issues become an evolving and universal target for women's humor in America. In the process of presenting these urgent issues, Holley exposes the larger systemic problems of womanhood, and in doing so, attempts recreating women's image away from a patriarchal and male gaze.

## Holley's Urgent Intentions

Holley's writing showcases Walker's introductory claim in *A Very Serious Thing* that "women are storytellers, rather than *joke* tellers" as she attempts to capture a shared history among common nineteenth-century women (xii). Because she was unmarried and independent, Holley, despite being the sole author, does not function as the relatable figure for audiences or the "true" woman. Samantha acts as the relatable figure, resembling the assumed female reader who might be a loyally married wife and mother, making her a non-controversial storyteller. In addition to narrating, Holley let's Samantha "write" her adventures under the pseudonym "Josiah Allen's Wife." Samantha's recurring role as storyteller and author retells this common history among women, creating an even more dynamic relationship between herself and the reader. Among Holley's twenty-five published books, most, if not all, center around Samantha's voice. Samantha's voice and constant presence provides a sense of familiarity, creating a strong connection with the reader. This connection means readers will more likely understand and accept Holley's "controversial" stance on subjects like as suffrage. Compared to the common female protagonists of the nineteenth century, many of which portray an inept woman, Samantha's common sense, logic, and capability appears distinct among Holley's peers.

When Holley began publishing her collections of satirical work in the 1870s, women's suffrage debates appeared ingrained in the discussion of American politics, with many women convinced that suffrage should not be their duty. Twenty years after the Seneca Falls Convention, the "first" call for women's suffrage, the American Civil war occurred, and the topic of women's suffrage took a backseat to the more urgent issues of the time. Once the focus shifted from the war back to women's suffrage, suffragettes such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Francis Willard found themselves growing increasingly restless defending

women's unalienable rights. These suffragettes inevitably recognized that women's popular literature, such as Holley's sketches, could reach untapped audiences who might be wary of the subject. Anthony and Willard reached out to Holley to appear as a delegate at prominent suffrage conventions, but despite any admiration, these suffragettes pushed too hard for Holley to speak publicly, but as a compromise Holley took suggestions for her Samantha stories (Gwathmey 29). Additionally, after her first two Samantha Stories, Anthony sent letters to Holley with ideas that "Samantha may have a comment to make" (Winter 66). Holley's influences and her refrain from public speaking highlight the desired relatability she wanted to project onto the unwary reader. Holley intentionally made herself invisible, rather than be an outspoken, "controversial," woman, so that Samantha, who rests somewhere in between the "true" and "new" woman, can act as the prominent spokesperson on women's issues.

In her first published book *My Opinions and Betsy Bobbet's* (1873), Holley exposes the reader to strong-willed suffragettes, but the stark differences between these activists and Samantha makes the text's message more receptive to indifferent and new readers. In the sketch "Interview with Theodore and Victory," Samantha, who goes by "Josiah Allen's Wife" (despite Josiah's absence), interviews Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for president, and Theodore Tilton, an abolitionist publisher, where they discuss suffrage, divorce, and "the woman question." This fictional interview pits Samantha and Woodhull against each other as foils, where Samantha does not advocate for suffrage (as we later understand her to do) and Woodhull demands for women's right to vote and divorce. Samantha works from an extremist stance that attempts to embody the "true" woman's traditional morals. Holley, however, shows Samantha being influenced by Woodhull's impenetrable logic that counteracts the "true" woman's extremist views:

What should you say to livin' with a man that forgot every day of his life that he was a man and sunk himself into a brute. Leaving his young wife of a week for the society of the abandoned? What would you say to abuse, that resulted in the birth of an idiot child? Would you endure such a life? Would you live with the animal that he had made himself? I married a man, I never promised God nor man that I would love, honor, and obey the beast he changed into. I was free from him in the sight of a pure God, long enough before the law freed me. (104)

Here, a satirized Woodhull uses logic and shared religious morals to support her divorce, a topic Samantha (playing the “true” woman) disagrees with at first. Woodhull’s last line “I was free from him in the sight of a pure God, long enough before the law freed me” uses Christian morals that the “true woman” would have shared and attempts persuading Samantha’s version of a “true woman” that believes life-long marriage is the moral (and legal) thing to do. Woodhull weakens Samantha’s moral and “legal” stance by making the logical argument that if the man changed into a “beast” or someone she does not recognize then God will recognize this separation, even if the law does not. “Beast” appropriates the language of England’s Divorce Act of 1857 that claimed, “a wife had to prove that her husband was “physically cruel, incestuous, or *bestial* in addition to being adulterous” to secure a divorce (Thierauf 266). Woodhull uses the language of the oppressor to weaken its authority over the virtuous and traditional “true” woman that Samantha plays. The choice to use the most extreme and descriptive term “beast” sways Samantha from a strong-willed adherence to the “true woman” persona to a receptive woman.

This sketch’s satire, word choice, characters, and conversation create a dichotomy between Samantha and Woodhull’s and the parts they play as the progressive suffragette and traditional “true” woman. This dichotomy implies an unexplored, and more relatable, middle



ground exists between the two sides. As readers, we know Woodhull's goal to persuade Samantha from her conservative views will not be fully accomplished since Samantha never stops using "Josiah Allen's Wife" as a pen name, nor does she leave her husband or son as Woodhull suggests she should. However, Samantha, although at first glance apparently unphased by Woodhull's logic, begins being persuaded in her last lines: "I hadn't no hear to say anything more to Victory. I bid her farewell. But after we got out in the street, I kept a sithin'" ("Interview" 112). Here, Woodhull's words leave an obvious impression on Samantha as she kept "sithin," but not enough to completely change *all* her beliefs. Holley's insinuated middle ground creates no clear winner between Woodhull and Samantha. This character choice does not, nor is it meant to, persuade, but leads readers to question what they believe about divorce, suffrage, and even institutional oppression; therefore, Holley makes these issues more receptive to the reader. This exploration of the middle ground in Holley's first collection of *My Opinions and Betsy Bobbet's* creates a foundation for her beliefs before she published Samantha stories more frequently. Samantha beliefs evolve as Holley becomes more explicit with topics of women's suffrage. Thus, Holley instills an urgent tone to reach the common and unwary female reader.

In *My Opinions and Betsy Bobbet's*, Holley tasked herself with writing urgently, yet strategically, to reach audiences who found themselves caught between the suffrage and the "true" versus "new" woman debate. The sketch "A Allegory on Wimmen's Rights" shows this urgency. In this sketch Samantha and Josiah argue over women's suffrage, but Holley uses Samantha's actions, rather than words, to make her message clear. Josiah's side of the argument claims that the "lection boxes alone, it is too wearin for the fair sect" (27) and women are "too good to vote with us men, wimmen haint much more nor less than angels any way" (30).

Samantha responds to Josiah's with statements, laced in sarcasm and irony, of the daily laborious work she needs to complete before dinner:

“Josiah Allen, there is one angel that would be glad to have a little wood got for her to get dinner with, there is one angel that cut every stick of wood she burnt yesterday, that same angel doin’ a big washin’ at the same time” ...

“I would get you some this minute Samantha... but you know jest how hurried I be with my springs work, can’t your pick up a little for this forenoon? You haint go much to do have you?” ...

“Oh no! Says I “Nothin at all, only a big ironin’, ten pies and six loves of bread to bake, a cheese curd to run up, 3 hens to scald, churnin’ and mappin’ and dinner to get. Jest a easy mornin’s work for a angel.”

“Wall then, I guess you’ll get along...” (30).

Holley validates and acknowledges the strenuous labor women do within the domestic sphere, negating the male argument that women are too weak to move outside their sphere and vote. Since Samantha does not explicitly correct Josiah, she shows the reader his ignorance so they can question why he, or any man, should decide if women are capable of voting. This approach to discussing suffrage, although not explicit as Holley's other sketches, guides female readers to independently question male opinions and patriarchal institutions.

Holley writes and publishes *many* Samantha sketches to help her readers form lasting opinions on suffrage and “the woman question” during an increasingly restless political climate. Samantha's constant presence, consistent logic, and a lighthearted satirical tone, pushes reluctant readers to value Samantha's wits and Holley's urgent goals. In Holley's sketch, “How I Went to the ‘Lecture” from *Samantha at the Centennial* (1884), she explicitly presents the urgent topic of

suffrage, yet uses Samantha and round-about questions to weaken men's opposition rather than state women's authority on the issue. In this sketch, Josiah brings Samantha with him to vote, igniting the conversation why Josiah, who stands in for the stereotypical American man, accepts her presence when he believes women are too delicate to move outside their physical sphere to vote at the polls:

“Wouldn't it be revoltin' to the finer feelin's of your role, to see a tender woman, your companion, a crowdin' and elboin' her way amongst the rude throng of men surroundin' the pole; to have her hear the immodest and almost dangerous language, the oaths and swearin'; to see her plungin' down in the vortex of political warfare, and the delicacy of my sect goin' to stand firm a jostlin' its way amongst the rude masses, and you there to see it?” Says I, “Ain't it goin' to be awful revoltin' to you Josiah Allen?” (167)

To which Josiah responds: “Oh no! not if you was a goin' for shirt buttons.” (167). Holley showcases male-sided hypocrisy and contradiction that women cannot handle such “manly” tasks such as voting, unless of course women are there to serve men or complete her “womanly duties.” Michael H. Epp argues that Samantha writes in a voice that is both challenging and submissive (“A Republic of Laughter” 3). Here, Samantha is both “challenging and submissive” by choosing to not call out male hypocrisy and rather use false ignorance in conversations to show it. Through subtle and round-about questioning, Samantha maintains agency and awareness over hypocrisy while staying within her “sphere” that does not publicly ridicule her husband or any man for that matter. As the text progresses and the longer she stays in men's public sphere, Samantha becomes more challenging, explicitly questioning men's resistance to women's suffrage. These questions and hypocrisy appear when Samantha encounters two other voting men in “How I Went to the 'Llection.” The first man, who seems to be a friend of Josiah, states “I

was paid to vote democrat... I am a man of my word" (169), showing a hypocritical sense of morals. The next man Samantha meets seems has trouble reading his election ticket:

"What made yo vote the wrong ticket?" Says I [Samantha], "can't your read?"

"No," says he, "we can't none of use read, my father, nor my brothers; there is nine of use in all. My father and mother was first cousin," says he ina confidential tone...

"I am the only smat one in the family. But," says he, "my brothers will all do best as father and I tell 'em to, and they will all vote a good many times a day, every 'lection; and we are all willin; to do the fair thing and vote for the one that will pay use the most. But not knowin' how to read, we git cheated,"...

"There couldn't be much worse goin's on, anyway if wimmen voted."

"Wimmen vote! Says he in a awful scornful tone. "*Wimmen!*" ...

"Wimmen don't *know* enough to vote." (170-1)

After these conversations, Samantha questions men's patriarchal loyalty that deflects women's suffrage, and from these conversations she reaches the conclusion that men's "consciences are like ingy rubber, dretful easy and stretchy" ("How I Went" 174). Through Samantha's experience in "How I Went to the 'Llection," Holley shows the contradictions in men's anti-suffrage beliefs by claiming their opinions are inconsistent, assumed, and unformed, highlighting these hypocrisies to the reader. Exposing these hypocrisies guides audiences to create their own beliefs on suffrage, outside inconsistencies that their husbands and fathers may have, while leaving women's virtue uncompromised by not encouraging talking back to or questioning these men. The humor of Holley's sketches allows for a consensual consumption of Samantha's logic that the common working class or rural woman can find accessible. Samantha's "challenging and submissive" voice, along with humor, sustains Holley's urgent

message so that readers *actually* listen. Holley could easily and directly argue that male politics are hypocritical, and women should not listen to men, but without a relatable, non-controversial, woman figure Holley would not influence that average and unwary reader. Holley lets female audiences enjoy reading and create their own principles by toning down Samantha's beliefs with satire and wit so that Samantha's adventures inspire the reader, rather than Holley telling the reader what to believe.

Holley stopped publishing Samantha stories in 1914 and during her final years it seemed she found herself still not satisfied with women's continued subjugation. By 1913 Samantha's adventures started declining and Holley's messages on suffrage became more candid. "How I Went to the 'Lecture'" is one of Holley's more explicit texts supporting suffrage. This work wrapped Samantha's logic in humor while appeasing women's expected role in a patriarchy. The sketch "Polly's Eyes Grewed Tender," from *Samantha on the Woman Question* published 1913, is much more direct about suffrage and women's place compared to "How I Went to the 'Lecture'" published in 1884. In "Polly's Eyes Grewed Tender," published the same year as the first suffragist parade, Samantha no longer allows Josiah to lay claim over her actions, and logic is no longer facilitated by humor or sarcasm. In two instances in "Polly's Eyes Grewed Tender," Josiah, who the audiences believes to be asleep, interrupts Samantha's suffrage discussion with her friend Lorinda, tells his wife "I can't let you go [vote]..., into any such dangerous and onwomanly affair" (162), while also testifying "Well, as it were – Samantha – you know – men hain't expected to represent wimmen in everything (162-3). Samantha challenges Josiah's statements by responding "'Let'... that's a queer word from one old pardner to another" (162) and then, even more explicitly, tells Josiah "Oh, I see... "men represent wimmen when they want to, and when they don't wimmen have got to represent themselves." (163). Shelly Armitage

argues that Josiah represents “the characteristic ideas of the men’s sphere or public life” (195). From Armitage’s assessment, Josiah’s selective silence can be interpreted as a sleeping patriarchy that exists even when not seen or heard. Interpreted from Holley’s written awareness, a sleeping patriarchy recognizes that a patriarchy looms and always seems to have the final say on women’s issues. This awareness resembles a time before women’s suffrage where women needed male supporters to lobby and create the legislation for women’s rights. So, to indirectly target these male voters, Holley uses her awareness of the sleeping patriarchy to inform these voters’ wives, the unwary female reader, of this unjust and uniformed presence.

At the end of her career, Holley explicitly speaks through Samantha to tell her, now loyal, readers that “the woman question” or the sphere does not end with suffrage. In these final sketches, Holley supports direct opposition to husbands and fathers, letting Samantha fully embody the “new” women persona. This shift where Samantha clearly resists Josiah’s beliefs, who stands in for the stereotypical man, urgently and clearly tells Holley’s readers that suffrage does not solve women’s issues. In much of her works, Holley clearly labels suffrage as the most serious issue concerning women, but an implicit message exists, that beyond voting an infrastructure continues impeding on women’s equality. By the end of Holley’s career this implicit message appears at it clearest, becoming a wake-up call to her loyal readers.

### **Holley’s Unspoken and Larger Intentions**

Holley’s larger, oftentimes unspoken, message critiques a male gaze that dictates the way women could please the sphere with their feminine performance. In her critique, Holley notes the ways women can be more accurately defined by their capability, rather than rigid binaries of proper womanhood. Unlike suffrage, this implicit message does not exist tangibly (nor entirely intangibly). These broader, intangible, issues focus on the ideological parameters of “woman’s

sphere” and the male gaze, making readers confront the idea of women’s systematic marginalization and female complicity that aids these structures. Holley shows this complicity by personifying the “true” versus “new” woman binary that the nineteenth-century woman clings onto. However, through Samantha Allen’s created double consciousness, Holley directs the blame on a patriarchal institution, rather than the complicit woman, arming female readers with a logical defense against this system.

In her book *The Second Sex* (1949) Simone de Beauvoir claims one is not “born a woman” but “becomes one” (293), meaning, femininity does not have innate characteristics, but rather a forced performance women must follow. This theory can be understood as womanhood being constructed under the male or patriarchal gaze. I use the “gaze” as Jacques Lacan describes in his metaphor of the “mirror stage” that identity is reflected back onto oneself. This metaphor applies to feminine performance as a reflection of a male, or patriarchal, expectation of womanhood. Since women live within this gaze, they attempt to fit into a mold of what men assume women “are,” which is the inverse of masculinity.

Samantha’s awareness of women’s forced, yet complicit, feminine performance leads to pointed criticism of the gaze in Holley’s work. Holley makes these critiques by having Samantha question hypocritical differences of masculine and feminine performance in her sketches. In the sketch “The Jonesville Singin’ Quire,” Samantha raises questions why parents raise boys and girls differently, which Samantha explains with her son Thomas Jefferson in mind:

Thomas Jefferson needn’t think because he was a boy he could do anything that would be considered disgraceful if he was a girl. Now some mothers will worry themselves to death about thier girls, so afraid they will get into bad company and bring disgrace onto ‘em. I have said to ‘em sometimes, “Why don’t you worry about your boys?” (134)

In this excerpt from “The Jonesville Singin’ Quire,” Samantha questions differences of male and female upbringing by asking “why don’t you worry about your boys?” This statement allows Samantha to insinuate that boys have the same capability of bringing disgrace as girls; yet young girls and women will be shamed and punished for their behavior. Holley questions why, at a young age, girls and boys have different behavioral expectations when outcomes of disgrace are equal. Through this “simple” question, Holley raises the issue that differences in gender performance inevitably shapes female identity at a young age and anticipates female failings. Holley, rather than giving a straightforward answer to solving this issue, lets Samantha phrase the question as “Why don’t you worry about your boys?” Redirecting this line of question onto the son, rather than radically claiming girls should be raised equal to boys, lets Samantha travel under the guise of a careful and loving mother who anticipates her son’s failings as she would with a daughter. Altering this question, Holley suggests a hypocrisy in gender performance, but more specifically, showcases that gendered differences in upbringing as arbitrary.

Holley continues raising these questions of womanhood, with few explicit answers, through aspects of feminine performance, such as clothing and the physical and ideological restrictions it brings. In a few of her sketches, Holley wrestles with nineteenth-century clothing restrictions women “happily” wore. In the sketch “On Pantaloon” from *Samantha at the St. Louis Exposition* (1904), Samantha talks to Dr. Mary Walker, a union army surgeon, abolitionist, and spy who often wore men’s clothing, where Dr. Walker compares her “comfortable” clothes to Samantha’s “womanly” clothes. Dr. Walker specifically asserts, “my dress is fur more comfortable that the ordinary dress of females” (123). Holly’s word choice “ordinary dress,” arguably, refers to the expected roles or physical performance of femininity. Thus, Dr. Walker’s claim that her dress is “more comfortable” says that women’s expected feminine performance is



not “comfortable” or natural. Similarly, in Holley’s sketch “On Miss Flamm's Ideal Goddess” from *Samantha at Saratoga* (1887), the character Miss Flamm describes her ideal goddess of Liberty (the Statue of Liberty) to wear a corset, skintight sleeves, and an overskirt. After Miss Flamm’s description of an “ideal” goddess of liberty, Samantha states: “Why, sez I, ‘How could she lift her torch above her head? And how could she ever enlighten the world if she wuz so held down by her corsets and sleeves that she couldn’t wave her torch” (125). In these two texts, approximately thirty years apart, Holley shows an awareness that rigid rules of female performance restrict women from reaching enlightenment. In “On Miss Flamm's Ideal Goddess,” Samantha’s question “and how could she ever enlighten the world, if she wuz so held down by her corsets and sleeves that she couldn’t wave her torch?” directly refers to an enlightenment (Miss Flamm 125). Although Samantha refers to a physical lighting of the goddesses’ torch, Holley’s diction doubly implies women’s obstacles to enlightenment, suggesting that women cannot truly understand their identity and womanhood because of the expectation to perform a type of restricting femininity constructed by a male gaze. Referencing enlightenment relates to Margaret Fuller’s essay “The Greatest Lawsuit” which also explains that strict gender binaries keep women from enlightenment. Although Holley and Fuller make similar points, Holley’s use of satire, wit, and imagery allows her female protagonist to simply raise questions and concerns of female identity to the reader, rather than sermonize. This humorous style allows audiences to read a more accessible understanding of enlightenment and a patriarchally constructed womanhood.

In the process of showing Samantha’s awareness of female performance and critiquing the “woman’s sphere,” Holley exhibits women’s double consciousness and attempts answering the “woman question.” As seen in “On Miss Flamm's Ideal Goddess,” Samantha notes the

physical obstacles women face while upholding a male gaze, as the Goddess will not be able to lift her torch if she wears a corset and tight sleeves. The choice to say “enlighten” over any other synonym comically shows Samantha’s awareness of the patriarchal standards that hold women back, both ideologically (enlightenment) and physically (clothing). Therefore, this example displays women’s double consciousness between true capability and identity versus the performed. Holley weaves this awareness of women’s barriers in each of her sketches to subtly questions women’s oppression, starting with something as simple as women’s clothing. By inadvertently guiding female readers to question the sphere and patriarchal expectations themselves, Holley seemingly lifts the veil between women’s double consciousness to highlight that the male gaze has constructed the ideal feminine performance.

Near the end of her career, Holley, despite unsaid and overarching questions, no longer found herself bound to the rules of the physical, ideological, or literary sphere, and began utilizing an awareness of double consciousness more explicitly. During her final publishing year, Holley’s portrayal of a double consciousness became much clearer as she wrote humorous works outside her allowed literary sphere and created *Josiah Allen on the Woman Question* (1914), a collection of satirical sketches from Josiah’s point-of-view. In *Josiah Allen on the Woman Question*, Holley abandoned Samantha as the protagonist and spoke through Josiah. With Josiah’s, patriarchally granted, male authority, Holley acts upon the argued subtext that gender performance is arbitrary. Holly does this by writing from a male perspective, and thus performing a masculine identity. Since Holley performs as a male identity, she does not have to write within the limits of the sentimental genre, but can imitate male satirist writing, much like Whitcher attempted but failed in gaining long-standing recognition. Unlike Whitcher, Holley stays loyal to her recurring female protagonist and continues portraying Josiah as flawed and

temperamental and Samantha as his logical companion. By switching the perspective from Samantha to Josiah, while keeping their recurring characteristics, Holley mimics the stereotypical male argument—putting herself in man’s metaphorical shoes—to counter-argue against women’s rights. Josiah’s perspective continues making ridiculous sexist statements. He declares, for instance, that “As any male Filosifer and female Researcher knows... owin’ to her weakness of inteleck and soft nater, a woman’s mind gits ruffled up easy, and that rufflin’ up affects her cookin’” but as the actual author, Holley weakens the stereotypical man’s arguments by highlighting faults in this misogyny (“In Which I Resolve” 2). Holley takes on “the woman question” from a more encompassing angle by placing herself at the center of a male perspective and portraying *his* argument, further disproving arguments against women’s suffrage or women’s movement outside the “sphere.”

Through an awareness of the gaze and its expectations, Holley can perform ideal femininity through the character of Samantha, who maintains her expected role of pious wife and mother, while also performing masculinity through the character of Josiah. Investing her characters with a sense of double consciousness allows Holley to understand and perform masculinity resulting in a reversed and appropriated sense of authority. To perform this masculinity, Holley uses humor to speak as a comic and dominant perspective typically denied to women, all while imitating male opposition to women’s issues. In granting herself this dominant perspective through Josiah, Holley satirically shows men missing a double conscious lens. This missing lens insinuates that men, who are bestowed a divine dominance, do not feel the need to understand opposing arguments because they grant themselves authority on *any* subject. The lens Josiah lacks comes from *not* being marginalized, allowing Holley to imply that an oppressing identity will never truly understand the oppressed. The first chapter of *Josiah Allen on the*

*Woman Question*, “In which I Resolve to Write a Book,” showcases Josiah’s missing lens as he mentions his controversial anti-suffrage book to Samantha expecting her react hysterically and irrationally angry, but she replies calmly and methodically:

“When I wuz a girl we had a Debatin’ School, and there was a feller that we always tried to git on the side opposite to us, his talk and arguments wuz such a help to us. I hain’t no objections to your writin’ the book Josiah” (4)

In response to Samantha’s anecdote, Josiah, in relief, states: “I felt relieved, but couldn’t see what sot her off to tellin’ that old story at this juncture” (4). Irony and satire dichotomize Josiah’s simplemindedness with Samantha’s methodical logic, so Holley can further question why women should not entertain or strengthen men’s vapid oppositions to women’s rights. So, as seen with Josiah, who Samantha plainly offers methods to strengthen his knowledge of the other, Holley implicitly states that the male gaze that sets the standard for womanhood comes from an uninformed place that men are unable (or do not want) to change.

Writing from Josiah’s perspective, Holley showcases her awareness of the sphere’s ideological limits and women’s double consciousness as she performs masculinity and femininity. Holley’s form in *Josiah Allen on the Woman Question* highlights her ability to fully understand the dominant perspective’s ideologies enough to not only reiterate but satirize and weaken their claims without outwardly stating these beliefs are wrong. This strategic satirical approach highlights Holley’s awareness that a patriarchal society and audience do not allow her to write humorously the way men can, regardless of her success writing a stereotyped male character. Holley recognizes that an outwardly rebellious, crude, or deviant female figure, such as herself, would lose the unwary reader from listening to her progressive and implicit messages on womanhood. This recognition influences Holley to perform as Samantha, who acts as author

(Josiah Allen's wife) and narrator, showing that any gender performance, feminine, masculine, "true," or "new," is arbitrary. This basic awareness drives the argued implicit intentions of Holley's writing.

### **Conclusion: The Target of Female Humor and Its Evolution after Holley**

The difference in Holley's urgent and implicit messages represents the sign of her time writing in the nineteenth-century where gender binaries were arguably at their most rigid. Holley's work featuring the funny female protagonist created a unique target for female humor, where, although she criticizes and comments upon current event issues such as women's suffrage, she enters a debate of understanding woman's identity outside of a male gaze. This understanding of the gaze remains a common thread among female humorists who come after Holley and survives past the nineteenth and into the twenty-first century.

Past the nineteenth-century, Elaine Dundy's novel *The Dud Avocado* (1958) and Torrey Peters' *Detransition Baby* (2021) both continue considering Holley's questions of womanhood and critiques the structures that sustain the male gaze. Through varied styles of humor, Dundy and Peters showcase similar awareness of women's required feminine performance and will designate literary agency and control onto their female protagonists. Holley's nineteenth-century audience did not easily grant her this literary agency, so she embedded questions and critiques of the "woman's sphere" in her subtext which survives past her era. This subtext revealed long-term consequences that were beginning to be recognized in the nineteenth-century. These consequences indicate the woman's sphere never, truly, disappears, but rather becomes internalized subconscious barriers and expectations that continue to dictate womanhood. Therefore, by making the argument that the sphere's existence persists, despite the terminology of the "sphere" disappearing altogether by the 1920s, I look towards Jane Curry. Curry is the first

scholar and author to rediscover and popularize Marietta Holley in the twentieth century, and in her insightful introduction to her anthology “Samantha Rastles the Woman Question” (1983) she claims, “When one reads the Samantha books, she begins to view the nineteenth-century not as a ‘then’ so much as it was the beginning of the ‘now’” (1). Curry’s interpretation of Holley, her influences, and time period as a foundation for women’s issue, leads to my understanding of Holley as a moniker for women’s humor and its evolving target. This target, despite its changing appearance and terminology, remains influenced by the “woman’s sphere.”

## Chapter Two

### **“*The Dead Avocado*”: Examining Elaine Dundy’s Complex Humor to Define the American Woman**

#### **Introduction**

At her lowest point, Elaine Dundy’s protagonist from *The Dud Avocado* (1968), Sally Jay Gorce, over the dinner table, hears this piece of wisdom, from her friend Stephan,

“Hah! Avocados,” he said, brightening. “How I love them. Cheer up my little avocado,” he said to me, pinching my hand. “You know, these American girls are just like avocados. Whoever even heard of an avocado sixty years ago? Yes, that’s what we’re growing nowadays. His avocado arrived and he looked at it lovingly. “The Typical American Girl,” he said addressing it. “A hard center with tender meat all wrapped up in a shiny casing.” He began eating it. “How I love them...So green—so eternally green.” He winked at me.

No, it’s true, And I will tell you something really extraordinary, *mes enfants*. Do you know that you can take the stones of these luscious fruits, put them in water—just plain water, mind you—anywhere, any place in the world, and in three months comes a sturdy little plant full of green leaves? That is their sturdy little souls bruising into bloom,” he finished off, well satisfied with his analogy. (224-5)

But Sally Jay doesn’t buy it and replies, “Well this one isn’t going to burst into bloom...What you’ve got here is a dead one.” Misunderstanding, Stephan asks, “A what? A dud one?” “No, dead,” Sally Jay answers. “Dead. Oh, forget it.” To this, their dinner companion Max, raises his glass and proposes a toast: “The dud avocado” (224).

In this passage, which gives *The Dud Avocado* its name, Dundy's protagonist uses humor as a way to react to the idea of being the "newly" discovered, "Typical American Girl." However, these lines beg the question, why name the novel *The Dud Avocado*, when Sally Jay actually means *dead*? Sally Jay's notable claim to be a "dead" avocado could be interpreted as a simple, self-critical joke, but rather, Sally Jay's quick wit, and even quicker surrender, writes a more realistic American "girl" than meets the eye. Stephan's label of "Typical American *Girl*," specifically not acknowledged as a woman, infantilizes, and acts a classification that pushes a marketable ideal of womanhood for male consumption rather than female liberation. By using the term "typical" to describe the American woman, the common male expatriate such as Stephan himself, looks to exoticize womanhood by simplifying the complex women into a brand, the "Typical American Girl," making this individual more easily found, created, and consumed, which is symbolized by Stephan acting out his metaphor where he looks "at the avocado lovingly" and then eating it shortly thereafter. Stephen, who could be representative of the male expatriates Sally Jay runs into, sees the liberated female as a new, profitable, and trendy perspective on American identity. Although there is nothing inherently new about Sally Jay's brand of femininity, as this liberated, expatriate, independent female character appears thirty-two years earlier with Brett Ashely in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), the historical context of World War II and the anticipation leading up to second wave feminism connotes this new "Typical American Girl" as a trend, rather than an isolated trailblazer, making her more acceptable for male consumption. Sally Jay, however, does not necessarily resist being exoticized as the liberated woman. As a young woman, Sally Jay chooses a sense of freedom and identity over the housewife archetype that Betty Friedan will similarly reject in her foundational 1964 book *The Feminine Mystique*. In order to find this freedom and identity beyond the



housewife occupation, Sally Jay resists the stereotypical or proper roles women embody, such as being domestic, chaste, and passive. However, while among the dominant male group in Paris, Sally Jay sees what true freedom looks like but becomes aware that her female status prevents her from reaching this liberation, and so the men around her exoticize women's search for freedom. The men exoticizing the "liberated woman" does not consider modern womanhood as a complex response to the limited roles women have previously been offered, but a desirable and nonthreatening other that they can consume, sexualize, and exploit.

Dundy examines this new, male desired, female archetype by exploring and recognizing the configurations of the complex woman. But to explore the limits of this woman, Dundy throws her self-aware female protagonist into a literary realm overcrowded with the cliché expatriate archetype that so many American men were chasing in lieu of a romanticized time before World War II. By doing this, Dundy makes direct comparisons between liberated male and female identities, ridiculing the pretentious and self-involved man who only sees women as an accessory to his liberation and patriarchal claim over the arts, literature, and the concept of enlightenment. To give her female protagonist a fighting chance, Dundy equips Sally Jay with humor to talk back and survive against the dominant group.

Dundy writes Sally Jay's humor as self-aware and private from male characters, representing a sense of agency and control that begins being assumed in the American woman during and following the Second World War. Sally Jay's autonomy and humor, however, projects privately onto the reader, rather than the other characters, exemplifying a new age of humorous authority and ideological awareness that comes from a place of resistance as she keeps her thoughts from and mocks the dominant group. This resistance, although slight, lets Sally Jay covertly discuss and mock her female subjugation with a sympathetic audience, building up a

confidence that will eventually be heard. For instance, when Stephan says, “American girls are just like avocados...that’s what *we’re* growing *nowadays*,” he not only fetishizes the American girl, but claims sole ownership over mid-century womanhood, by claiming that is what “we” (men) are growing nowadays, as if the “Typical American Girl” exists only as a trendy crop. Sally Jay resists this male claim over womanhood by redefining the “avocado” as a “dead one” refusing to “bloom” for him, enforcing her own identity over the simplified analogy. By claiming the label “dead avocado,” Sally Jay uses self-deprecating humor to redirect power from Stephan’s classification, creating and acknowledging her own definition of womanhood. After Sally Jay asserts this more accurate description of womanhood both men mishear her, and so Sally Jay’s keeps this self-deprecating quip to herself and the audience. Nevertheless, Sally Jay’s pre-second wave counterattack slowly, but surely, works as the men around her still rename the avocado in what they believe is in her image.

The exclusiveness of *The Dud Avocado*’s humor, of who hears and understands the jokes, unifies the novel’s funniest moments as no other character witnesses Sally Jay’s humorous insights other than the reader. This relationship between Sally Jay and the reader grows increasingly more intimate, giving Sally Jay confidence and a sense of community in the face of her liberation being fetishized. Through this relationship, Sally Jay talks out her issues with a sympathetic reader. In confiding with the reader, she begins realizing her place among expatriate men and their female companions. As Sally Jay attempts moving around Paris as a mid-twentieth-century woman and among mid-century men, she realizes her marginalized status comes from the sexist political unconscious that lives inside her male companions. This “political unconscious” can be defined by Fredric Jameson as a “conceptual gap between the public and private...between society and the individual...” that creates a “tendential law of

social life... alienating us,” with the only liberation coming from “recognition” of the constraint the unconscious has on us (20). Dundy recognizes this sexist “political unconscious” through Sally Jay’s humorous observations, self-deprecating, yet self-enhancing, quips privately shared with the audience. Sally Jay alienates herself from the other women she sees as she considers them willing and happy accessories to their male companions; whereas Sally Jay subconsciously wants freedom from these required relationships and find liberation on her own terms, but briefly settles for finding this freedom with Larry, who eventually also wants to exploit her. In resisting these relationships and recognizing the limitations attached to women’s liberation, I suggest, Dundy uses intimately shared humor to question the evolving roles of women and the sexist political unconscious of the men surrounding Sally Jay that, in spite of their counterculture pretensions, still uphold rigid boundaries about expectations of women. Through her unique style of humor, Dundy wrestles with the continued tensions inherent in mid-twentieth-century women’s expected roles and the construct of the “woman’s sphere,” no longer defined as physically, rigidly, or as overt as in the nineteenth century, but rather as the available ideological parameters for women’s identity and what was often unconsciously considered during the mid-twentieth century as a woman's place.

I retain the phrase “woman’s sphere,” in spite of its nineteenth-century associations, to recognize continuities between the worlds of Marietta Holley and Elaine Dundy while exploring how these worlds differ, to suggest that the boundaries demarcating female identities in the twentieth century were no less real than they were in the nineteenth century, even if they grew more subtle. Beyond the physical parameters of the sphere found in Holley’s satire—that arguably still exists in *The Dud Avocado*—the roles and characteristics that the men of this novel unconsciously expect Sally Jay to embody, and into which Sally Jay humorously recognizes she

does not “fit,” upholds the ideological conditions of the sphere. In the relationships and events where Sally Jay should belong as a female companion rather than as a liberated woman, Dundy uses humor to represent a more critical consciousness of womanhood that subtly rejects the expectations of male gaze. To express this more critical consciousness of womanhood, Dundy does not use satire like Marietta Holley does by simply satirizing an expatriate tradition, novel, and plot, despite Dundy including some of these hyperbolic features in her novel. Dundy, more prominently, draws direct comparison between the stereotyped male expatriate and Sally Jay.

*The Dud Avocado* makes a few references to Ernest Hemingway, his vision of the American expatriate, and his novel *The Sun Also Rises*. While away from Paris, Sally Jay alludes to the failed and badly reviewed film adaptation of *The Sun Also Rises* (1957) by mentioning the film’s main idea as a “bullfighter in French fishing villages” (173). This allusion forces a direct comparison between Sally Jay and Jake Barnes (Hemingway’s protagonist), distinguishing their experiences as expatriates and narrators. Jake, as a member of the dominant group, speaks publicly and simply to drive the plot. Whereas Sally Jay uses extremely detailed storytelling with complex plot driven by contradicting inner-narration and outward dialogue. These differences symbolize their gendered approach to expatriatism. As a man, Jake is taken seriously as the narrator and has semi-biographical features to Hemingway himself, therefore he does not need to dress up his narrative to captivate audiences. Sally Jay, however, literally talks to the audience, almost as if she constantly fights to keep their attention. So, through Sally Jay, Dundy mocks this seriousness she is not automatically granted by alluding to the failed film adaptation, weakening Hemingway’s seriousness, and humorously accepting her inability to fully assimilate to the dominant group, by no fault of her own. Though Dundy forces this comparison between the male and female expatriate’s themes, features, and narration, showcasing that even in an original plot

women continue being restricted by sexist unconscious barriers, she makes a larger critique about the pressures of the male gaze that prevent liberation. Regardless of the fact Sally Jay similarly narrates herself like the epitome of a male expatriate, Jake Barnes, the mid-century male expatriates still do not consider Sally Jay their equal. Through humor, Dundy uses Sally Jay to see beyond and through the ideological structures, weakening the authority of the gaze and its power over womanhood and liberation.

Dundy's novel finds itself in a unique period of American history where second wave feminism begins to form, and the limited roles and jobs women have traditionally assumed are questioned in hopes for liberation. This search for liberty can better be defined by Dundy's theoretical contemporary Simone de Beauvoir and her book *The Second Sex* (1949), while also including Betty Friedan's inevitable foundational feminist text *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) that articulates Sally Jay's issues with womanhood that go unnamed in *The Dud Avocado*. These works give insight into the rapidly changing woman and her relationship with male oppression. Dundy tests the limits and concludes that the mid-twentieth-century woman and her desired liberation cannot be supported while men fantasize about an unforgiving and romanticized period of 1920s American expatriatism. This realization displays the evolving funny woman as a new, more explicitly resistant, woman reinventing herself as shown in *The Dud Avocado*. As we continue to see from Holley's satire to Dundy's *The Dud Avocado*, the humorous tradition continues to test structures and genres, seeing if evolving woman can be contained. For Holley, she pushed against the fences of the sentimental genre and the male dominated satirical form. As for Dundy's work, Sally Jay challenges the boundaries of the American expatriate novel with her presence and awareness she should not belong. Through this awareness, Sally Jay presents the double consciousness that lays at the foundation of women's humorous tradition that tries to

understand how women fit in patriarchal institutions. Therefore, *The Dud Avocado* proves to be a fragment in the larger canon of women's humor and the evolution of womanhood in American culture.

### **Sally Jay's Varied and Split Humor**

Rather than try and answer *why* Dundy uses humor in her novel, which cannot truly be known, exploring *how* she uses humor will help us understand to what end this humor is essential to the novel's message. Specifically, Dundy's humorous form mirrors a tradition of women's "secret" humor passed down generations. According to Regina Barreca, "Yes, women's lines have always gotten a laugh—but only in secret. "Secret" meant just what the deodorant ad told us. 'Secret' meant for women only'..." (*They Used* 102). This point establishes that, "women generally rate themselves more comfortable when telling jokes to a very small group of close friends, whereas men feel comfortable telling their jokes to a much larger size" (103). In much this way, Sally Jay's humor follows women's "secret" joke telling form, where she only makes jokes or humorous quips for herself and an assumed reader, but not for the men she finds herself around. By having Sally Jay use "secret" joke telling in a published novel, Dundy publicly, yet accurately, portrays this hidden tradition Barreca claims and resists women's systemic subjugation head on. Dundy's use of parentheses, diary entries, and Sally Jay's "breaking of the fourth wall" talking directly at the reader, all supports Barreca's notion of "secret" humor. We first find an instance of Sally Jay breaking the fourth wall after her argument with her married boyfriend Teddy:

"So, he [Teddy] gave up. And in a way I kind of gave up myself. I gave up wondering if anyone was ever going to understand me at all. If I was ever going to understand *myself*

even. Why was it difficult anyway? Was I some kind of a nut or something? Don't answer that." (44)

Here, Sally Jay directly speaks to the audience, asking us if she, essentially, is crazy, and immediately following up that question with "don't answer that." Sally Jay's choice to talk to the reader, rather than Teddy, reveals where she finds the most comfort.

Sally Jay's choice to hide humor and existential issues from Teddy resonates with *The Feminine Mystique*, published five years after *The Dud Avocado*, where Friedan will eventually observe that women dealt with the anguish of identity privately, keeping these problems from husbands, doctors, and psychiatrists because they were ashamed of not being happy with their "proper" role of housewife or because they were ignored by these men (14-5). So, by avoiding heavy conversations with Teddy, Sally Jay, like the deeply unhappy and unfulfilled housewife that Friedan defines, avoids talking to the men in her life and chooses to talk directly to the audience. Additionally, breaking the fourth wall, according to Nancy Walker in *A Very Serious Thing*, allows characters to establish a relationship and intimacy that "justifies the chatty, confidential tone that follows (131). Alongside Sally Jay's confidential tone that creates intimacy with the reader, Barreca's idea that women are funny in secret, only among other women, adds an additional layer to this style, as seen in the difference between Sally Jay's relationship with Teddy and the reader. Although Sally Jay seeks out an affair with a married man, she chooses to keep her existential crisis away from her male companion and redirect to the reader. This choice could mean that Sally Jay feels more comfortable speaking to an audience who *maybe* will understand why she feels so unfulfilled with Teddy. This redirection to a sympathetic audience resembles mid-century feminism and women's fight for agency, that Friedan defines five years later in *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan's work will actualize the reasonings behind Sally Jay's

choice to confide in the audience over Teddy by claiming that women were deemed crazy, irrational, or were simply ignored when mentioning existential issues to husbands, doctors, or psychiatrists, so these women talked among themselves or kept these issues private (14). Through humor, and rather than feel silenced, Sally Jay gives herself power over these “secret” questions by overseeing how, where, and why she chooses to share with an audience but not the other characters. Like the eventual second wave beliefs, the humor found between the narrator and reader’s relationships gives Sally Jay agency over her voice, narrative, and image away from the men physically closest to her.

The exclusiveness of Sally Jay’s humor echoes Barreca’s claim of women’s secret humor—as in just for women— while also speaking to a recurring oversight of women’s humor and issues in American culture. Sally Jay not only withholds her humor, jokes, and quips from the fictional men around her, but reserves these humorous moments for readers who seek her out, ensuring someone will listen. Friedan articulated a female phenomenon named “the woman problem” describing the unfulfilled and unhappy housewife that was “secret problem” everyone was talking about but took for granted as one of the unreal and unsolvable problems in America (21). Here, Sally Jay’s choice to keep her inner thoughts and humor hidden from the men around her highlights the unnamed pattern in women’s behavior that come to surface in the 1950-60s. Sally Jay’s choice to hide her humor seems in reference to this pattern of female behavior, where she worries and assumes the men around her will not listen, understand, or will simply overlook her issues. This worry (and assumption) becomes justified after Teddy proposes to Sally Jay and she attempts to express her existential grievances:

“Tell me something,” I asked him, “tell me exactly how we would live. This isn’t just idle curiosity. It’s difficult to explain, but I just somehow feel that I never really have



lived; that I never really will live— exist or whatever— in the sense that other people do.

It drives me crazy. I was terribly aware of it... (53)

Rather than *really* listen to Sally Jay's concerns about identity and belonging, Teddy claims they cannot live like those at the Ritz, because he has no money and needs to marry to find more (53). Not only does Teddy admit wanting to marry Sally Jay solely for her money, but he also does not *really* answer her question. Sally Jay does not necessarily want to live like those women at the Ritz who only accompany men but searches for a place where her identity belongs, to which, as a wife to an "Old World" type like Teddy, Sally Jay realizes she will never find that fulfillment with him and his expectations. However, Sally Jay does not have these same issues of sharing with the reader who willingly listens to her. This suggests Sally Jay assumes the person she speaks to will not overlook or undermine her concerns.

Terry Teachout explores patterns of overlooking in her introduction, as a theme both in humor and *The Dud Avocado*, claiming this novel is: "handicapped by being funny. Americans like comedy but don't trust it" (vii). Although the wide assumption that comedy is unserious lives in American culture, a larger disparity between male and female humor highlights a separate, sexist, problem. This disparity comes from the inequitable amounts of male and female works accepted in a humorous canon and that are anthologized, which Walker attempted to correct in her anthology *Redressing the Balance: American Women's Literary Humor from Colonial Times to the 1980s* (1988). This canonical male humor, including names such as Mark Twain and Artemus Ward, exposes and questions hypocrisy in institution, which popular audiences enjoy and respect, even if these readers did not understand the subversiveness of these humorists. Barreca's claims that women's "secret" humor speaks to the psychology of women that comes from being overlooked for centuries. To correct this, Dundy does not make an

unforgettable presence, but rejects this oversight of women's issues, identity, and humor by purposefully withholding Sally Jay's humor from those with an authority to overlook. Dundy weakens this authority by having Sally Jay reserve her humor from male characters, suggesting she removes herself from trying to appease a male gaze that stereotypes, sexualizes, exploits, and therefore overlooks women as complex beings. Sally Jay's reservation of humor acts as a sense of agency over her identity, finding power in this secrecy that is passed down from Dundy to Sally Jay, and then onto the willing reader.

Dundy's written form, and how she creates an intimate relationship between Sally Jay and the reader, exemplifies Walker's argument in *A Very Serious Thing* that "women's desire to claim autonomy and power is central to American women's humor" (4). Dundy's unique presentation of humor— that is self-deprecating and self-enhancing— gives Sally Jay authority over her image, setting, reactions, and emotion, but only depending on the intended audience of this humor. To define these two types of humor, I use self-deprecating to mean afflictive humor, where an individual plays into a negative trait for the group— welcoming being laughed *at*. Additionally, Walker defines self-deprecating as "a way of acknowledging that she has difficulty living up to the standards established for her behavior" (*Very Serious* 106). Self-enhancing humor, however, also targets an individual's trait, but is not necessarily a negative quality— therefore, laughing *with* the group. Self- deprecating and enhancing humor, in Sally Jay's case, works together in the same jokes, yet the delivery of these punchlines, whether someone laughs *at* or *with* Sally Jay, depends on the individual hearing the joke. At the beginning of *The Dud Avocado*, Sally Jay runs into an old American friend Larry, who ends up being a key character throughout the novel, and as Sally Jay narrates, they have this encounter:

Slowly his eyes left my hair and traveled downwards. This time he really took in my outfit and then that Look that I'm always encountering; that special one composed in equal parts of amusement, astonishment and horror came over his face.

I am not a moron, and I can generally guess what causes this look. The trouble is, it's always different... I squirmed uncomfortably, feeling his eyes bearing down on my bare shoulders and breasts.

"What the hell are you doing in the middle of morning with an evening dress on?" He asked finally.

"Sorry about that," I said quickly, "but it's all I've got to wear. My laundry hasn't come back yet...I mean these teintureries make it so difficult for you to get your laundry to them in the first place, don't they, closing up like that from noon till three? I mean, gosh, it's the only time I'm up around over here– don't you think?"

"Oh yeah, *sure*," said Larry and murmured "Jesus" under his breath. (9-10)

Here, Sally Jay expresses both self-deprecating and self-enhancing humor, yet both are not intended for Larry. Sally Jay's self-deprecating humor begins when she addresses her inappropriate evening dress to remove Larry's uncomfortable stare that makes her insecure of her body and image. Sally Jay acknowledges not living up to the proper woman who does her laundry on time and is put together. So, she tells Larry directly about these failures and invites being laughed at, rather than objectified. Self-deprecating humor gives Sally Jay power to move Larry's critical stare from her bare shoulders and chest to her forgetfulness and tardiness to do laundry. Although these are still negative traits that Larry laughs *at*, Sally Jay changes the narrative from one that objectifies the female body to one about her inability to wear clean appropriate clothing.

In this moment, the humorously blunt claim and inner dialogue of “not being a moron” while being physically objectified changes this scene from the self-deprecating humor Larry sees to self-enhancing that the audience reads. Sally Jay’s control over the narrative lets her use inner thoughts to narrate, forcing the audience to read the scene through her perspective, opposed to Larry’s nonconsensual, objectifying, gaze onto her body. Self-enhancing humor lets Sally Jay invite the reader to understand her discomfort of this moment and therefore laughing *with* Sally Jay as she attempts to remove herself from this objectification. To laugh *with* Sally Jay rather than *at*, Dundy, as de Beauvoir claims, protests and refuses the “real” by reimagining the “soul” (758). Sally Jay deals with the “real,” actual and uncomfortable, objectification women face only ten pages into the novel, but rather than simply letting the audience see Sally Jay lose control over her image, Dundy reimagines this scenario with self-enhancing, inner-dialogue humor that critiques women’s casual objectification during the sexist act.

Dundy’s observational humor works in tandem with self-deprecating and enhancing humor, so like her image and spoken narrative, Sally Jay has agency over the narrative’s setting that strategically informs what the audiences sees. For Dundy, observational humor showcases the absurd objectifications women handle daily. In the conversation between Larry and Sally Jay about her laundry, observational humor communicates to the audience about the ridiculousness of Larry’s stare on Sally Jay’s bare chest and shoulders, critiquing how objectifying the female body is normalized under a patriarchal culture. Additionally, this humor prevents the audience from objectifying her like Larry. By writing the scene through Sally Jay’s hyper-aware narration the audience reads about her discomfort of Larry’s wondering eyes rather than the details of her chest and arms, making readers also experience this objectification. Forcing this uncomfortable experience onto the reader creates a shared history between Sally Jay and the audience. Sally

Jay, who feels alone in her objectification, establishes a shared history with readers who may also feel this loneliness, and so a friendship forms based on female objectification, letting Sally Jay share, validate, and control her discomfort, isolation, and insecurities throughout the novel.

Through humor, Dundy's strategically gives Sally Jay control over the narrative and herself; however, humor does not mean a lack of seriousness. In Teachout's introduction to *The Dud Avocado*, she claims that what the novel "has to say about life *must* be read between the punchlines" (vii). Through Sally Jay's humorous narrative and self-reflection, the reader also reflects on the serious, yet absurd, issues many women encounter daily, such as objectification. Additionally, Walker claims that women's "relationship to authority, decision making, and social change" comes from different influences than men (*Very Serious* 12). Dundy's work illustrates Walker's claim, as humor and awareness simultaneously work with Sally Jay's character, to express, understand, and reflect on the many ways women live differently than men in a patriarchy. *The Dud Avocado's* seriousness, coupled with humor, gives female readers the opportunity to laugh at women's marginalization, creating feelings of empowerment and recognition, rather than subjugation. Dundy uses humor as a tool to weaken the authority of the dominant group by pointing out the hypocrisy and foolishness of the men around Sally Jay, which she secretly ridicules herself. Humor works as a vital element in Dundy's novel to effectively deliver her points on female oppression and identity to the reader. Dundy's humor makes this serious message about women's constant marginalization more enjoyable and approachable for audiences. Without humor, Dundy's message would be a dramatized narrative that could either sermonize to the reader or easily blame women's issues on the incompetence of the female protagonist and, once again, the larger patriarchal instigator of these issues would be forgiven. Much like humor's effect on this novel's message, Sally Jay's humor also weakens the

structures, like the male gaze, that marginalize and fetishize her identity, enough so she detaches herself from these expectations as she returns home. Dundy's humorous, hyper-aware, and (although she does not always know it) independent character personifies expressions of womanhood that finds the subconscious boundaries of the ideal or proper woman arbitrary. By the end of the novel, when Sally Jay returns home, Dundy presents evidence of this independent identity through Sally Jay's character growth and the notion that women cannot only survive outside the gaze but can flourish given the chance.

### **Dundy's Historical Influence and Humorous Inspiration**

*The Dud Avocado* continues critiquing the "woman's sphere" that once defined nineteenth-century standards of womanhood with a new mid-twentieth-century awareness. The nineteenth-century woman's sphere referred to the physical spaces women could occupy, such as home or kitchen, while also pressuring women to maintain their submissive partnership with men. Although the public debate about "woman's sphere" dwindles by 1915 and disappears almost altogether after women receive the right to vote, the separation between men and women and the private and public sphere continue to exist (and be upheld) well into the twentieth century. This separation, rather than a vocalized divide, lives in an unconscious bias that assumed women were happy being kept inside the home. Friedan eventually named this false assumption the "feminine mystique." Barreca's concept of women's secret humor makes a similar claim to Friedan that women hide their humor from men because of the "'glass ceiling' between the kitchen— or the private world of women—and the 'upstairs' public world of men" (103). Women's double consciousness lives within this subconscious divide where women's awareness of their expected roles and place contradicts desires or capability.

Continuing from Holley, female humorist often approaches this continued ideological divide while raising questions about the tensions of womanhood. In the period between Holley and Dundy, Dorothy Parker, a notable satirist, symbolizes the transition in women's humor from urgent topics such as suffrage to existential questions of identity and womanhood. In her sketch "The Waltz," Parker visually illustrates women's double consciousness and awareness of their "proper" roles by using alternating italics and roman type to contrast an inner-monologue and spoken dialogue. In this humorous sketch, an unknown man asks the unnamed narrator to dance, and thus forcing the narrator to perform as a woman should. To question these proper roles about how a woman should act, Parker places her female narrator in a public setting where these rules are more strictly enforced, with the first line cooing "WHY, *thank you so much. I'd adore to* (209). These lines contrast between the female narrator's real versus falsified reactions when asked to dance. However, the narrator's true feelings unravel as she is stuck dancing with the unknown man, complaining "I don't want to dance with him. I don't want to dance with anybody, and even if I did, it wouldn't be him" (209). Parker humorously portrays the annoying obligations for women to perform as they should as pandering to and accessorizing the men who find them attractive. Although "The Waltz" does not take place in a "private sphere," it still highlights the unspoken, yet enforced, expectations women live up to. Parker conveys these forced expectations by having her narrator complain about, rather than harshly critique, the proper roles women must follow, making this experience humorous and relatable revelation of the unspoken ideals that continue affecting women's lives. As stated by Barreca in her introduction to *Dorothy Parker: Complete Stories* (1995), Parker aims to "make fun of... and trace the split 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 analysis highlights Parker's double consciousness of

womanhood, where the split defines the expected versus the real performances of femininity. Evidence of double consciousness in Parker's work showcases a lineage traced backwards from Holley and forwards to Dundy.

Following Holley and Parker, Dundy's work highlights, through her use of humor, how the sphere evolves and Sally Jay's planned escape from it. Sally Jay exposes the sphere's evolving boundaries by attempting to escape women's proper place and infiltrates a male dominated world of American expatriates. To survive this group, Dundy grants Sally Jay narrative authority and humor that recognizes the hypocrisy and absurdity around her. As Sally Jay infiltrates the male expatriate world, it becomes evident this sphere is no longer as overt as Holley's physical boundaries of the home, but rather lives in a political unconscious of the men around her. Dundy's juxtaposition of Sally Jay with the male expatriate illustrates the stereotypical man's sexist unconscious bias that clashes with Sally Jay's female presence. Sally Jay attempts to imitate the American male expatriate to belong in their world and escape the sphere, but this proves futile as Sally Jay's visible identity as a woman prevents her from being men's equal as the sexist unconscious of male expatriates now carries the sphere with them.

The historical and literary context leading up to and surrounding *The Dud Avocado*, such as the American expatriate movement, World War II, and beginning signs of mid-century and second wave feminism, influences Dundy's writing and her funny female protagonist Sally Jay. Arguably, *The Dud Avocado*'s structure mimics and mocks the male American expatriate novel showing how it clashes with a mid-century female protagonist. Dundy writes an American expatriate pastiche with a female protagonist who name-drops famous expatriates such as Hemingway, while subtly digging at his male-centered features, like his male narrator Jake Barnes or sexist female creation Brett Ashley, while also noting Hemingway's "failures" such as



the ill-adapted film of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). However, Dundy does not want to belittle expatriate works; after all, not only were Dundy and Hemingway, at the very least, friends, but Hemingway praised her book, “I liked your book. I liked the way your characters all speak differently ... My characters all sound the same because I never listen” (259-60). Pitting *The Dud Avocado*’s characterization and narration against the 1920s expatriate works and characters highlights where this tradition fails to support the female protagonist or the mid-twentieth-century woman, who, like the rest of the world, the Second World War changed. Much like Hemingway’s character Brett Ashley, Sally Jay is also a sexually liberated and independent woman, but the periods in which each of these characters exist connote their liberation differently. For Brett, Hemingway describes her as miserable and unsatisfied by all the men she surrounds herself with. Dundy, however, writes Sally Jay to learn from her experiences with sex and men as part of her character development, making her liberation a positive resolution rather than a negative symptom. This expatriate style and its failure to support feminist female characters comes from the flat female presence the 1920s male expatriate literary portrayed or forgot to include. Sally Jay seeks to correct this female archetype or forgotten woman by repurposing her mid-twentieth-century influence to push against the parameters set for female characters in a 1920s tradition.

Sally Jay embodies these changing connotations of women’s image by placing herself among 1950’s male American expatriate who romanticized how the 1920s expatriate lived, including the rigid masculine and feminine binaries that came along with this period. This romanticized view, however, comes about thirty years after the height of the expatriate movement of the 1920s. In this gap, World War II drastically changes the connotations of the disillusioned expatriate who now has experienced the brutality of war and genocide. In this

change, (white) women's proper roles were significantly altered, and Dundy's 1950s female protagonist reflects this progression. While American men began enlisting in the Second World War, white women stepped outside the traditional housewife role and into industrial factories to fill the growing gaps in essential jobs—which Black women and other women of color had been doing for decades. Women leaving the home to work in these jobs push against the physical boundaries of the woman's sphere that constituted ideal femininity. However, when men returned home, they expected women to, once again, embody the proper housewife role, but the question arose, why? While women stepped up to work in these laborious conditions, they revealed capability, strength, and independence which did not previously describe the housewife. In her Afterword, Dundy references this period after World War II, specifically London, as “laying in rubble” but in a “midst of a renaissance for artists” (257). This imagery juxtaposes the physical devastating state of the world with an optimism for a better future. This optimism, then, means we should not live in the past, which Dundy notes by having Sally Jay imply Teddy and the female companions at the Ritz as archaic by calling them “Old World.” Putting Sally Jay, a female protagonist born and influenced by the war that shifted women's image, into a mimicry of an uncompromising period that upholds strict (and dated) gender binaries, show how women do not fit into either the original or recreated *male* expatriate movement because men do not consider women as an equal, but an accessory to their own liberation.

Dundy's expatriate pastiche shows that even a female character defined by a progressive and new period of American history remains incompatible with the genres, traditions, and “spheres” not made with women in mind. Dundy writes *The Dud Avocado* about thirty years after the 1920s expatriate movement. By the late 1950s, the 1920s expatriate movement functions as a nostalgic time to understand (male) identity and liberation compared to living in a

devastating, yet optimistic, post-war culture. Sally Jay assumes she can closely follow the expatriate lifestyle because of a changing and progressive time for women, but soon in the novel she realizes it is not her own capability holding her back, but the sexist unconscious biases of the expatriate men around her. Sally Jay establishes this realization during her conversation with Larry's about tourists:

“Ah well, you're young, you're new, you'll learn, Gorce” ... “I know your type all right.”

“My type? ... “My type of what?”

“Of tourist, of course.” (10)

To which Larry explains the types of tourists, all of which are conveniently women. As Sally Jay points out:

“Why are all of your tourists *she*?” I finally asked.

“Because all tourists are she,” he replied promptly.

“No males at all? Don't be silly.”

“Nope, no males at all. The only male tourists—though naturally there are men visitors—you know, men visiting foreign countries,” he explained maddeningly, “The only male tourists are the ones loping around after their wives. (15-6)

Larry, like the men that will be described in *The Feminine Mystique*, do not consider women to have an identity outside the home, their husbands, or children, nor outside expected “feminine” performances, and so he represents the stereotypical sexist 1950s expatriate man. Even Larry's romanticized view of the 1920s expatriate movement writes as uninformed and incomplete, as he fails to consider the period's most influential and female expatriates like Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and Edith Wharton. Larry's uninformed and incomplete view of the 1920s American

expatriate is on par with the 1950s man, who as Friedan will describe, only associates women with her traditional roles rather than her individual being. Much later in the novel, we discover that Larry's perspective comes from his status and occupation of a pimp, whose job controls, and markets women (and her image) to a male consumer. These characteristics of Larry's identity tunnels his vision so that he only understands female identity in relationship to a male companion, such as a husband, pimp, or the home and children provided by either. These beliefs make Larry's character an antagonistic male opposition to the changing roles of women. Larry's character acts as a foil to Sally Jay who embodies a progressive and changing times, yet she still falls victim to a male gaze and Larry's exploitation of her womanhood.

In the process of reimagining the expatriate novel, Dundy, by placing Sally Jay among a dominant group, showcases women's awareness of their changing role and belonging in a patriarchy, a topic that persists in women's humor. Much like Parker's narrator in "The Waltz," Sally Jay presents an awareness and double consciousness of this performance by contrasting outward dialogue and inner thoughts. This contrast appears like the split between self-deprecating and enhancing humor. Sally Jay's metaphorical and physical closeness to the dominant group of male expatriates heightens her awareness of identity and belonging. While accompanying Teddy at the Ritz, Sally Jay harbors feelings of insecurity as she directly compares herself to Teddy and the other similar men and women at the hotel. When Sally Jay attends a party at The Ritz with her married boyfriend Teddy, her proximity to the dominant group produces this awareness:

he [Teddy] signaled the waiter again, with the enchanting little series of finger snaps he'd used earlier on and although he was none of these things, I suddenly saw him as fat,

aging and silly. The phrase “Old World” flashed through my mind... I think that was the first time I really felt like a woman. (47)

Ironically, Sally Jays starts to “really feel like a woman” after labeling Teddy as “Old World” because she accompanies a man who is self-assured and part of a group she longs to be in. But just as quickly as she “felt” like a woman, Sally Jay asks the audience “what do you know about that?” and so the moment passes:

Suddenly walking though that gilded cage of a Ritz bar, through all those exotic perfectly mated birds of paradise chirping away so harmoniously, I experienced a terrible pang of conscience. It seems to me that all the women loved all their escorts, and all the escorts loved all their women, and if they were in groups of more than two, they all loved one another or at the very least were extremely *well* pleased with one another. That's what made me feel sad and guilty all of a sudden. (47)

Quickly after feeling like a “real woman,” Sally Jay’s feels like a fraud as her awareness of belonging turns from comforting to perplexing. By asking the reader if they know what it is like to *feel* like a woman, Sally Jay searches for validation to know if this belonging is real, but in asking she confirms that she does not belong in Teddy’s “Old World.” This quick change, brought by Sally Jay’s inner-monologue, expresses a self-aware insecurity that she does not fit into the group of men and women around her, and so she shares this overly self-conscious feeling with the reader. By sharing this consciousness with the reader, Dundy makes these questions exist beyond her novel, suggesting these feelings of doubt and identity persist for average mid-twentieth-century woman.

Sally Jay’s privileged characteristics make her the perfect candidate to test the limits of female identity and sexist ideological boundaries. If a well-educated, wealthy, and charismatic,

white woman, cannot live as the individualistic and equally privileged white male expatriates, the difference causing this binary is clearly marked by gender. The gendered difference also presents a disparity in opportunities for liberation between women and men. Sally Jay's shows this consciousness of this disparity early in her life when she explains her need for freedom with her uncle:

"I want my freedom! I said, tears stinging my eyes at the word.

"Your freedom?... What are you planning to do with it?"

I hesitated, I had to think for a moment. I hadn't really put it into words before. "I want to say out as late as I like and eat whatever I like any time I want to," ...

"Is that all?"

"No. I think if I had my freedom, I wouldn't allow myself to get introduced to all the mothers and fathers and brothers of the girls at school... I wouldn't get introduced to anyone. I've never wanted to meet people I've been introduced to. I want to meet all the other people... I can't explain."

"Try..."

"It's just that I *know* the world is so wide and full of people and exciting things that I just go crazy every day stuck in these institutions. I mean if I don't get started soon, how will I get a chance to sharpen my wits? It takes lots of training... I want them to be so sharp that I'm always able to guess right. Not *be* right—that's much different—that means you're going to do something about it. No just guessing." (25-6)

As a young, thirteen-year-old-girl, Sally Jay has a subtle understanding of what *true* freedom is but because her age and proper sheltered role she cannot define it. Although Sally Jay has more freedom than the nineteenth-century's "woman's sphere" dictated, Friedan will describe that

negative connotations tarnish and minimize these new liberties, much like how Sally Jay's uncle belittles her longing for freedom she cannot quite define yet (61). The same ridiculing subconscious boundaries exist in the expatriate men surrounding Sally Jay, preventing her from finding and achieving the freedom she longs for. Sally Jay's consciousness of the unavailable liberation grows while around privileged men who do not seem to have marginalized identities in any way, leading to Sally Jay's isolated insecurity and an existential crisis. In her attempt to bury these desperate feelings, Sally Jay falls victim to the male gaze.

Sally Jay's insecure feelings prevail outside her relationship with Teddy, appearing when she surrounds herself with other male characters, namely her foil Larry. Larry resembles a successful individualistic American expatriate artist who is dedicated to their work and tries to venture out from the status-quo. Sally Jay, although also an American expatriate, continuously finds herself lost in the crowd. The audience reads Sally Jay's feelings of not belonging when she is close to Larry, who deems her an outsider. This insecurity and feelings of isolation leads Sally Jay to construct her feminine performance around Larry's subconscious biases or "gaze" of women's place and performance in his expatriate fantasy. Before opening night of Larry's play, which Sally Jay stars in, she creates a binary between Larry and Fame:

Larry and Fame I was now approaching the two things I wanted most in the world with breakneck speed. The only trouble was that toward the first, my inclination was to head-long full-steam ahead, and from the other—the Ordeal—to hold back forever. (109)

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir analyzes the "actress" as having "very different aims. For some, acting means earning one's living...for others, it is access to fame that will be exploited" (692-3). This analysis of the actress applies to Sally Jay's choice between Larry and fame as inseparable entities. Larry's required performance and shaping of Sally Jay works in two ways, a

performance on a stage and one of identity, both of which are asking her *not* to be herself. Metaphorically, by asking Sally Jay to perform in his play, Larry actively shapes her identity into his artistic image, but literally, he reshapes her feminine identity into a marketable object that he can exploit in his attempt at prostituting her. Sally Jay's hypothetical question where she must choose between Larry and fame (and choosing Larry), proves she gives herself over to Larry's exploitation to fit into *his* desired woman, accessory, and property. Sally Jay becomes increasingly insecure and isolated while around Larry and his version of expatriate world, stemming from their first conversation where he clearly tells her she is a tourist that does not *really* belong anywhere but home. Since this conversation, Sally Jay tries to prove herself to Larry by basing her identity on his ideal version femininity, but in doing so she ironically confirms his judgments of her as an accessory rather than an individual. As Sally Jay and Larry become closer, the reader sees how this insecurity begins altering Sally Jay's outward identity so that she fits into Larry's own male gaze. This insecurity leads Sally Jays to believe that she can never belong in dominant (expatriate) group alone but can sneak in on the arms of a male expatriate. Dundy, however, does not promote this male-tethered identity but condemns it. Like Friedan's eventual contempt of women's male-tethered identity of housewife, Dundy's resentment of male defined womanhood and success is autobiographical.

In Dundy's Afterword to *The Dud Avocado*, she discusses her divorce from Kenneth Tynan, a well-known theater critic, and expresses humorous contempt and conflicted feelings regarding women's self-restraint to appease a male gaze and ego. Dundy recalls a few questionable encounters with Tynan; however, in one instance she reveals similar conflicts Sally Jay has when choosing between fame and a romantic partner:



The reviews were excellent, and the book quickly went into a second printing. Then one night Ken came home and threw a copy of the book out the window. “You weren’t a writer when I married you, you were an actress,” he said angrily. Obviously, colleagues had been riding him because of the attention I was receiving. I was shattered. The next day, he said, “I’ve been rereading your book. There’s love on every page.” And then he gave me a beautiful red leather-bound copy of it with the inscription: “From the Critic to the Author.” Looking at it I felt a pang. I wondered if it was his admission of what I’d done that he had not. (259)

Dundy’s conflicted feelings of success, where she does not want to revel in what her husband did *not* do, resembles Sally Jay’s torn feelings between Larry and fame. Friedan’s explanation of the housewife will point out the hypocrisy in men’s ability to find extrinsic success while women are forced to find success in the home, insinuating women have traditionally held themselves back, physically, and metaphorically, for the male ego. Dundy proves Friedan’s future assessments by condemning her own self-restraint and guilt when she creates and maintains success separate from her husband. Ironically, when Sally Jay chooses Larry over fame, she realizes his plan to strip her of identity altogether, when Larry *literally* steals her passport and her only physical claim to identity. Larry’s stealing of Sally Jay’s passport symbolizes the ways men want to claim dominance over women. By stealing her passport, Larry allows Sally Jay to remain in the public sphere among other expatriates but on his specific, exploitative, terms. This interpretation of male possession of women comes from Friedan’s concept of the “feminine mystique.” This concept assumes women are happy in their housewife role and their identities defined by their husbands. Dundy begins showing this 1960s concept in her 1958 novel by having Larry assume Sally Jay would be happier as his companion, even as a prostitute, than as an independent female

expatriate. Sally Jay, however, resists this relationship once she finds out Larry's plan to own her and leaves Paris. Despite Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* being published five years after *The Dud Avocado*, Dundy anticipates second wave tenets, critiquing women's self-containment in the sphere or "mystique." In the Afterword she wrote for the novel, Dundy recalls the final cause from her divorce to Tynan. Dundy writes Tynan's breaking point was her successful novel and budding career as an author: "If you write another book, I'll divorce you." I sat down and started my second novel and wondered that I knew its beginning and its end (260). As seen in Dundy's personal life, she does not give into this male ego, but rather delves into the work that brings her success and identity as an author. This choice of personal expression and success over male approval is indicative of Sally Jay, who inevitably reinvents herself away from the male gaze.

### **Using Form to Mimic Female Friendship, Identity, and Conversation**

In Part One, Sally Jay speaks directly to the reader to discuss her thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the situations she finds herself in. These conversations, which are detailed, informal, and perhaps even colloquial, indicate an oral storytelling tradition, where Sally Jay acts as the lead storyteller who has complete agency over her narrative, image, and identity. This style and its agency can best be described using Walker's preface to *A Very Serious Thing* claiming: "The best (most revealing, funniest) humor is probably spoken, but without a Boswell in constant attendance, it gets lost. Written humor stays put, even when the pages get yellow" (xi) and "women tend to be storytellers rather than *joke* tellers" (xii). Sally Jay's unique narrative suggests she mimics oral storytelling and conversation found among exclusive groups. Like Barreca's claim of women's "secret" humor, Sally Jay exclusively tells stories to readers willing to listen, establishing not just a transactional relationship, but a friendship with this reader. The nature of this narrative that mimics storytelling and conversation means Sally Jay's words do not

require a polishing as written narratives do. Sally Jay's stream-of-conscious structure and its emotionally revealing nature indicate she does not take the time to revise her words. This narrative, then, works more like a long conversation where Sally Jay talks candidly to the reader. Dundy captures this traditional and oral humor by being in "constant attendance" (her authorship) to Sally Jay's narrative, keeping it from being lost. Therefore, if we can consider this narrative as a storytelling conversation between friends, Sally Jay's awareness of the sexist political unconscious and her active exploration of identity extends onto the reader.

In Part Two of *The Dud Avocado*, Dundy switches the novel's structure from a stream-of-conscious narration to multiple reflective diary entries, changing the conversation Sally Jay has with the reader. The change to diary entries mirrors Sally Jay's change of scenery as she leaves Paris for Côte d'Argent to escape a marriage proposal from her boyfriend Jim. By choosing to write diary entries, Sally Jay creates an even more intimate friendship with the reader as she gives up complete power as a linear, stream-of-conscious, storyteller that dictates plot *for* the reader, and so she becomes a reader that reflects on her own work. This intimate relationship builds on Sally Jay's vulnerability and her confusion after turning down Jim's proposal. To turn down this proposal means that Sally Jay anticipates and rejects womanhood stuck in Friedan's "feminine mystique." Although Sally Jay knew she did not want this male defined identity as housewife or live in her expected proper role, it forces her to reflect on what she does want. In the first diary entry's opening remarks, Sally Jay writes "I went to the local bookshop and bought this enormous diary and that's what *I'm* going to do to keep myself from going mad" (155). The diary's semantics allow Sally Jay to keep a narrative structure, but rather than have an active conversation with the reader, she delays updating the plot in "real time" and gives herself moments to reflect on her identity and selfhood. This delay also lets Sally Jay become the reader

as she revises her words, seen as she corrects a wrong date by crossing out “May 7” to adding “5” (155). This new status of “reader” puts Sally Jay in a more vulnerable position. Since Sally Jay becomes the writer and reader of these entries, rather than storyteller, her words become more permanent and relives these words every time she opens her diary. This permanence ultimately causes Sally Jay's character to grow as she learns from her written mistakes.

Claire Barwise interprets Sally Jay’s narrative to be a “one-way dialogue that ensures dominance over the passive reader” (63); however, I question this idea that Sally Jay has complete dominance over a reader, because the diary format found in Part Two makes Sally Jay a reader herself. In these diary entries Sally Jay becomes the writer, reviser, and reader, and although she assumes control over the narrative again by the end of the novel, these entries negate the idea of “passive reader” that Barwise implies. Sally Jay’s close relationship with the reader, built on a one sided, yet active, conversation, turns into an even more intimate relationship as Sally Jay transforms herself into a reader, and for a moment, she has an equal power to that of the audience, and vice versa. This surrender of power gives Sally Jay a chance for genuine reflection on her identity, which eventually leads to understanding the male gaze’s influence on her performance.

The shift to diary entries acts as a reflecting period for Sally Jay to genuinely construct an identity away from the pressures of a male gaze. Additionally, Sally Jay’s departure from Paris to Côte d’Argent changes the novel's structure, creating a shift in Sally Jay’s characterization. When written in first-person narration, Sally Jay tries to echo the male expatriate lifestyle that strives for individuality yet falls short because of her physical markers of femininity and the not-so unconscious bias of the surrounding expatriate men. In her spoken narration, Sally Jay follows these men as an accessory, but unbeknownst to the male expatriates, the reader sees glimpses of

a truer makeup of Sally Jay's identity because of the private and revealing conversations she shares. The last moments of Part Two and of the diary entries, Sally Jay gains a confidence that comes from being the reader and begins acting upon more genuine reflection of herself. This confidence is seen in her final exchange with Teddy:

“Sally Jay, you are so naïve.”

“You're the naïve one! You've got so entangled in your cloak you keep stabbing yourself with your own dagger! Next, you'll try to tell me about a gang of spies; big white-slave market operating around the world.”

“That is not impossible.”

“Don't you *know* what you really are?” I asked incredulously. “Can't you see it? You're a vain, vain man. An insanely jealous man. And you're getting to be an old one.”

“Very well,” said Teddy stiffly. “It is now impossible to continue this conversation.” (209)

Although Sally Jay *is* being naïve about Larry's intentions, she no longer hides her emotions or what she really thinks about like a proper woman would have. The mid-novel shift in location and form gives Sally Jay room to grow as a person away from constantly trying to please a male gaze and begins to perform for herself. By taking the time to be a reader and reflect on her own diary entries and thus performance as storyteller, Sally Jay begins seeing a more authentic version of womanhood that already existed, but she was too micromanaging to see.

Without humor, *The Dud Avocado's* shifting form portraying women's inescapable, double-edged, feminine performance would drive away the reader and Sally Jay's revelations on womanhood would be lost. Barreca similarly makes this claim about women's humor:

We should use humor as a way of making our feelings and responses available to others without terrifying our listeners. When we frame a difficult matter with humor, we can often reach someone who would otherwise withdraw...to laugh is to affirm ourselves and our lives in a fundamental sense (*They Used* 102).

Barreca helps us to understand how important the humorous quality of Sally Jay's conversation with the reader is; it functions to explore tensions between Sally Jay's sense of self and the concept of womanhood. Rather than scaring off the reader with existential issues regarding gender, selfhood, and womanhood, Dundy's humor makes light of the, frankly, horrible, and unfair difference between men and women's performance of identity. This humor lets Sally Jay be hyper-aware of her feminine performance and her belonging without alienating the reader because of their established, and trusting, friendship that evolves throughout the novel. In these questions of identity, Sally Jay seems to humorously conclude that femininity does not have a unanimous look, such as the indistinguishable female companion to the "Old World" expatriate at the Ritz, while also saying women cannot "live as men because the male expatriate does not accept women in their world. Although these declarations seem bleak, Sally Jay comes to a broader, more optimistic, conclusion that women do not need to have a single look, live an idealized lifestyle such as the housewife, or accessorize the expatriate but can just exist as a woman defining her own path. This message can be more unanimously accepted by audiences as Sally Jay chooses to have a conversation about this topic rather than just *telling* the reader. At the end of the novel, Sally Jay practices this conclusion by abandoning the performances she thought she had to uphold to appease a male gaze or unattainable expectations, and soon after she finds love for her job, a romantic partner, and overall affinity for her life.

## **Conclusion: *The Dud Avocado*, Humor, and Definitions of Womanhood that Point Towards the Twenty-First Century**

As critic Rachel Cook argues, *The Dud Avocado* “is not read for its plot,” but for its female protagonist and her complex insight into womanhood. Telling her story in the very early days of second wave feminism, Sally Jay sets an optimistic tone for herself and the reader while revealing the complex journey women have undergone to understand womanhood; however, she does not just *tell* readers these issues persist. By throwing Sally Jay into the overcrowded realm of a dominant group, in this case American male expatriates, Dundy shows that the sexist political unconscious will never let women be equal to men, despite assimilating to a male gaze or adopting the proper performances of femininity. This message implies that Dundy’s plot should meant be read as a captivating fictional story, but an expository narration into the complex, convoluted, and subconscious subjugation of women, revealed by Sally Jay who states only fifty pages into her story: “I reflected wearily that is not easy to be a Woman in these stirring times. I said it then and I say it now: it just isn’t our century” (55). Dundy's use of “century,” chosen over year, decade, or generation, makes a cautionary statement to the female reader that this womanhood and its issues will not disappear anytime soon. Rather, these issues will linger and evolve in the years to come because of the patriarchy’s presence that exists in literature, television, film, and the sexist political unconscious of the men around them. So, Dundy seems to say women should live genuinely rather than trying to please a status quo. However, the presence of a sexist political unconscious continues in contemporary work, such as *Detransition, Baby* (2021), but humor keeps exploring genuine variations of womanhood and feminine performances that do not conform to an assigned gender binary, ushering in a new, broader, community than Dundy could ever hope for. Despite *The Dud Avocado*’s optimistic

conclusion, this mid-twentieth-century checkpoint in American history, tells us the search to understand womanhood is overwhelmingly corrupted by a male gaze that, as Dundy would say, is zymotic.



## Chapter Three

### “Isn’t it Ironic?”: An Examination of Irony and Womanhood in Torrey Peters’

#### *Detransition, Baby*

#### Introduction

Among twenty-first century women, the existential question of “*who* are you— a Carrie, a Miranda, a Charlotte, or a Samantha?” seems to be a looming indicator for modern womanhood. This seemingly simple question supposedly allows the (implicitly straight) contemporary woman to align herself with their favorite or most similar *Sex and the City* character; but frankly, this question is not so simple. Claiming that a single fictional character can wholly encompass one’s identity is an absurd oversimplification that the twenty-first century woman *gleefully* participates in. This question plays a significant role in Torrey Peters’ novel *Detransition, Baby* (2021) as trans characters Reese and Ames look towards popular culture and HBO’s *Sex and the City* to understand womanhood and feminine performance.

In *Detransition, Baby* (2021), Peters’ trans protagonists, Reese and Ames, ask the existential “*Sex and the City*” question to navigate transgender womanhood by using the model Reese calls the “*Sex and the City* Problem”:

Women still found themselves with only four major options to save themselves, options represented by the story arcs of the four female characters of *Sex and the City*. Find a partner, and be a Charlotte. Have career, and be a Samantha. Have a baby, and be a Miranda. Or finally, express oneself in art or writing, and be a Carrie. Every generation of women reinvented this formula over and over ... blending it and twisting it, but never quite escaping it. (7)

Women following the “*Sex and the City Problem*” reduces their identity to fit into an oversimplified, dichotomized, example of womanhood, making this model deeply ironic. For instance, to say that “to be a Miranda” means having a child is superficial to say the least. Not only was Miranda’s pregnancy unplanned, but for a greater part of her story arc she debated having an abortion because having a child might prevent her from making partner at her law firm—which she not only achieves but maintains while raising a child. Peters’ protagonist Reese uses this model to affirm her trans womanhood, presenting an extra layer of irony as she bases her femininity on an oversimplified, and hence unattainable, versions of womanhood that oftentimes exclude trans women.

As one of Peters’ protagonists, Reese embodies the irony of upholding the male gaze’s requirements to feminine performance and womanhood. The male gaze continues shaping female identity into the twenty-first century, but Reese’s battle with the gaze presents a unique paradox. A woman must appear feminine to appease a male gaze, but to be taken seriously this woman cannot be *too* feminine. Julia Serano specifies this paradox claiming that if a trans woman uses femininity and “successfully” passes as a cisgender woman she is a “deceiver,” but if this woman does not pass, she is “tragic” (“Skirt Chasers” 227). Serano’s paradox reflects the constant balance of affirming gender performance, which for trans women, appeasing a male gaze seems a necessary evil for understanding a sense of self. Like Serano’s argument, Reese recognizes and tries fitting into the “*Sex and the City Problem*,” and so she constantly balances on femininity’s scale.

Hypothetically, Reese’s awareness of this balance can allow her to resist the male gaze, as she notes not owing anyone femininity, let alone heteronormative, cisgender men and women; however, this same recognition of femininity affirms her gender performance as a trans woman. In her abusive relationship with Stanley, a cisgender and heterosexual man, Reese feels affirmed

in her femininity by Stanley's toxic masculinity and abusive tendencies. Stanley and Reese's relationship borders on sado-masochistic as Reese stays almost complicit in her abuse to feel feminine, and Stanley plays the sadistic abuser to affirm masculinity, implying heteronormative relationships and convention are somewhat disordered. Oftentimes, for the cisgender woman, whose livelihood does not depend on passing as cisgender, appeasing the male gaze and feminine performance is a subconscious conformity. Reese, however, consciously performs and maintains femininity in every aspect of her life, starting with calling her PrEP medication (HIV preventatives) "birth control" and to the point of reenacting pregnancy and motherhood with her cisgender sexual partners. Therefore, as seen through Reese, Peters wrestles with the fissions in womanhood and the evolving construct of the "woman's sphere" by using irony.

In her novel, Peters retains the late-nineteenth-century concept of the "woman's sphere," denoting the twentieth-century's subconscious boundaries for womanhood, but uses contemporary, ironic, and transgender perspectives to reveal the continued, uncovered, and tangible requirements of the sphere. Like the paradox of femininity, a trans perspective on the sphere specifically identifies and redefines the physical and limiting characteristics that label (and simplify) womanhood. Although naming these tangible qualities of the sphere can expose and challenge simplified definitions of womanhood that exclude many women, especially queer and trans women, pursuing these characteristics can paradoxically ease feelings of gender dysmorphia. *Detransition, Baby* ironically depicts the sphere's traits in "*Sex and the City* Problem," giving the novel's characters dichotomous, tangible, and unnecessarily rigid choices of womanhood. Peters points out the hypocrisy and unattainability at the root of feminine performance by using the "*Sex and the City* Problem," an equitable and contemporary imitation of the sphere, showing how this model panders to a controlling male gaze's and uses exclusionary tactics so that women can police their own acceptable versions of feminist, wife,

mother, and woman. This irony is defined in two ways. Although irony can be understood by its most traditional definition, a diversion from the expected, Kenny and Bell argue that in rhetoric, irony suggests an “author is complicit in upholding conventions...while at the same time wishing to appear detached from them” (568). Peters depicts these types of irony through her two protagonists, Reese and Ames, and their respective conformity or nonconformity to the “*Sex and the City Problem*.” In order to feel gender affirmation, Reese, at times, complies with heteronormative gender conventions that exclude trans identities. For Ames, a detransitioned trans woman (who for this argument will be identified by he/him/his pronouns based on his most present gender identity as a detransitioned man), resists fulfilling conventions of feminine and masculine identities claiming, “I *am* trans, but I don’t need to *do* trans” (96), while also rejecting the prospect of fatherhood for parenthood.

Peters uncovers femininity’s unconscious performance for cis and trans women alike by presenting two “ironic” variations of female identity, where one appeals to the male gaze, and one does not. Reese sees the error in upholding the heteronormative male gaze—which, like the “*Sex and the City Problem*,” marginalizes virtually *all* women—but this model accentuates tangible qualities that make gender affirmation attainable. This contradiction brings forth accusations that, ironically, and either subconsciously or consciously, most women police the woman’s sphere boundaries that men have historically vocalized. Reese gives readers insight into her unusual hyper-awareness of gender performance; however, gender remains performative for all people. Reese’s consciousness helps affirm her identity, where many cis women are not conscious but nonetheless complicit with gender norms, therefore are unconsciously affirming their gender identity. However, a patriarchy influences these women to uphold these boundaries, by pressuring women to appease a male gaze that dictates what womanhood can or should be.

The problem, then, is how can women escape the sphere and the gaze without needing its characteristics to affirm gender identity? This sphere seems inescapable without dismantling patriarchy; however, Peters showcases ways an individual can remove oneself from a male gaze by presenting two varied transgender female identities and relationships to this gaze. Theories of double consciousness and strategic uses of irony articulate these identities and describe women's complicated relationship with the male gaze. Peters' characters display how irony and a constant awareness of the gaze acts as agency over one's identity and the perception of others. In distinct and complementary ways, Reese and Ames take control over how they present their identities through an ultra-conscious performance (or non-performance) of femininity.

The double consciousness presented in Peters' works can still be defined by Du Bois and Walker, but also resonates with Susan Sontag's notable essay "Notes on Camp" (1964). Definitions of double consciousness, connect to Sontag's essay where she clarifies camp as a unique, split, perspective on the world. Additionally, Sontag's definitions of camp highlight a similar split view on identity that strategically redefines the "ordinary" (or heteronormative) and sees artifice in performance. These definitions appear in Peters' ironic and, at times, controversially humorous depictions of gender performance as opportunities for Reese and Ames to take control over their identity and image from others. This ironic display of control makes aspects of Reese and Ames' livelihood relatable among readers and characters alike who feel lost navigating womanhood. Reese and Ames' relatability creates community for those who feel they cannot live up to simplified models of womanhood and cis women can rethink their relationship to femininity.

Peters' presents an irony that critiques the sphere as reductive and unattainable for both cis and transgender identities. The "*Sex and the City* Problem's" ironic simplification to womanhood allows Peters to directly address the subjectivity that constructs of femininity. This

existential question of “Who are you?” and the *Sex and the City* Problem’s debatable choices, simplifies womanhood into caricatures that render pointless to understand any one’s identity. Peters showcases complex portrayals of womanhood by putting her characters directly against the inescapable “*Sex and the City* Problem,” and so the “sphere.” Peters’ direct and ironic comparisons implies that womanhood is a subjective debate. But Peters brings a more explicit message from this comparison that claims womanhood is an impermanent construct in need of constant redefining.

### **Double Consciousness and Camp in *Detransition, Baby***

Du Bois’ theory of double consciousness and metaphor of the veil can help us contextualize a split within marginalized female identities (such as between the “American” and the “American woman”), but in the case of women’s humor, specifically queer women’s humor, camp acts as a solution for dealing with double consciousness. Although double conscious theorist, such as Du Bois, writes about rising above the “veil” and marginalizing ideologies, the physical and unconscious barriers of society make this difficult. Camp, however, attempts to weaken this ideology. In definitions of camp, Sontag’s awareness of a split embraces the marginalized divide to reclaim power over convention. Sontag defines camp in a descriptive list, with these two descriptions seeming most relevant to Peters’ humor. First, Sontag describes camp as seeing:

everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a “lamp”; not a woman, but a “woman.” To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater. (4)

She then goes on to say,

Thus, the Camp Sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice. (5)

Camp, and its mention of “double sense” and “split-level construction,” wields a double conscious lens to one’s advantage by finding convention’s “artifice.”

In *Detransition, Baby*, Reese and Ames showcase camp’s power by taking control over their identities and its images. For instance, when describing her difficult and abusive relationship with Stanley, Reese recalls the literal and metaphorical meanings behind Stanley’s manipulative gifts of designer clothing. Reese sees Stanley’s designer gifts as a way “to spend money on luxury designer items that she could never afford on her own, but that she also couldn’t enjoy” (56). Stanley’s purchase of these designer goods and insistence that she wear them demonstrates a “calculation of power” by having the final say as to what Reese puts onto her body (56). Reese’s awareness of Stanley’s dual intentions is met with “cruel dysmorphia” while wearing the ultra-expensive boots he buys, ultimately leading her to return the shoes to buy knockoffs. This dysmorphia that comes from wearing Stanley’s gifts acts as a literal and symbolic reaction to his power over her. In a literal sense, Reese finds herself in the boots with flat sole and thigh-high length, to resemble a lucha libre wrestler, just as much as supermodel Gigi Hadid (57). Symbolically, Reese’s dysmorphia rejects an abusive man’s claim over her image, but not the male gaze entirely as she returns the boots for a knockoff version. Nevertheless, Reese limits Stanley’s emotional power over her by being conscious of her transfeminine identity and its relationship to the heteronormative male gaze. Sontag’s definitions of Camp are applicable in this exchange as Reese recognizes the “split-level construction” between Stanley’s and her own perspective on her womanhood. Stanley views a femme

transwoman as something to control and fetishize. Stanley plays the man but cannot see this as a performance because he has internalized his compulsory heterosexuality and misogyny, denying the parts of himself that he deems lesser than ideal masculinity. Reese, however, recognizes the complexity of identifying as a transwoman, making it impossible to feel completely affirmed in Stanley's stereotyped and dehumanized perspective. Reese's personal awareness, then, illustrates a split in her identity, described as somewhere in between Gigi Hadid and a lucha libre wrestler. Reese's recognition of this (hyperbolic) split helps her understand Stanley's power over her image as "artifice," so she detaches herself from Stanley's masculinity by redirecting the power to herself and wears the boots she buys, but also continues adhering to a broader male gaze by choosing knockoffs.

Compared to Reese's double consciousness, Ames' more explicitly states an awareness of his gender performance. When Ames' cisgender partner Katrina finds out about Ames' past as a trans woman she asks, "So you got sick of being trans?" (96). Ames responds, "I got sick of *living* as trans. I got to the point where I thought I didn't need to put up with the bullshit gender in order to satisfy my sense of myself. I *am* trans, but I don't need to *do* trans," adding that trans women know how to *be*, but not *do* (96-7). Ames lives with an awareness that identity and its performance cannot be defined tangibly. This realization comes from a trans double consciousness that Ames maintains despite detransitioning and appearing as a cisgender man. Ames presents a double consciousness through an awareness that "being" trans *is* his identity though he does not need to perform this identity to feel affirmed. Ames' realization that identity and performance do not need to match acts similarly to Sontag's suggestions that camp sees everything in "quotation marks" as a metaphor for "life-as-theater." Through seeing identity and performance as distinct features, Ames can find comfort, or at least not guilt, when resisting a male gaze. This choice to perform (or not to perform) distinguishes how Reese and Ames' take



control over their image. Reese finds affirmation performing for the male gaze, even if this affirmation is short lived, but takes control over her image by choosing *how* she appeases this gaze. Ames, however, takes control over his image from others by reimagining identity to be an evolving display, rather than a fixed performance.

Similar to Du Bois' intended subject (the Black American) for the veil, queer identities can use the concept of camp to view themselves differently in the eyes of the dominant group. Camp does not see the world as a set fixture but to have a doubled meaning. Queer and trans people can use a camp lens to find a place for themselves within a heteronormative framework that has historically excluded them. To fit into this framework, a camp lens redirects the power from heteronormative male gaze through queer renditions of these structures. Sontag concludes her essay, stating "camp style nourishes itself on the love that has gone into certain objects and personal style" (13). In applying Sontag's theory to *Detransition, Baby*, this concluding statement can mean that a camp lens allows queer identities to not be the excluded other, but rather a purposeful and loved reconfigurations of the community around them. Camp, then, remains relevant to queer identities in *Detransition, Baby*, such as those of Reese and Ames, as it repurposes double consciousness to create a community among the othered who face the male gaze. Therefore, camp's definitions indicate how Reese and Ames redirect the male gaze's power over their images to create community. For Reese, she rejects the shoes from the heteronormative man that wanted to dictate her performance of femininity. Meanwhile, Ames rejects a heteronormative framework by nourishing an unconventional version of a straight, cis-appearing male identity.

Critics and camp employers oftentimes associate Sontag's definitions with humor, and in Peters' novel she chooses irony to give her characters a unique and aware power over their

narrative and image. Camp's traditional "humorous" features typically critique the exclusivity of the dominant group by playing into aesthetics. Here, Sontag notes,

Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of "style" over "content," aesthetics" over "morality," of irony over tragedy (10)

While further claiming:

...Camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment (12).

From this definition, a camp lens proposes a dual ironic and "comic vision of the world" that weakens the legitimacy of convention, redirecting power from the oppressor to the oppressed. Peters uses camp, irony, and a twisted sense of humor, displaying this "comic vision of the world" that Reese and Ames use to weaken the oppressor and find power. For instance, on multiple occasions Peters "humorously" and ironically writes Reese as inviting domestic violence to affirm her female identity. Peters approaches a serious and deadly topic like domestic violence through this ironic and comic lens, giving Reese authority over her abuse and abuser. Walker articulates this approach in *A Very Serious Thing*, claiming "through apparent self-mockery and confrontation of the 'other,' women's humor seeks to correct a cultural imbalance" (70). Discussing a serious topic such domestic violence through ironic feelings of gender affirmation allows Peters to wrestle with the women's unequal position in a patriarchy, so that it does not further victimize trans women. These strategic deployments of camp and its relationship to irony and double consciousness, allows Peters' characters to question how we *truly* define womanhood.

## Reese's Ironic Agency and Self-Deprecating Humor to Present Womanhood

In *Detransition Baby*'s present-day narrative (chapters under the title of "weeks after conception") Reese and Ames both display irony in their performance (or non-performance) of femininity, but Reese wields a humorous awareness of this irony to her advantage. Reese uses her awareness of irony to take control over her identity and image, chiefly in her typical romantic relationships with married, cisgender, men. Early in the novel, Reese discusses her aspirations to motherhood, insinuating she wants to be the simplified "Miranda" character from *Sex and the City*. The audience sees Reese's awareness of irony as her aspirations of motherhood and her typical relationships intersect. The audience first sees a glimpse of the irony Reese recognizes and lives with during her affair with the "cowboy-turned-lawyer," who has disclosed his HIV positive status to Reese, where he asks while buying condoms, "Do we really need these tonight?... You know I'm going to want to knock you up," essentially asking to impregnate her with HIV (5). Following this statement by the Cowboy, the text notes that Reese stays in these relationships that make light of her desires of motherhood because of the "sense of danger" they bring. Reese justifies this relationship by claiming, "He got it. With him, she discovered sex that was really and truly dangerous. Cis women... rubbed against a frisson of danger every time they had sex" (5). Reese makes an association between danger and sex, characterizing heterosexual, cis women as running into a danger (of pregnancy) every time they have sex, and so, Reese recreates this "simple" scenario with complex features such as risking exposure to HIV. Here, Peters uses a traditional form of irony, as the expected pregnancy Reese wants is fulfilled by an unexpected alternative (HIV). However, by looking for unnecessary danger, Reese also exemplifies Kenny and Bell's definition of irony by upholding a heteronormative convention of sex, while simultaneously detaching herself from such convention because of the options of danger given. Reese's awareness of irony in her life connects to her deepest desires of

motherhood and feeling affirmed in her trans identity. The disaffirming, ironic, awareness of wanting a child, and feeling as though this desire is unattainable, infiltrates Reese's reflection of herself, but rather than ignore this irony, she incorporates it into her humor and the smallest details of her life to have agency over her transfeminine performance.

Like Hélène Cixous' concept of "Écriture féminine," that in order for women to claim authority over the female experience, "women must write women. And man, man" (877), Peters allows Reese to take control over her transfeminine experience and identity, as Peters writes from a trans perspective and body. Reese takes control over her feminine body, image, and experience by using irony to act as defense mechanism and claim to agency in her narrative. Reese points out the irony in situations to take control over how others (including the audience) view her image, body, and feminine performance, even if she becomes self-deprecating in the process. Reese's hyperawareness of irony and identity can lead to interpretations and assumptions of insecurity. For instance, when Ames tells Reese about his pregnant partner, Katrina, he first describes her based on ethnicity, that her mother was Chinese, her dad was Jewish, and grew up among white children, only to be "immediately recognized" by other Asian kids when she went to college (36). When Reese hears this description of Katrina, she comments "Great, she and I already have something in common... We're both *almost* cis white ladies" (36). Walker's definition of self-deprecation, which "acknowledges difficulty living up to the standards established," best describes Reese's sarcastic remark about her similarity to Katrina (*Very Serious* 106). The standard Reese compares herself to is Katrina's status of cisgender woman, mother, and Ames' current partner. Reese feels lesser than Katrina and powerless in this conversation with Ames. Rachel Brownstein's claims, "literal dialogue between characters... may be a point of assertion... of opinions... and the authority to state them" (68). This analysis similarly works in this conversation in *Detransition, Baby* where Reese twists Ames' description

of Katrina to claim she is “almost” a cisgender, white, woman, redirecting power to herself by calling out what constitutes Katrina’s marginalized identity. However, by maintaining the descriptor “almost,” Reese suggests that she sees herself as an “incomplete” version of the “ideal” woman and so, in an attempt at regaining power, she exposes her insecurities. Without her combative and ironically aware humor in this conversation, Reese would be the passive subject and Ames the dominant. Reese's humor, however, rewrites how audiences read this conversation, reversing the labels, making Ames the passive and herself the controlling, yet insecure, dominant.

In addition to dialogue, Reese’s awareness of irony also finds places in her narrative and search for gender affirmation by rewriting details of her life to fit a chosen performance of femininity, such as renaming her PrEP medication as birth control. Reese rewrites her performance to resemble and parody cisgender heterosexuality in her sexual and romantic relationships with cis men. *Detransition, Baby* introduces Reese during her affair with a married man, explaining “married men were the best for fleeing loneliness” (3), later adding, “every woman adores a fascist” (57). In order to feel more feminine, Reese uses fetish websites and justifies abusive relationships to imitate how heterosexual cisgender women seek the “fascist” man. However, the key to Reese’s affirmation is motherhood, and when first given this opportunity with Ames (at the time Amy), she rejects her secure lesbian relationship by having an affair with an abusive, heterosexual man. Although Reese seems proud to be part of a queer community, given she openly attends and supports queer sponsored parties and charity events, arguably she feels most affirmed in her feminine gender through a recognized ironic camp parody of heteronormative sexuality. Reese provides humorous observations of feeling affirmed in heteronormative relationships and sexuality, but the psychology behind these affirming techniques ironically recreates imbalanced relationships that invites female subjugation.

Although these relationships give Reese power over feminine performance, it takes away her ability to be an equal partner and escape from the “woman’s sphere.”

The looming irony of Reese's chase for affirmation that relies on imbalanced relationships, subjugation, and fetishization of her identity is not lost on her. In Reese’s narrative “eight years before conception,” Peters tells us,

Everything about Reese’s sexuality, she realized, was banal. Sex at the edge of abuse was banal. And when it comes to gender, consent makes it all pretend, which left consensual violence lacking real value in Reese’s tally of gender affirmation (58).

No matter how Reese approaches gender affirmation, she continues finding something “banal” about her performance and sexuality, which ends up losing affirming connotations. Apart from her relationship with Ames, Reese’s sexuality and relationships closely resemble those of a heterosexual, cisgender woman who willingly submits to a dominant masculine partner. This choice to present a queer heterosexuality over a lesbian relationship happens when Reese cheats on Ames (at the time Amy) to find affirmation in an unequal, ironic parody, of a heteronormative relationship with Stanley. Although Stanley is verbally, emotionally, and physically abusive to Reese, the gender affirmation she receives from being in this relationship outweighs the abuse. This affirmation lasts until Reese and Ames face Stanley’s violent trans-misogyny head on after Ames finds out about affair and confronts the both of them on a crowded street in New York:

“What do you expect Amy? We’re standing on the street. I don’t want a scene. So let me ask again. What do you want to do now?” [Reese asked] ...”

Right now?” Amy asked, meeting Reese’s hard glare. “I want to punch him [Stanley] in the face” ...

“What’s that?” Stanley asked. “You want to punch me in the face?” ...

“Just stay the fuck out of it, dude.” Amy snapped. Her voice came out from somewhere in her chest, low and angry. She sounded like a man...

“No, *dude*. Stanley leered... “I don’t think I will. I don’t like little faggots threatening me.”

Faggot? For a moment, the misgendering threw Amy off... A change had come over Reese. She looked genuinely frightened, and began pushing Amy away from Stanley, whispering, “No, no, no.” ...Quite obviously, Reese was afraid of Stanley. (250-1)

In this excerpt, Reese’s quest for affirmation, although has always been dangerous for her, proves dangerous for those around her as well. Reese, who has an outside perspective on the cisgender, heterosexual, relationship, categorizes these relationships as imbalanced, but also as a sense of security—from physical harm, a chance at motherhood, and for gender affirmation. Yet, Reese ironically has this perceived security with Ames, only for it to be taken away once Reese has an affair with a cisgender man who purposefully misgenders Ames as a man. Reese’s awareness of irony that comes from her simplified and dangerous parody of the cisgender and heterosexual woman inevitably defines her womanhood. This irony, Walker claims, “masks a truth, and reveals a different truth.” (*Very Serious* 67), applying to Reese who unintentionally reveals contradictions in cis and transgender female identities alike. By writing Reese to recognize irony in her life, relationships, and identity, Peters asks the question *why* the prime gender affirming method comes from appeasing a male gaze. Femininity and masculinity work on a binary, where one is constructed based on what the other is not. Therefore, Reese feels the most feminine when she can directly contrast herself to an ultra-masculine man, even if this man weaponizes trans-misogyny against her. Through Reese’s repeated attempts at affirmation

through the gaze, Peters' shows that a strong sense of self is impossible without removing oneself from an unattainable standard. Reese's awareness of irony and approach to womanhood presents issues that ideal womanhood is a constantly moving target that remains unattainable for all women.

### **Using Irony to Question "Womanhood:" Ames as the Ironic Difference**

Unlike Reese, Ames uses an awareness of irony to detach himself from the heteronormative male gazes to find agency over his identity; however, humor in this novel is not so much done *by* Ames but *to* him. In Walker's essay "Ironic Autobiography: From *The Waterfall* to *The Handmaid's Tale*" (1988), she claims the ironic difference between reality and the protagonist's "stories" separates the narrator's consciousness into two "selves," "one that endures the anguish of her own reality and the second self that stands apart and comments, often quite humorously on the plight of the first" (204). Reese and Ames personify Walker's ironic difference during their first conversation of the novel in which Ames introduces his idea of a queer family. However, when Ames approaches Reese with this idea, she calls Ames "Daddy-O" (32), despite—or, rather, because of—understanding Ames' difficulty grasping fatherhood. Here, Reese's makes a joke at the expense of Ames's detransitioned identity. This ironic difference creates contrasting portrayals of a trans double consciousness, where Reese's agency comes from addressing irony and complying with the male gaze, and Ames finds control removing himself from the gaze altogether.

Walker's book *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women* (1990) best describes Ames' aversion to heteronormative male gaze, claiming that the ability to see language as "arbitrary and mutable" is one of "the first steps to liberation" (44). Ames achieves this liberation by pointing out larger issues of female expressions, telling Katrina that he: "got sick of *living* as trans... I *am* trans, but I don't need to *do* trans" (96), while adding



that trans women knew how to *be*, but not *do* (97). Ames realizes that identity and performance are not equals. And in doing so, Ames resists hegemonic language that blends and equates “to be” and “to do,” looking for the difference between the two. Considering the distinction between “to be” and “to do,” much like the one Ames makes, Serano writes in “Reclaiming Femininity:”

Trans-misogyny is driven by the fact that in most U.S. contexts, feminine appearances are more blatantly and routinely judged than masculine ones. It is also driven by the fact that connotations such as “artificial,” “contrived,” and “frivolous” are practically built into our cultural understanding of femininity (172)

Serano notes in American culture that feminine appearance carries connotations of the “artificial” or false, which relates to Ames’ point that trans women know how “to be” a trans woman, but “not do.” Ames finds the divide in “to be” and “not do” by equating it to a “true” identity and subjective performance. However, Ames’ logic is dangerous. If in the wrong hands, this logic excuses hiding identity and staying in the closet. However, for Ames this logic liberates and validates his identity from subjective performances. Ames’ use of the phrase “to be,” means that trans and cis female identities can be women because they simply *are*, regardless of performance. To say trans women can “not do,” however, Ames makes a more critical point about performance. “Not do” refers to the movable target of ideal female performance.

Womanhood has no clear, attainable, or tangible features, but a cisgender woman has easier access to “achieving” ideal femininity because their identity is more widely accepted by society. Ames claims that because this target moves based on intangible features which trans identities constantly chase the ideal womanhood without ever fully achieving or being accepted by society. So rather than chasing, Ames stops and rejects the performance altogether. This deconstruction

of “to be” and “not do” liberates Ames from heteronormative male gaze while maintaining his trans consciousness. This rhetorical difference helps Ames claim agency over his own identity.

Kenny and Bell’s definitions of irony apply to Reese and Ames who, are not necessarily foils, but contrasting ironic depictions of transgender identity, where Reese knowingly, and with a wink, complies with the male gaze, and Ames detaches. Reese and Ames’ difference also indicates contrasting approaches authority over their self-image. Reese, who conforms to a somewhat camp version of heteronormative structure, leans into irony to find agency in her identity and its performance. Ames, however, resists “male-dominated language,” as Walker calls it, to detach and find agency from heteronormative male gaze (*Feminist Alternatives* 44). Ames’ detachment from heteronormative male gaze/performance helps avoid facing similar forms of irony that Reese constantly battles; however, Ames is forced to reexamine his identity and irony when a possible child comes into the picture, and thus called upon to play what has traditionally been coded as a “masculine” role: fatherhood. Here, Ames begins raising questions regarding “true” womanhood. In the novel’s final moments, Ames brings up this question through, once again, the “*Sex and the City Problem*”:

Reese, do you remember how the whole idea of the *Sex and the City Problem* for you is that no generations of trans women has solved the *Sex and the City Problem*, and that every generation of cis women has to reinvent it?...

Well, what if this is our solution? Maybe this is so awkward and hard and without obvious precedent because we’re trying to imagine our own solution, to reinvent something for ourselves...whatever kind of women we are.” (335)

The narrator then adds, “They are together, and miles from each other, their thoughts turning to themselves, then turning to the baby, each in her own way contemplating how her tenuous

rendition of womanhood has become dependent upon the existence of this little person, who is not yet, and yet may not be” (335). This passage tells us that Ames never loses the double consciousness that a trans identity gives him and can still see the world for its “twoness.” Therefore, by rejecting convention while maintaining a trans double consciousness, Ames recognizes gender performance’s subjectivity, finding comfort in not having to perform either femininity or masculinity forever— or at all. This excerpt reveals Peters’ existential question of who and what women are. Reese first introduces the “*Sex and the City Problem*” as a guide to understanding womanhood, and although the novel ironically reinforces this framework throughout, Ames’ character provides a solution. But this solution does not simply reject convention, but rather, Ames suggests removing oneself only far enough from convention to recognize subjectivity and find comfort in the real. Ames will continue “enduring anguish” as Walker’s concept of “ironic difference” claims, but by accepting this anguish or “awkwardness,” as it is described in the excerpt, Ames uses the heteronormative “*Sex and the City Problem*” against itself to positively redefine female identity as subjective and undefinable. Here, Ames ironically suggests that permanent affirmation can only be achieved by accepting womanhood as an abstract construct.

### ***Detransition, Baby’s Misunderstood Humor and Creation of Community***

In *Detransition, Baby*, Peters couples irony with absurd, controversial, and easily misunderstood humor, making conversations of understanding womanhood more approachable. Reese and Ames’ dichotomous display of a trans identity puts womanhood on a spectrum, where readers can relate to aspects of either characters’ identity or approach to womanhood. In these differences, along with the novel’s humorously absurd approach to dealing with identity, Peters establishes a community. The most absurd and controversial humor of this novel rests on Reese’s

ironic awareness of gender performance, prompting outrageous reactions and comments. Reese's humor creates genuine, unfiltered, reactions to the contradictions around her which helps the reader take a liking to, and therefore listen to her. For instance, Peters' novel presents the recurring problem of gender affirmation by showing the extremes Reese willingly meets to feel validated, with the most absurd example being when Reese "ironically" (and maybe humorously) justifies domestic abuse to feel like a "real woman.":

Reese remembered women saying that if your husband doesn't beat you, he doesn't love you, a notion that horrified the feminist in Reese but fit with a perfect logic in one of the dark crevices of her heart. And yeah, liberal feminists—especially the trans-hating variety—would have a field day with her...But you know what? She didn't make the rules of womanhood... she had inherited them. Why should the burden be on her to uphold impeccable feminist politics that barely served her? The New York Times regularly published op-eds by famous feminists who pointedly ruled her out as a woman. Let them. She'd be over here, getting knocked around, each blow a minor illustration of her place in a world that did its gendering work no matter what you called it. So yeah, Stanley, bring it on. Hit Reese. Show her what it means to be a lady. (58-9)

To those outside a trans identity, who may not need as much constant gender affirmation, this may not be funny or invoke laughter of any kind. Peters does not use Reese to "justify" abusive relationships, rather she exaggerates the desperate feelings for gender affirmation from either feminist groups, men, or herself. This excerpt highlights the abused underbelly of gender affirmation, where the need and extreme lengths taken for validation requires trans women to fit into a heteronormative framework. Peters makes this point through Reese's awareness of irony that points out the absurdity of not fitting into "feminist" definitions of womanhood but still fits

into the “typical” victim of domestic violence. Reese chooses the dangerous extreme because, ironically, it feels easier. Reese’s exaggerated justification of domestic violence works as a semi-humorous exposé on the irony of trans identities adhering to the same heteronormative male gaze that excludes and harms trans women. However, rather than ridicule gender affirmation, Peters questions why this validation can only be met when appealing to a heteronormative male gaze. Although these ironic moments can be especially relatable to trans individuals, they are not exclusive to trans readers; rather, Peters uses “community humor,” appealing to different groups of women who find themselves lost in the gaze.

Peters’ humor and dichotomous displays of gender performance create a sense of community with the readers based on female differences, rather than similarities. In *A Very Serious Thing*, Walker’s explains “community humor” as specific humor used among a group that serves “as an index of the state of affairs in any given society” (23). “Community humor” nicely articulates Peters’ humor, irony, and awareness of complex identities as she uses these features to question how we “define” womanhood. Through this humor, Peters creates a kinship among marginalized women who find similarities in their subjugation, and thus, redirects and questions the authority of the dominant group. Arguably, Peters explicitly uses community humor through Reese’s inappropriate jokes at a funeral for a trans woman she once knew:

“Q: What do you call a remake of a nineties romantic comedy where you cast trans women in all the roles?

A: Four Funerals and a Funeral.” (210)

After telling her joke, Reese receives backlash from another trans woman attending the funeral, who Peters describes as “early in her transition” and “one of those Twitter girls eager to offer theory-laden takes on Gender.” When this woman overhears Reese’s joke, she shakes her head

muttering “*insensitive!*” (210). To which Reese “pulls rank” and says “Oh come on... You know who gave Tammi her first shot?... Who are you to say if she can make a joke or not?” (210). Reese’s long-standing membership in her community gives her confidence and power to use humor that weakens the dominant, patriarchal authority. Reese’s community humor questions the systemic violence trans women face, while also not giving the enabling dominant party power over her psyche. However, even in this excerpt, Reese’s supposed “community” misunderstands her humor, raising the question, what specific community is Reese’s (and Peters’) humor for?

The intended community Peters seeks are those who feel lost and alienated by the male gaze and ideal feminine performance. Ames and Reese’s contrasting identities creates a spectrum of womanhood that, in one way or another, can be relatable to female readers. But Peters deliberately does not limit the reach of her novel to trans readers or uninformed trans “allies.” In an interview with *The Guardian*, Peters states this novel is not meant to be “101: Intro to Trans Course,” rather this novel immediately starts with the day-to-day lives of trans characters who, like any mother and fathers-to-be, are having to ask existential questions because of an unborn child. Peters further expands and clarifies this community in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR), claiming her inspiration for *Detransition, Baby* was divorced cisgender women. In an interview transcript, Peters claims she found existential similarities among her own transition and divorced cisgender women:

They had experienced a break in life, in which they had to reassess themselves, and they had to be honest about who they were and what they wanted, and then they had to make a plan going forward. They couldn't stay stuck. You know, they couldn't get divorced and be angry for the rest of their life. They had to make a move. And the kind of questions that they had to ask themselves were so similar to the questions that I had to ask myself as a trans woman. (“Seeing”)

These unlikely inspirations and interpretations for *Detransition, Baby*, made by Peters herself, creates community for the directionless individual navigating womanhood in a male gaze. This community can find refuge in Reese, Ames, and Katrina who are all flawed, but misunderstood and lost characters. Reese can be described as self-involved on her mission to feel affirmed in femininity, which leads her to cheat on Ames for not being the partner she envisioned for herself. Ames keeps big problems to himself that eventually snowball, such as hiding his sexual desires from Reese, not telling Katrina he asked Reese to be a mother to their unborn child, or by not telling Katrina about his trans identity before the pregnancy. And Katrina, who suddenly finds herself in a queer relationship, uses an unconscious transphobia to out Ames to his peers. Although Katrina's "flaw" is much more dangerous and wrong than those of Ames and Reese, each imperfection and Peters' warped humor create a vulnerable and relatable narrative that facilitates a much more authentic discussion of womanhood.

Peters' female characters create a community around the lost woman trying to navigate a sensationalized, dichotomized, and unattainable version of womanhood. However, because this novel ends with no clear answers or suggestions where its' characters may end up, Peters does not make *Detransition, Baby* a comprehensive guide to understanding identity, but a place where this conversation of "true" womanhood begins. Peters' irony, characters, and overall humor, depict modern womanhood as accepting directionless as a part of women's journey. This lack of direction creates a vulnerable place for readers to reconsider how the male gaze continues to control womanhood. This vulnerability lets Peters weaken the male gaze's authority for the reader—not to define womanhood in her image— but rather to un-define womanhood from its oversimplified caricatures. *Detransition, Baby* aims to disempower the male gaze over femininity, and through Peters' references to popular culture, she arms the reader with the awareness to resist the gaze's reach beyond the scope of her novel.

## **Conclusion: *Detransition, Baby*'s Shift to the Small Screen and Fourth Wave Feminism**

*Detransition, Baby* employs humor, not just by absurd exaggerations and ironic awareness, but by referencing popular culture, television, and film. These references, such as *Sex and the City*, *Cheers* (1982), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and more, serve as canonical comparisons upon which Reese and Ames can base their trans identities. Television and film present diverse representations of identities and stories (at least that is the hope), but as seen in the “*Sex and the City* Problem,” women are often simplified or misrepresented. When Ames first explores his transition from James to Amy in college, he meets an older trans man, Patrick, who shows him how to shop for bras, dresses, and other feminine affirming clothing, but Ames makes an uniformed assumption of what Patrick would look and act like,

Amy had expected Patrick to be something quite different than what he turned out to be. She had imagined someone quite masculine: the stereotypical man-in-a-dress. Some cleft-chinned action hero with blue eyeshadow—Patrick Swayze in *To Wong Foo*. That was the best trans she'd seen on TV. Her other options were *The Silence of the Lambs* or *The Bird Cage* or maybe *The Crying Game*. (134)

Ames' preliminary assumptions of trans identities are warped by popular media's grossly simplified and wrong portrayals of the trans woman as the “man-in-a-dress.” Ames' misguided assumptions of trans identity *as* a trans individual lets Peters raise concerns about the media's influence of what trans and cis femininity should look like. Although the male gaze can partly be blamed for dictating femininity's look, a complicity among female viewers who internalize these depictions of womanhood should also be questioned.

Along with Reese, a large majority of all American women look towards and reference *Sex and the City* to compare their attempts at womanhood. For instance, *Sex and the City's* popularity continues as the reboot, *And Just Like That* (2021), premiered twenty-three years after



the original pilot, now welcoming a new generation of fans too young to have watched live on HBO, but old enough to binge watch on HBO's streaming service. These fans, like Reese, tuned into *Sex and the City* and its reboot, despite the show's outdated views on sexuality, race, and gender, and find some kind of comfort in these characters' cluelessness on sex, relationships, and womanhood. *Sex and the City* markets itself as a show *about* women *for* women, but in the finale, almost all the female characters fulfill traditional roles of either wife, mother, or both. Samantha is the only character among the core four who chooses herself over a male partner; after explaining that she loves him, but that she loves herself more, so she breaks up with him. Yet, the other three characters ridicule Samantha's display of female agency and this plot disappears altogether in the show's reboot. The complexity of these characters who all have vulnerable, unlikeable, yet endearing moments ultimately captivate female viewers. *Sex and the City* is a hallmark for how women's sexual and romantic desires are prioritized, but at the same time, each character stays within their limits of women's heteronormative expectations, either by having children, marrying a man, or in Samantha's case having a long-term and monogamous relationship with a man (until she is written off the show). Each *Sex and the City* characters' "aspirational traits" (such as having baby, like Miranda) associates female goals with male companionship. So, the captivated viewer who simplifies the characters of *Sex and the City* finds themselves unable to reach an ideal womanhood without the presence of a man.

Besides Peters, other recent authors and women have criticized and resisted the relationship *Sex and the City* creates between female liberty and male validation. In the season three finale of Fox's *Pose* (2021), set in 1998, the protagonists, four trans Latinx and/or black women recreate the *Sex and the City* "summer brunch." When approached by the waiter, who asks the women if they want "Cosmopolitans," one character, Elecktra, claims she wants a "real drink" and then says "I refuse to let some TV show about white girls define how we eat, drink,

and gather as girlfriends. We've always made our own rules and we ain't stopping now.” Elecktra claims agency over the four women brunching, and in doing so, also resists a heteronormative and white standard that *Sex and the City* establishes. Similar to Peters' novel and characters, *Pose*'s trans characters show an awareness of the heteronormative expectation in place (*Sex and the City*), and in this awareness Elecktra knows where to resist, by choosing a scotch-whiskey over a Cosmopolitan.

Peters' awareness of the relationship between television and film's self-identification and a compulsory heteronormativity, I posit, will play a significant role in her upcoming television adaptation of *Detransition, Baby*. Although very little is known about this adaptation, other than that Peters is set to write the pilot and act as executive producer, the shift from novel to television puts new (and hopefully more accurate) trans representation into a more accessible medium (Petski). Walker claims in her Preface to *A Very Serious Thing*, published in 1988, that she concentrated on “women's *written* humor opposed to that found in cartoons, film, television, and stand-up comedy...[because] each medium presents a different set of issues and problems, including those of production” (xi). Traditionally, there has been a distinction between humor found in literature compared to television and film, but in an age of fourth wave feminism this line separating the two mediums becomes faint. Peters' involvement in this adaptation replaces the male gaze's power in film with her own, as she controls how these characters are visually introduced. By giving a trans woman control over trans identities in television, popular media begins to be influenced by someone, like Reese and Ames, who presents an awareness that feminine performance should not be created in comparison to a heteronormative male gaze.

In *Detransition, Baby*, Peters asks the existential question of “who are you?” but leaves it unanswered for the reader. This looming and unanswered question of “who are you?” indicates feminism's fourth wave, where the tenets of this wave focus on intersectional identity and

internet mediums do not strive for “one” definition for womanhood, but leaves it undecided. *Detransition, Baby*’s adaptation from novel to television represents a generational change where existential questions of *who* and *what* we are is widely and quickly shared while resisting, instead of pleasing, conventions of the dominant group. Peters highlights the importance of diverse and true, visual representations of womanhood with references to a popular culture canon; she even exaggerates this generational fixation on visual media with Ames, who has difficulty choosing to afford HBO or his unborn child, but easily decides on “just how much he did not want to cancel HBO” (15). This shift of emphasis in mediums highlights the sign of twenty-first century identities and the forward-facing humor of *Detransition, Baby*. Peters’ novel represents womanhood broadly and genuinely, and with the pending change in mediums, she sets to expand authentic portrayals further. Peters’ use and awareness of irony allows the modern reader to recognize the absurdity in the choices women are offered in male’ gazes accepted terms of womanhood. Whether it be the choice of *Sex and the City* character or if women should be beaten or excluded to be considered an ideal “woman,” Peters’ humor makes this absurdity clear. Women's options for self-actualization have been ridiculously limited, but with the shift in medium, these issues of female identity will continue to be interpreted and explored through compatible and humorous conversations beyond the novel.

## Conclusion

During the Covid-19 pandemic, I, like many other Americans, found myself isolated and scared, but also incredibly bored. During this lockdown I did two things more than anything else—watch television and scroll through Instagram—and at the center of my viewings I found funny women. Scrolling through Instagram in 2020, I stumbled across an “Instagram Live” show with Ziwe Fumudoh, who professionally goes by Ziwe. In this show, Ziwe created an interview setting where she baited her willing guest with uncomfortably direct questions to mimic “gotcha” journalism. In this line of uncomfortable, but funny, questioning, she did not shy away from issues on race, gender, politics, or even the personal lives of her guests. On one episode of this Instagram Live, the first question she asks comedian Yassir Lester, “You famously date a white woman. My first question for you is do you believe Black women are not worth love?” This question, loaded with shock value, claims authority and twists the guest’s personal life and language to question larger issues of race, gender, and interracial relationships. Ziwe’s baited questioning, along with an interview style talk show, uses humor to disarm her guests and redirect power to herself. This humorous style, delivery, and line of questioning allows her to ask guests these uncomfortable questions in earnest— an opportunity most comedic talk shows do not get. In many ways, Ziwe’s shows, its mediums, and her style of humor, highlights where women’s humor is heading.

As we are living through feminism’s fourth wave, mainstream humor, not only becomes more diverse, but uses complex and direct strategies in its approach. Ziwe’s show inevitably moves from Instagram to Showtime, officially being named *Ziwe*. The show’s first episodes dealt with the “phenomenon of white women,” with her first guest being American satirist, Fran Lebowitz. When Ziwe moves her talk show to Showtime, she not only keeps her direct and

uncomfortable questioning, but she radically changes the format to use multimodal features, such as visual, editing, and verbal gags to weaken the answers of her, arguably more privileged, guest in post-editing. When interviewing Fran Lebowitz, Ziwe’s first question was, “Why did you come on my show?” To which Lebowitz responds that someone on Ziwe’s team was incredibly persistent, so just doing the show was easier than repeatedly declining. Ziwe celebrates this response as representing the “persistence of women of color,” which Lebowitz refutes with “or any persistence.” Beyond her baited questions, Ziwe uses edited visuals to twist her guests' words after the interview where the guest can no longer resist. In the case of Fran Lebowitz’s words “or any persistence,” Ziwe and her editors put the statement “All Persistence Matters” on the bottom of the screen (see fig. 1),



Fig. 2. Screenshot example from: “Ziwe Series Premier Full Episode.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Showtime, 14 May 2021, [https://youtu.be/AG-C515Uo\\_U](https://youtu.be/AG-C515Uo_U).

In this multimodal format, Ziwe keeps asking discomfoting questions, but now has the power of post-interviewing editing to create even more direct and exposing jokes than before. In this example of “All Persistence Matters,” Ziwe not just humorously accuses Lebowitz of supporting “All Lives Matter” (a common and racist redirection from Black Lives Matter) but raises the

question of *why* Lebowitz felt she had to correct her to say: “or any persistence.” Although I do not think Ziwe is *actually* accusing Lebowitz of supporting “All Lives Matter,” she gives herself the authority to question a powerful and esteemed satirist.

In my first chapter, I argued that satirists give themselves authority to point out an institution’s hypocrisy, and it is notable that Ziwe’s first guest is a well-known satirist. Ziwe disarms “the satirist” by inviting and deconstructing the arguments of a well-known author of this style while also being her *first* guest on the *first* televised show. In having Lebowitz as her first guest, Ziwe highlights the monumental change in women’s humor from the nineteenth to twenty-first century. Beyond editing or post-interview power, Ziwe deconstructs the spoken language of the satirist during the interview. Although Lebowitz has a prestige that comes from publishing many influential satirical works and social commentaries, her inability to be “funnier” than Ziwe’s multimodal and live humor shows that Lebowitz’s style is outdated in the face of twenty-first century technology. This is not to say humorous literature is no longer funny, as seen with Torrey Peters’ recent novel, but women’s humor seems to be having a renaissance when it comes to overlapping modes of humor.

Multimodal humor not just allows the humorist more creativity, but can now be edited, shared, and viewed on a plethora of mediums. In the case of *Ziwe*, audiences can view full episodes on television and on websites such as YouTube, while also watching shortened and edited segments of Ziwe’s show among social media platforms, as seen in her show’s beginnings on Instagram, and now, shared via TikTok and Instagram Reels. These shortened videos posted on various platforms are quickly and widely rectifying decades of overlooked women in comedy. With the help of these social mediums, women’s humor becomes more widely accessed, due to algorithms, “For You” pages, and feeds.

As female humorists share their works via these platforms, they further delegate to subsections of the internet via trends, edits, and even distinct web groups that allows fans to promote their favorite television series, films, or books via “BookTok.” In the past two years, one of the most popular shows at the center of these trends and edits, was Amazon Prime’s limited series *Fleabag*. Originally released in 2016, with its second and last season released in 2019, *Fleabag* followed the unnamed female protagonist (referred to as “Fleabag” in the subtitles) as she processed the “accidental” suicide of her best friend, her estranged relationship with her sister, and the death of her mother, all by speaking directly to the audience about her sexual escapades and her inner thoughts. An example of how humor accompanies this style and themes happens in season one, when Fleabag, on the way to her sister’s surprise birthday party with a date, stops at a sex shop to buy her sister a vibrator. In this store, her date (which she barley knows) becomes increasingly and obviously uncomfortable taking note of a “prosthetic vagina” and proceeds to tell Fleabag she “should get one of those.” To which Fleabag, a cisgender woman, tells him “I’ve already got one” that she “takes everywhere.” The date reacts in utter disbelief, and he starts asking clarifying questions, but all while doing so, Fleabag talks to the audience stating he is “never going to get it [her joke].” Not only does Fleabag break the fourth wall to talk to the audience, much like Sally Jay in *The Dud Avocado*, but also recognizes that men do not understand her sense of humor. Scenes such as this one inevitably went viral on TikTok and Twitter from 2020-2022 as users began editing clips together as music videos or in compilations of their favorite moments, and so, audiences who did not initially watch the show in 2016 found interest and viewed it for the first time about five years later. However, young female fans did not simply consume or discuss this show on online platforms, but started claiming that were in their “Fleabag Era.” Meaning, these viewers felt they were either living or

reacting the way Fleabag does in the show, which is self-destructive, incredibly blunt, and witty. This claim to be in a “Fleabag Era” comes from deeply relating to the character, her humor, or her relationships, showing how audiences currently consume and resonate with women’s humor in a digital and streaming age.

*Fleabag* and *Ziwe* are two very different approaches to comedy, but both still fall under the tradition of women’s humor. On her show, Ziwe directiveness strives for a linguistic control over her guest, pointing out the flaws in logic and where these guests fail to consider identities outside of their own. Fleabag keeps her humor secret, talks with the audience, and uses jokes as a defense mechanism from the turmoil in her life. Despite these shows’ differences in style, content, medium, audiences, and approach, both represent the trajectory of women’s humor and identity in a new age that recognizes women’s experiences are not universal. These differences highlight the expansion in the canon of women’s humor that, at one point, primarily focused on white, cisgender, heterosexual women. As we look toward this evolving canon, fourth wave feminism points to the importance of medium and women’s humor. Although we cannot ignore humorous literature by women, the media separated by the fine lines between book, film, and television adaptations have equal importance in how female humorists tell their stories. As seen in my chapters, women’s humor has a deep-seated history, that contrary to some belief, connects themes and issues of womanhood. Hopefully, as women’s humor continues stretching among genres, mediums, approaches to its diverse storytelling, this tradition no longer goes unnoticed. Although I continue to believe women’s humor is made *by* women *for* women (however we define that), feminisms’ fourth wave seems to aid humorists in rejecting the notion “women are just not funny.”



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## **Vita**

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During her five years at Appalachian State University, Ms. Crump was an active member in the Lambda Phi chapter of Delta Zeta and served as the primary senator for the English graduate department in the Graduate Student Government Association. She currently resides in Boone, NC as she completes her M.A. degree, which she expects to receive in May 2022. After completion of her M.A. Degree, she plans to teach high school English.