

MATERIAL GIRL: THE SUBJECTIVE ROLE OF OBJECTS IN
DOROTHY PARKER'S POEMS AND SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the importance of objects within Dorothy Parker's poems and short stories and how her use of material items as metaphors for the restricted roles available to women of her day simultaneously intensifies and challenges these gender-related limitations. The essay draws upon the tenets of feminist theory that call for a pluralistic reading of female texts and an appropriation of "feminine" items within a literary language, as well Karl Marx's theories of commodity in which material objects serve the primary purpose of capitalistic exchange and Laura Mulvey's study of pleasure-viewing in which women play specific roles designed for them by men. This study of how Parker illustrates her heroines through the material objects surrounding them serves to highlight her writing as an innovative subversion of the commonly accepted parameters for the women of her era.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to M., whose pretty shoes were the first I dreamed of walking in someday, and to A., who reintroduced me to the intriguing world of Mrs. Parker.

Dorothy Parker began writing as a young child. While on summer holiday with her older sister, Helen, she and her father exchanged daily letters that were often filled with light verse, their subjects ranging from accidental sunburn to Rags, the beloved family dog. As Parker reached adulthood, her poems and short stories continued to focus on similarly inconsequential subject matter, yet simultaneously addressed social concerns that alternately amused, puzzled, or infuriated their author. Throughout the body of her work, Parker's primary concern appears to be the objectification of women within certain social roles. At a time when women were cautiously beginning to step away from the domestic sphere and embark on professional careers, Parker's poems and short stories reflect an impatience for those women who clung to previously prescribed traditions of feminine behavior. Parker illustrates this vexation through her heroines' preoccupation with the mundane material objects that could typically be found within a woman's traditional surroundings.

As a young woman embarking on a literary career, Parker seemed singularly preoccupied with the material objects that dominated women's lives and curtailed the options available to them. Her early submissions to various magazines were poems that "epitomized trivia: wrong telephone numbers, bloopers made at the bridge table, the pros and cons of nutmeg in rice pudding" (Meade 31). These were initially met with rejection. When she finally received a letter of acceptance for one of her poems in 1914 from the new Condé Nast publication Vanity Fair, she used the opportunity to ask its editor, Frank Crowningshield, for a job. Hired to work for the copy department of Vogue, she was required to properly represent the magazine by appearing at work in the female employee dress code of "hats, white gloves, and black silk stockings" (36). She spent her days writing captions for fashion illustrations of the latest nightgowns, corsets, etc. Quickly wearied by the tedium of performing this task for a magazine at which it was deemed "easier for a camel to navigate a needle's eye than for an ambitious

woman to achieve literary grandeur” (35), she began to lash out against her situation by criticizing “the office paintings, its marble tables and raw silk curtains, [and] the uniformed maid who tiptoed around dusting desks and arranging fresh flowers” (36). Her disdain extended to her female coworkers who pandered to the pompous trivialities their workplace mandated for them, and she often amused Frank Crowningshield by privately ridiculing the materialistically-consumed conversations she had overheard throughout the day.

The poem that had first won her Crowningshield’s appreciation, “Any Porch,” was a similarly humorous invective against the women who had surrounded Parker during those childhood vacations with Helen. Though it is not one of her most well-known pieces and was neglected when she assembled The Portable Dorothy Parker, the poem does embody her contemptuous disregard for a perceived feminine tendency to ignore worldly issues in favor of focusing on the mundane objects that inhabit the daily lives of women. As her biographer Marion Meade points out, “Again and again in her writing Dorothy would return to these women, and for good reason. She feared becoming one of them” (32). Parker’s poems, made easily accessible to women readers through publication in such magazines as McCall’s, The Ladies’ Home Journal, Ainslee’s, and Life served as revealing mirrors into which these women could see not only themselves but their attention towards those pretty objects around them that served to anchor them within a world of feminine absurdities.

As the focus of “Any Porch” drifts from one porch to another and snippets of nine various conversations are recorded, this apparently random community of female voices trivializes itself in the way that topics such as philosophy, women’s suffrage, and World War I are immediately interrupted by discussions of nightgowns, bobbed hair, and playing cards:

“I’m reading that new thing of Locke’s –

So whimsical, isn’t he? Yes–”

“My dear, have you seen those new smocks?

They’re nightgowns – no more, and no less.” (1-4)

“This war’s such a frightful affair,

I know for a fact, that in France – ”

“I love Mrs. Castle’s bobbed hair;

They say that *he* taught her to dance.” (13-20)

The fact that these conversations are recorded entirely in quotes, without the benefit of a narrating voice to lend some moral critique to the poem, only serves to aggrandize the objectification of these women who are limited to their gender-specific designations by virtue of the objects at their disposal. No matter which porch the poem leads us to, the women encountered there are the same; in effect, Parker is recording the voices of generations of women who had allowed themselves to be contented with banal conversation that is made even more ridiculous when contrasted with the weighty events of the world that are hovering around them, but of which these women are only minimally aware.

Such object-oriented literature revolving around a woman’s material environment has often been both disregarded as trivial and denigrated for lack of artistic merit, the argument being that the vocabulary is intrinsically foreign to a male audience. Feminist theorist Annette Kolodny maintains that the struggle for female texts to find acceptance within the canon may be due in part to masculine unfamiliarity with the worlds (i.e. parlor, nursery, kitchen, etc.) that serve to inspire the female consciousness (Kolodny 1393). Similarly, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar offer a lengthy analysis in The Madwoman in the Attic of ways in which the “phenomena of ‘inferiorization’ mark the woman writer’s struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart” (50). They argue that “for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those

patriarchal definitions that intervene” (17). Women writers of Parker’s era were expected to adhere to their traditional roles by composing stories appropriate to their gender, and the mention of items associated with this feminine realm of the household, such as a dress or a piece of artwork, served to confine women within the male-ordained parameters of a woman’s capabilities while simultaneously dissuading them from attempting to achieve social significance through their work.

A true element of genius in Dorothy Parker’s work, however, is her ability to cloak emancipatory sentiments with ironic subtlety, simultaneously gaining prestige as a female writer while mocking the gender-appropriate subject matter that ostensibly characterizes her work. By placing the majority of her heroines within traditional settings, she was able to lure readers into a false sense of security before revealing a trailblazing feminist tendency to ridicule the very notion of these traditions. Various critics have speculated on the impulses lying behind Parker’s subversive literary style. While biographer Arthur Kinney aptly observes that Parker “used clever, even sardonic quips to poke through the shallowness and commercialism of what she saw” (Kinney 33), it is Marion Meade who seems to touch more accurately upon Parker’s true ambition: to succeed within a literary world that she viewed as inherently male. Meade argues that Parker rejected “the prevailing standards for female writing and thinking. She had chosen to present herself not so much as a bad girl but as a bad boy, a firecracker who was aggressively proud of being tough, quirky, feisty, [and] a variation of the basic Becky Sharp model” (Meade 45). This “bad boy” attitude seems to have bolstered Parker’s attempts to evade the two things she most dreaded: “being considered a ‘woman writer’ and turning into a ‘society lady’” (Day 42), yet it also creates an interesting study in contrasts: although she may have cultivated a masculine tongue, the persona that Dorothy Parker presented to the world was unequivocally female.

As a member of the famed Algonquin Round Table, perched demurely among the “the literary male-wolves” (Fagan 231) that she had befriended, Dorothy Parker seemed anomalous. Though she initially sat in silence, “shyly blinking at everyone from under the brim of her Merry Widow hat, virginal, self-conscious, and extremely well turned out in one of her good suits so that she looked like a Park Avenue princess slumming” (Meade 61), she eventually proved herself the reigning queen of witty repartee, her ten-second word puns becoming legendary for their succinct ingenuity. She was so much the “bad boy” (45) that many of her jokes “were lost because their obscenity made them unprintable” (85). The same contrast proved true while she served as drama critic for Vanity Fair, chosen by Crowningshield to replace comedic favorite P.G. Wodehouse in 1918. Though she introduced herself to readers of her column “as ‘a tired business woman’ who was ‘seeking innocent diversion’” (45), Parker quickly became known for her acerbic and relentless criticism of her contemporaries.

The power she was able to wield with her pen was not universally admired, and the prevailing attitude of Parker’s male contemporaries appears to have been that which she most feared: that she was merely a woman writer stepping too far out of prescribed social boundaries. In 1920, after her column insulted Billie Burke, the wife of influential Broadway producer Florenz Ziegfeld, Parker was fired from Vanity Fair and replaced by Edmund Wilson, who would later become a great admirer of Parker’s work. Recalling their first meeting at the magazine’s offices, however, Wilson describes her in his memoir as “overperfumed, and the hand with which I had shaken hers kept the scent of her perfume all day. Although she was fairly pretty and although I needed a girl, what I considered the vulgarity of her too much perfume prevented me from paying her court” (Wilson 33). Other male heavyweights within her field offered similar observations centering around her femininity. Though she had firmly expressed to Frank Crowningshield when he first hired her at Vogue that “fashion would never

become [her] religion” (qtd. in Day 11), his remembrance of her was as a style-conscious woman with “a fondness for *Chypre*, as a perfume, and for flat-heeled shoes, sometimes for black patent leather pumps with black bows...Green, as a colour, seemed to appeal to her greatly, whether in a dress, hat, or scarf” (qtd. in Meade 44). She was described as “a stiletto made of sugar” by Robert Sherwood and her writing was categorized by Alexander Woollcott as “not so much the familiar phenomenon of a hand in steel in a velvet glove as a lacy sleeve with a bottle of vitriol concealed in its folds” (qtd. in Day xiii). In effect, this woman who proved herself so intent on ridiculing women for their preoccupation with material items was likely inspired by her own frustrating experiences of being categorized within the traditional contexts of her gender, even as she tried to evade such a definition. As her poems and short stories reveal, such objectification will almost always lead to unhappy results.

The unfortunate effects of a woman’s limited social value were consequences that some of Parker’s readers may have already been familiar. The economic theories of Karl Marx, widely studied in early twentieth-century America, invest a substantial degree of attention on the plight of the working woman who, relegated to tasks deemed appropriate to her gender, is undervalued and ultimately seen as detrimental to the economic good of her community as a whole. In tracing the history of this gender-dominated social structure, Marx describes the evolution of society from matriarchate, in which women controlled the production of agriculture, to patriarchate, in which stock-breeding took precedence as the primary means of subsistence. This transition, Marx maintains, took place mainly because the instruments used in stock-breeding, “the spear, the lasso, and the bow and arrow,” (Woman 9) were traditionally handled by men. The correlation between social roles and material objects, therefore, is historically both gender-specific and seemingly essential to economic stability, which men dominated simply by virtue of the objects in their possession. In other words, women’s tools, or the objects associated

with women, were denigrated both socially and economically by their very connection to femininity.

In “Any Porch,” Parker alludes to this devaluing of a woman’s potential within the workforce:

“I don’t want the vote for myself,
But women with property, dear – ”
“I think the poor girl’s on the shelf,
She’s talking about her ‘career.’” (13-6)

The stanza listens in on two conversations revolving around the social power derived through economic independence. In the first conversation, the issue of women’s suffrage is dismissed as relevant only for those women who own property; the speaker of these lines is content to relinquish her right to vote in deference to her husband who, as a result, owns not only the property but this women as well. The second conversation of the stanza concerns a woman who has attempted to step outside of the boundaries instituted by the patriarchy and venture into the workforce. Her cold dismissal by the speaker as being “on the shelf” denotes the fact that her marketability as a woman (i.e. the measure of her appeal to the male provider) is dwindling, forcing her to into a difficult situation: in order to provide security for herself, she chooses to pursue a male-dominated career path, and, in so doing, further alienates herself from her socially-acceptable identity as a woman.

The material objects comprising a woman’s sphere then began to divide into two branches: those intended for domestic use and those used to accentuate personal appearance. In terms of Marxist theory, the social relations of a woman began to reflect the success rate of her material relations; her value as an individual evolved into a measure of the attractiveness of her apparel and the comfort of her home.

Insofar as a material object is concerned, its value as commodity is realized in the act of social exchange, and the rate of this exchange determines the social standing of the object's owner; as Marx argues in Capital, Volume 1, "the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things" (777). As the division of labor historically became more focused on male-specific productivity outside of the home, the economic survival of a woman depended on her ability to attract and marry a man who could successfully provide for her.

In "Any Porch," Parker addresses this issue of women approaching marriage primarily as an economic transaction :

"I've heard I was psychic, before,
To think that you saw it – how funny –"
"Why, he must be sixty, or more,
I told you she'd marry for money!" (21-4)

The first conversation of this stanza humorously addresses a perceived elevation of the power of a woman's mind. The woman who is described as "psychic" seems herself unaware of her extraordinary potential; she cannot determine this quality for herself, but rather must be told of its existence. Regardless, she refuses to capitalize on the idea. In characterizing the notion of being recognized for this capability as "funny," the speaker is dismissing any significant role that her acute mind could potentially play in her identity as an individual. This element of surprise in her tone is replaced by the more certain tone of the second speaker in the stanza, whose conversation deals with the more realistic expectations of a woman's pursuits. The woman who has basically sold herself to a much-older man in order to gain financial security is not exactly chastised by the speaker for doing so, but is rather being acknowledged for having satisfied the

expectations of those who have been observing her. As opposed to the woman whose mental capability is regarded as something foreign and laughable, this woman is playing the role expected of her as a physical commodity within the patriarchy.

The main function of women in the society that Dorothy Parker was raised in, then, was to appeal to the sensory scrutiny of the men around them. As such, women had become commodities themselves in terms of how successfully they could use objects to enhance their own appeal. Just as the economic transition from matriarchy to patriarchy described by Marx prompted the undervaluing of a woman's productivity potential, this universal scrutiny of a woman's materially-enhanced appearance prompted a regression among women to the passive role of "image," placed on display for men who played the active role of "viewer." Women were, in effect, becoming animated mannequins designed to advertise the potential actualization of male-controlled sexual fantasy.

In her study of psychoanalysis and the cinema, Laura Mulvey expands upon this idea of woman being "displayed as sexual object," focusing on the theatrical allure of "erotic spectacle: from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire" (Mulvey 19). The Ziegfeld referred to by Mulvey is the same Florenz Ziegfeld whose actress wife, Billie Burke, became a target of Parker's harsh criticism. Reviewing Burke's dramatic stage performance in Caesar's Wife, Parker wrote that, "In her desire to convey the girliness of the character, [Burke] plays her lighter scenes as if she were giving an impersonation of Eva Tanguay, [a famous burlesque star]" (qtd. in Day 27). This critique reflects Parker's mounting impatience, which would intensify throughout her literary work, for the male-orchestrated objectification of woman as spectacle, as well as for the women who allowed themselves to become trapped within such parameters.

Mulvey continues her analysis of "women in representation" to conclude that they "can

signify castration, and activate voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent this threat” (25). This stems from the Freudian division of pleasure-viewing into the categories of *scopophilia*, in which pleasure is derived from viewing a fantasized spectacle from a distance, and *ego libido*, in which the spectator identifies himself with the object on display. As Freud considered these two categories to be inextricably linked, Mulvey observes that:

Ultimately, the meaning of a woman is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the father. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. (21)

The “fetishistic mechanism” employed to assuage this anxiety signifies a return to the anxiety’s original source, given that Freud also divides fetish into two categories: that pertaining to an inappropriate body part or else to “some inanimate object which bears an assignable relation to the person whom it replaces and preferably to that person’s sexuality (e.g. a piece of clothing or underlinen)” (Freud 100). Those same material items that had originally prompted a woman’s commodification as spectatorial object then become disproportionately larger in focus than the woman who is associated with them. That is to say that a woman’s identity becomes increasingly overshadowed by the fetishized object’s representation of the idealized masculine version of femininity. As Mulvey maintains, “Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man’s role as the active one of advancing the story, making things happen” (20). Despite the fact that these objects are traditionally exclusive to the female sphere, their value as commodity depends on the masculine interpretation of their intended use.

In Parker’s poems and short stories, the heroines’ preoccupation with various material

objects could be argued to be a direct result of such fetish theories. In other words, as the male viewer contemplates the female figure, his sexual desire leads him to focus on that element of a woman's body that is not only different from his but is physically lacking something that his body possesses. The male viewer's desire to be close to this woman, however, leads to a feeling of anxiety over losing that part of himself, the "castration complex." He refocuses his attention, therefore, on the objects used to accentuate a woman's figure, and fetishizes them so that they are no longer adornments but substitutes for the woman herself. As the woman becomes secondary to the objects around her, the male viewer is able to approach her without the anxious dread of losing his identity. He further limits a woman's power over her own identity by assigning value to those objects that had become exclusive to a woman's sphere based on his sexual fantasy.

The feminist response to such fetishization has been to question how much women should value those objects that directly correspond with masculine standards of value. In "Any Porch," Parker addresses the frustration inherent to a woman feeling bound to attain those objects that will enhance her value as commodity within the male framework of desirability:

"I don't call Mrs. Brown *bad*,

She's *un-moral*, dear, not *immoral* – "

"Well, really, it makes me so mad

To think what I paid for that coral!" (5-8)

The two conversations, again, parallel each other in that the very essence of a woman's character is being challenged. In the first conversation, Parker is being progressive with the idea that a woman may bend the rules of society without stepping completely out of her boundaries. In the second, the woman who has paid too much for some jewelry is not stepping out of her bounds – she has indeed bought the coral – but she is bending the rules by challenging the value of her

purchase; in other words, she is expressing the frustration that emerges when realizing that an object's value does not measure up to the price that must be paid for it. This woman does not perceive her own value as commodity being increased high enough to warrant spending so much money on an object that has come to represent the masculine fetishization of a woman's sexual appeal.

The question remains, then, as to why the women in Parker's work continue to surround themselves with these objects. Just as Parker herself was an anomaly – a woman criticizing the objectified fashions of her society while still wearing them herself – there is an anomalous futility implied in the struggle against these objects. It could be argued, however, that the heroines of Parker's work are constructing their own fetishes; that they are using objects not as substitutes for sexual gratification but rather as inanimate items assumed to possess magical powers. Just as Cinderella's glass slippers were perceived by court members in the well-known fairy tale as having the ability to transform their wearer into a princess, Parker's heroines could be attempting to use the objects around them as a means of elevating themselves from the limitations imposed by the male-determined value placed upon the objects they possess.

It could be argued, then, that Dorothy Parker's work illustrates a desire to counteract the notion that women are secondary to the objects around them and reclaim a feminine definition of what these objects represent. Her writing illustrates a range of fetishized objects including items of apparel, such as a hat and a garter, as well as household items, such as a telephone and a vase of Flower. These objects, interpreted from a feminine perspective, evolve from being idealized by their owners as a means of entry into the realm of masculine attention and social significance to being blamed for their apparent inability to enhance their owners' desirability. Just as the evil stepsisters struggle to slip their unsightly feet into Cinderella's glass slipper and become the Prince's bride, the heroines of Parker's poems and short stories attempt to manipulate their

various objects in order to rewrite their own formulaic, predetermined life-stories. And just as the evil stepsisters fail in achieving their desired goal, so too do Parker's heroines typically meet with unsatisfying or disillusioning conclusions. However, Parker's heroines ultimately challenge the myth of their object's effectiveness, and, in so doing, their stories illuminate Parker as one of the earliest and most compelling voices of twentieth-century feminism.

POEMS

Parker's three major volumes of poetry, Enough Rope (1926), Sunset Gun (1928), and Death and Taxes (1931), reflect her desire to elevate herself beyond the life she was living in which she was limited by her gender yet faced with its unnerving inevitability. From a feminist framework, her poems' preoccupation with death could be interpreted as having dual meaning: first, that there was no other option available to women who found themselves confined to such limiting and therefore miserable conditions; and second, that the use of material objects to define and confine women exclusively within the domestic sphere was a death unto itself.

Parker's characterization of women and their relationships to objects can be divided into three categories: those women who idealize objects, those who find themselves disillusioned by objects, and those whose physical identity itself is portrayed by way of object imagery.

Idealized Objects

The following three poems portray an inclination among their speakers to remain optimistic about their options in their portrayal of certain feminine objects. Though each poem does end with a hint of disillusionment, the steadfast, albeit naïve, optimism of the speakers emphasizes the struggle Parker would have had to face against the women of her day who remained firmly attached to traditional perceptions of their expected roles.

"Day-Dreams"

Included in Enough Rope, "Day-Dreams" is unusual in tone. While certain Parker poems

do begin with lofty or lighthearted sentiments, most of these poems' speakers tend to surreptitiously burst their own happy bubbles by the final stanza. The speaker in "Day-Dreams," however, maintains her optimism throughout in describing what she imagines to be a "model life" (26): while her husband goes to work, she will "gaily" (6, 19) and "valiantly" (13) perform the domestic duties expected of her. Though she does not expect to do them well, foreseeing that her culinary efforts will turn out "black and dry" (11), she remains secure in her role within the home, telling her husband that she is "assured you'd not complain" (14) and "if my finger I should burn, / you'd kiss away the pain" (15-6).

The first three stanzas begin with the mention of such objects essential to this model life the speaker is planning: "a little bungalow" (1), "a little cook-book" (9) and "a little scrubbing brush" (17). The diminutive adjective before each item is simultaneously endearing and grating; it appears that this couple would indeed be attempting to live in the type of model home built as a young girl's decorous plaything. Her description of the objects in her home as "little" may make their practical use appear less daunting, and her ideal of a perfect marriage may then seem more within her grasp. However, she seems to have rendered the objects too small and fragile to actually be handled. She admits that she is unable to cook, therefore her book can serve no practical purpose. The only "little" chore she seems capable of is scrubbing the floors with her "little" brush – a momentous undertaking for such an inadequate tool, and one that would likely keep her on her knees for hours on end. In effect, the woman is miniaturizing herself, presenting herself as a loveable doll within her doll house, albeit one who is conscious of the traditional role she is expected to play out.

This doll-like persona seems to prompt the speaker to assume a mental vacuity as well. Though she does allude to the intellectual pursuits attracting many women of her day, she diminishes these as well:

But though I'd cook and sew and scrub,
A higher life I'd find;
I'd join a little women's club
And cultivate my mind. (21-4)

As was the case with "Any Porch," Parker is sneering at such a woman's naïve and limiting ideal of domestic bliss. Again, the adjective "little" negates any substantial merit of this club and insinuates that any such cultivation would be very shallow indeed. It is a subtle reminder that any foray into the outside world should be an extension of the woman's world rather than an invasion of the man's, and should inflict no threat upon the continuation of this domestic ideal. The true cultivation throughout the poem seems to be limited to the couple only, which this speaker seems to want to plant as deeply and inescapably as possible within this imagined life. Her forecast of the future is static, and any jubilant emotion or action that was described in the first three stanzas is conspicuously missing in the fourth. The couple seems to have become cast in porcelain, immortalized in the speaker's fantasy that "We'd travel on, from year to year, / At no increase of speed" (27-8). Rather than action and individuation, the speaker is making a bid for stasis and the economic security inherent to being a wife. The true irony of the poem, however, is that it is unique to the speaker's mind; her elaborate depiction has been presented in order to entice a marriage proposal. The man, who is the embodiment in this poem of "town" (8), has not yet agreed with the speaker's opinion that it is "best, my love, / to string along as two" (31-2). Her vision of the future, therefore, is as fragile as the "little bungalow" she has described, and Parker's triumph lies in the threat that the "little" objects of domestication that the speaker longs to own may never be hers.

"Afternoon"

This poem, also included in Enough Rope, is another projection of the future. In the case

of this speaker, however, the life of a passionate woman is drawing to a close. Whereas so many of Parker's poems depict her preoccupation with a preemptive and cheerless death, "Afternoon" presents dying as a calm moment when the speaker is "old, and comforted, / and done with this desire" (1-2). No longer subject to relationships with other people, she is accompanied only by "Memory" and "Peace" (3, 4). She prepares herself physically for death by combing her hair "in scalloped bands / Beneath my laundered cap" (5-6) and donning "a spriggèd gown / With lace to kiss my throat" (9-10). Though she opens her "curtain to the town" (11), there is no mention of what lies outside. Rather, she sits in her rocking chair to contemplate as "my cool and fragile hands / Lie light upon my lap" (7-8). Neatly folded within her cap and gown, this woman appears ready to be tucked away, in much the same way that a piece of clothing would be laundered and tucked away within a chest of drawers.

The calm description of these objects enhances the idealized order and rest inherent in this woman's old age. The sprigged pattern of her dress, though evocative of the flowering earth, is used to conceal her body, again foreshadowing the grave she will soon be lying in where she herself will be concealed under the ground. The calm, circular motion of her hand as she stirs her tea is a striking opposition to the jerky movement of the needle being used to assemble "The Satin Dress" (a poem discussed later), soothing evidence that the fires of youthful passion have been thoroughly extinguished. Yet it is the speaker herself who dispels her own fantasy as she mourns the inevitable, wishing that "those blessed years / Were further than they be!" (15-16). Though possible to attain, these idealized objects of old age and death remain a fantasy embodied only within the poem itself.

"Ninon de L'Enclos, On Her Last Birthday"

Markedly different in sentiment from "Afternoon," this poem from Death and Taxes (1931) is a portrayal of Mademoiselle Anne de L'Enclos, one of the wittiest members of the

literary salons of seventeenth-century France. It is unsurprising that Parker should find herself inspired by a woman with whom she shared so many similarities. Each would take numerous lovers throughout her life, though they both remained most loyal to their celebrated literary friends; they both were often criticized for their biting humor as well as for their sense of independence; and they both lived unexpectedly long lives.

Though the title of Parker's poem introduces Ninon as being near the end of her life, the speaker portrays herself as still very much attached to the passions of youth. Her first request is to "let me have the rouge again" (1), in order to paint her youth back onto her cheeks and lips. This is soon followed by a request for "my scarlet slippers" (13) and "the powder-puff" (14). As for her dress, she is torn between two:

And I shall wear the blue, I think—
They beg to touch its rippled lace;
Or do they love me best in pink,
So sweetly flattering the face? (5-8)

The feminine objects in Ninon's arsenal, just as those used by women today, are meant as strategies to either enhance or camouflage her body in order to ensure that "the dear young men" (15) whom she still desires will continue to reciprocate her advances. Unlike the speaker in "Afternoon," she does not choose a dress that satisfies her, but rather agonizes as to which one will be more pleasing to others. The dress's lace, rather than a means of concealment, serves as a gateway for physical intimacy.

Despite Ninon's best efforts at preserving her feminine appeal, her paranoia over its loss lies at the direct center of the poem: "are you sure my eyes are bright, / And is it true my cheek is clear?" (9-10). And despite her avowal that one of her suitors recently vowed to slit his throat if he could not be with her, she can only refer to him as "Young what's-his-name" (11), a clear

indication that her relationships with men have become superficial at best.

In spite of its lighthearted tone and alluring speaker, the poem seems to emphasize the strategies that women typically employ to fool themselves into thinking that youth and beauty automatically translate into a successful female life within patriarchal standards. Adrienne Rich refers to such strategies as the lies intended to fill the void inherent to womanhood. According to Rich, women “have been expected to lie with our bodies: to bleach, redden, unkink or curl our hair, pluck eyebrows, shave armpits, wear padding in various places or lace ourselves, take little steps, glaze finger and toe nails, wear clothes that emphasized our helplessness” (33). This objectification of the body, she maintains, has been employed for centuries as a means towards the “refutation of our experience and our instincts in a culture that validates only male experience” (35). That is to say that any accomplishments a woman may achieve outside of the realm of personal aesthetics or domestic comfort receive validation only once they are perceived and appreciated by men. Through her preoccupation with the objects associated with Ninon’s celebrated body, Parker personifies the struggle implicit in a woman’s relationship not only with the men in her life but with her own identity.

The fact that Ninon remains blissfully attached to her objects of ritual beauty points to the confusion Parker may have felt in perceiving that a woman of such similar tastes and accomplishments as herself had allowed her attractiveness to become validated only when appreciated by the male viewer. Though Ninon’s request for her powder-puff may, recalling the poem’s title, serve as a grisly foreshadowing of the natural pallor to come and the idea that her many efforts to preserve the beauty of her youth are ultimately futile, the poem’s final image of Ninon blithely stepping towards her young admirers in her “scarlet slippers” remains a testament to the bold and passionate spirits of both muse and poet and to the idea that it has remained Ninon’s choice to disguise her age with objects of adornment in order to maintain her

relationships with men who would otherwise have long ago discarded her in favor of a younger woman. Her scarlet slippers, then, represent her own fetishization of this object in terms of a female definition of talisman, or inanimate object granting the magical gift of eternal youth and vitality.

Objects as Disillusionment

While the previous three poems merely hint at an underlying twinge of discontent, the following selections provide direct criticisms of the inability of objects to serve as satisfactory and satisfying elements of a woman's life.

“The Red Dress”

One of the earliest entries in Sunset Gun, this poem begins with a childhood fantasy of owning “a gown of reddest red” (3) as tangible proof of having achieved adulthood. Though the color chosen is appropriate in its fiery boldness, the speaker seems to negate the potential for passion inherent in wearing such a dress when she imagines herself “walking, sleek and slow” (4). Such languorous action feels anti-climatic in response to gaining the long-anticipated prize of freedom; as she reveals that her goal in owning such a dress is for “one to see me so” (7), and she imagines that she will have found a man with the ability to “flip the world away” (8), she is actually mirroring herself within this slow-motion act of display wherein her world revolves around the male-viewer’s pleasure in watching the dress advance along the street.

This center image of the poem presents little alteration from the poems of idealized objects already mentioned. Her imaginary husband is nearly mannequin-like in his perfection, with “stars behind his eyes” (10) and “hair like metal in the sun” (11). Together, they embody the perfect marriage and social heights desired by many of Parker’s heroines. As the speaker reaches the zenith of her fantasy, seeing herself as “high honored in the town” (14), reality reasserts itself and the speaker reveals that she does, in actuality, already own “the silly gown” (16). The true disappointment within the poem is not that this woman’s fantasy has not come true, but that the dress itself is incapable of bringing about such an extraordinary transformation:

I always saw us, gay and good,

High honored in the town.

Now I am grown to womanhood...

I have the silly gown. (13-6)

The realization of the dress’s existence being separated from the body of the poem by the ellipses at the end of line 15 spotlights the speaker’s desire to separate herself from the dress, and

one can almost visualize her holding it from her at arm's length in a mocking display of the inadequacies of formerly idealized objects. Though she had attempted to infuse this dress with the magical capacity of ensuring an ideal relationship and domestic bliss, she ultimately realizes that it does not contain the transcendent power with which she had initially invested it. Rather, when she wears it she becomes objectified indefinitely by her desire for "one to see me so, / And flip the world away" (7-8). She is unable to emerge from behind the fetishized status of this dress as an appeal to the male-viewer.

"The Satin Dress"

Though Parker's common spotlight on the plight of lovesick or jilted women, recurrent throughout Enough Rope, may often appear flippant or facile to the casual reader, a closer glance at the body of her work reveals her starkly realistic sensibility of a woman's limits within her society, the unequal state of relationships between men and women, and the basic human emotions of desire, loneliness, and despair.

"The Satin Dress" provides a striking example of this realism. From the first stanza, the speaker is embroiled in the frustration of being torn between the value of her object and the attentions of the man it is supposed to attract:

Needle, needle, dip and dart,
Thrusting up and down,
Where's the man could ease a heart
Like a satin gown? (1-4)

Though the poem opens with strongly sexual connotations, "man" is quickly replaced by the more stable emotional support of a "satin gown." The elusiveness of masculine involvement within the text is echoed by the staccato movements of the needle as it "dips" and "darts" through the soft fabric. The result of this stitching is an almost serpentine depiction of the

dress's construction, which will serve as a vessel for the feminine fantasies associated with the wearing of such a dress, evoking the role and importance of "The Red Dress." The poem then continues to describe various other fabrics and the connotations ascribed to them; while brides wear organdy and old maids dress in gingham, for example, satin is reserved for the "free" (12), the "bold" (16) and, ironically, the "wiser folk" (19) who live in perpetual anticipation of a dress that is ultimately categorized by outside observers, with typical Parker melancholy, as "a fine shroud" (24). The gown that this poem's speaker had originally hoped would serve as a substitute for masculine affection, a luxurious suit of armor in which she could present herself as a strong and independent woman, can be attained only at the expense of life itself.

As the speaker of "The Satin Dress" is perceived to be voluntarily burying herself within her unattainable fantasy of a satin-clad, empowered persona, Parker's feminist tendencies emerge once again. As the appeal of this dress disintegrates by the final stanza, those who observe the dress arrive at the conclusion that death ought to be preferable to such an object-oriented existence. The idea is reminiscent of "Any Porch," wherein women were dismissed and denigrated for any attempt to step outside the boundaries of the male-fetishization of objects. Though wearing such a dress will inevitably lead to death, the fact that it was assembled and worn not to attract the attention of a male-viewer but to replace it is evidence of Parker's attempt to subvert the existing parameters of the object's value as commodity.

"Salomé's Dancing-Lesson"

Included in Death and Taxes, this poem is an interesting depiction of a young girl who is able to exert such influence over the men around her while still being subjected to commands issued on ways to appeal most sensually to the male-viewer. It is unclear from the title whether the famed biblical dancer is the one giving or receiving this lesson, yet the message she is imparting leaves the reader with the impression that Salomé's true talent lies in her ability to discern the superficiality of her object-oriented circumstances.

The structure of the verses, which places the actual dance lesson in parentheses, presents each command as an idea that is repeated until it echoes through the subconscious, offering proof that a woman is always meant to be conscious of her role, even deep within her psyche. Yet this particular woman, who is a princess and capable of demanding "costly things" (5), maintains that "jewels tarnish" (14) and "veils are woven to be dropped" (17). Those objects meant to adorn the female body are relegated to inconsequential distractions, designed to please those who are witnessing the dance, not performing it. Yet it is the "young and cool" (21) female body that has no need of these lessons, signaling the speaker's attitude that youth is the most highly-prized commodity in the social exchange between men and women.

Female Body as Objects

As Cathy E. Fagan argues, Parker often "explored the female quest for power and the price such acquisition exacts. [Her] female protagonists try to be the passive adornments of the men they can 'access.'" (231). Fagan reaches the unhappy conclusion that these women inevitably "become bitter and confused in their relationships, fall into physical and mental decay, and ultimately become suicidal rejects of the gender system they cannot live within or without" (ibid). The following poems address women who either attempt, unsuccessfully, to objectify themselves in order to fit more securely within male parameters, or find themselves forced within such objectification as a result of straying too far from their expected social behavior.

“Iseult of Brittany”

This poem, included in Death and Taxes, provides perhaps the most obvious association of the female body with a represented object. The eponymous heroine, also known as Iseult of the White Hands, was the unhappy wife of Sir Tristan, who was in love with a different woman of the same name, Iseult the Fair. According to medieval legend, as retold by Joseph Bédier, Tristan and Iseult the Fair fall in love due to a powerful enchantment that had been intended for Iseult the Fair to share with her betrothed, King Mark of Cornwall. Tristan’s knightly honor forces him to leave Cornwall and, after wandering in the forest for two years, he engages himself to defend the pillaged lands of Duke Hoël. Having successfully done so, Tristan marries Hoël’s daughter, Iseult of the White Hands, though he asks that they do not become lovers for one year, under the pretense of having made a vow of chastity to the Virgin Mother. Eventually learning the truth of Tristan’s love for Iseult the Fair, the poem’s speaker has her revenge by lying to her husband and watching him die before he can be reunited with his true love.

Renowned for the beauty of her white hands, Parker’s Iseult of Brittany is lamenting the fact that she is unable to use them to win Tristan’s love for herself:

Too frail to cup a heart within,
Too soft to hold the free –
How long these lovely hands have been
A bitterness to me! (5-8)

As Ruthmarie H. Mitsch observes, “As in most of Parker’s works, there is here a pessimism with bite just beneath the polite surface” (39). Mitsch relates Iseult’s comparison of her hands to a cup as a reminder of the chalice containing the potion that had bound Tristan and Iseult the Fair, “taking away all free will, so that Tristan is not ‘free’ to love his wife” (ibid). In objectifying her

own hands within the function of a cup, Iseult of Brittany aggrandizes her perceived failures as a woman; though the “delicate” (1) appearance of her hands had once been her source of value, she discovers that being “too frail”(5) or “too soft” (6) is ultimately a liability that she cannot endure. Her resulting revenge likewise ends in failure, and Bédier’s final description finds her “crouched, maddened at the evil she had done, and calling and lamenting over the dead man” (189). Parker’s poem hints at this tragic decline of the speaker. In perceiving herself incapable of using her hands as an object, Iseult finally declares them a “bitterness” (8). Iseult’s white hands, though desirable objects, are unable to increase her power over Tristan; by acknowledging her objectified status, Iseult realizes the extent to which her body as objectified commodity has failed her.

Mitsch argues that “This bitterness that eats away at Iseult of Brittany will soon devour her conscience, pushing her to a definitive vengeance, whose threat we sense behind the lilt of the poem” (39). This interpretation is reminiscent of the stanza of Parker’s poem “Any Porch” wherein a female speaker dismisses the idea that she may have psychic abilities and refuses to acknowledge that her mind may contribute to establishing her social identity. Likewise, Iseult of Brittany trades her conscience and eventually her sanity for the temporary satisfaction of revenge against the man who had failed to devote himself to the quintessentially feminine beauty of her hands. Her desire to objectify her hands as a female embodiment of a cup is intended as a means of safeguarding her security within the marriage, yet it is Iseult of Brittany herself who becomes objectified within the confines of her hands. As Parker’s poem ends, Iseult remains in constant contemplation of her hands and “how long” (7) it has been since they became a valueless commodity.

“News Item”

The shortest entry in Enough Rope, this poem first appeared in The Conning Tower and quickly became one of Parker’s most oft-quoted witticisms, its fame eventually superceding that of its author. Marion Meade notes that “Those nine words seemed quite innocuous to her at the time. Later, to her utter amazement, it would be ‘News Item’ that people remembered while they forgot or ignored or never knew any of her other work, and she cursed the impulse that ever led her to republish it” (170). These sentiments seem almost karmic, considering the message that is relayed so breezily in the poem’s two lines:

Men seldom make passes
At girls who wear glasses.

Just as these girls become invisible behind their eyewear, so is Parker rendered secondary to the poem itself.

Ellen Pollack argues that, “According to Parker’s epigrammatic logic, the girl who wears glasses becomes an intellectual woman but thereby loses her girlish sex appeal” (215), a formula that she then applies to Parker herself in her capacity as a female critic. Pollack deems that Parker’s brutal evaluation of Yale Professor William Lyon Phelps’s book Happiness causes her to assume “a spectatorial stance that paradoxically ‘womanizes’ and desexualizes her” (ibid). Pollack’s insight provides an interesting framework by which to evaluate Parker’s own “News Item,” in that Parker’s intellectual pursuits, which were used to engage in entrepreneurial commerce (she sold the reviews to various publications after all), were simultaneously used to minimize her feminine credibility and to strip Parker of her physical female identity.

As “News Item” seems to imply, for a woman to wear eyeglasses and to assume a “spectatorial stance,” she also loses her marketability as a woman. In capitalistic terms, such a woman has failed to preserve herself as a valued commodity within her social structure. As

Marx explains in the first volume of Capital, “There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (777). He elaborates on this idea in terms of the relation between commodity and society, arguing that “Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange-values” (783). A man’s refusal to “make passes” at a woman wearing glasses leads to the assumption that these glasses are the only feature of her appearance that men are able to distinguish when gazing at her. This woman has then *become* the object she is wearing and, as eyeglasses are desexualizing, she has lost her exchange value as a commodity.

The social relation implied is that such an object is considered appealing only when worn by men. As Parker implies in her poem “Men: A Hate Song,” men have become accustomed to see life “as through shell-rimmed glasses” (3) and thus have assumed the responsibility to “look at a woman languorously, through half-closed eyes, / And tell her, in low, passionate tones, / What she ought to wear” (41-3). While seeing the world through his specifically-engineered viewpoint, a man is in full control of the way a woman should appear to him. When a woman dons a pair of glasses and attempts to achieve her own improved vision of the world, a man gazing at her finds himself confronted by his “exhibitionist like” (Mulvey) and the castration complex becomes prominent in his mind. In refusing to acknowledge any commodity value to a woman wearing glasses, a man is able to then continue his control as male-viewer over not only the idealized appearance of the female gender but also her ability to clearly see the world around her.

“Interior”

In this selection from Sunset Gun, a woman’s mind is described as being housed within

“a quiet room, / A narrow room, and tall” (1-2). Accepting this metaphor, then the “quiet room” translates as this woman’s body, and a mental image begins to form of a tall, thin girl with eyes that shine like “pretty lamps” (3) and designer clothes whose labels are “mottoes on the wall” (4). The image is expanded upon only in order to emphasize how decorous, tidy, and sweet such living space is. In essence, this girl’s mind has become an advertisement for the woman who “lives tidily, apart” (9), according to the traditional domestic role assigned women of the day.

Yet this woman has truly become objectified within this physical prison, as it is revealed in the final two lines that her mind has bolted “the door against her heart, / Out wailing in the rain” (11-12). Similar to the speaker in “Day-Dreams,” this woman has become imprisoned within this aesthetically pleasing yet ultimately hollow home wherein her heart, the source of her passion, desire, and emotion, is given no opportunity to exert influence over her mind.

SHORT STORIES

Like her poems, Dorothy Parker’s short stories are strongly feminine in content and context, yet are dominated by sentiments of a discontented acquiescence. The majority of Parker’s heroines are placed within traditional female roles (wife, girlfriend, secretary), which leaves them feeling overwhelmingly malcontent. As Sondra Melzer aptly points out:

Indeed, all of the stories deal with issues that at their core are concerned ultimately with the way in which men and women struggle, and in most cases fail in their relationships....However, we see in some cases that...these women characters gradually recognize the constraints on their lives and the roles they have assumed in their relationships, and are struggling in their own way to come to terms with this awareness. (5-6)

Though this struggle is typically left unresolved by story’s end, Parker’s focus on the undercurrent of malaise in her heroines’ attitudes is especially intriguing in that it lends a heightened awareness and significance to the mundane, everyday objects found within a

woman's world.

In "Here We Are," the strain of a newlywed couple's relationship is magnified in their discussion over her old blue hat. In "The Lovely Leave," a wartime wife who is desperately trying to gain her visiting husband's attention finds herself upstaged by a bathtub, the buttons on her husband's uniform, and her own little black dress. In "A Telephone Call," a woman waiting for her lover to contact her alternately pleads and threatens her telephone to ring. And in "The Garter," Parker represents herself as a woman who becomes completely incapacitated when her garter breaks during a fancy party. These are just a few of the many examples within Parker's short stories where everyday objects are aggrandized in order to reinforce the reader's awareness of the disparity between the genders and their relation to material things. Male and female reactions to these various objects are fundamentally different in Parker's stories; while the men tend to view objects in simple terms of appearance or purpose, the women tend toward a more pointed significance wherein the objects are directly linked to themselves. That is to say that the heroines see their personal value correspond to the way the objects around them are perceived by their male counterparts, which usually leaves these women feeling either unsatisfied or deceived.

"Here We Are"

This story, first published in the March 1931 issue of Cosmopolitan, records the conversation of a pair of newlyweds as they travel by train towards their honeymoon, barely three hours after their wedding ceremony. The words of the title, scattered plentifully throughout their conversation, express their nervous astonishment at finally being married, a naïveté that Parker exploits by focusing the majority of her descriptions as well as the couple's dialogue on the various objects with which they come into contact.

The groom, dressed in a new suit, is introduced as overly fastidious, spending an unusual amount of time and "concentrated care" on "the settling of two suitcases, and a hat-box" in the

rattling overhead compartment (136). His bride is literally a walking price tag (the tag is still glued to her shoe's sole), and "her hat, her fur, her frock, her gloves were glossy and stiff with novelty" (ibid). The amount of detail used to describe the objects that preoccupy the couple underscores the fact that personal communication between the pair has been preempted by the awkward carefulness usually attached to new possessions. As they try to adjust to the idea of being married, they find themselves having to relearn certain behaviors that had once been second-nature. As the young husband studies "his wrist-watch as if he were just acquiring the knack of reading time" (136), his wife sighs over the fact that their wedding day had become "so mixed up, I sort of don't know where I am, or what it's all about...[C]hanging all my clothes, and then everybody throwing things, and all. Goodness, I don't see how people do it every day" (137). Their attempts at adjustment begin to play themselves out in a conversation that, fittingly enough, revolves around yet another material object: the young bride's new hat.

Spurred by jealousy over her husband's compliments towards one of her bridesmaids, the young wife fixates on what she perceives as his slight of her sister, another member of the wedding party. As she extends this slight into a rejection of her entire family, her husband attempts to curtail her misdirected reasoning by saying, "you're just feeling sort of nervous" (139) and advises her to take off her hat in order to become more comfortable. Though she does admit that "this darned old hat...kind of presses" (ibid), she asks her husband's opinion towards its attractiveness. He likes it, though not as much as an inexpensive hat she used to wear, prompting another disproportionate and highly emotional response from his wife. The rest of the story details his attempts to placate her and to garner more enthusiasm from her over their fast-approaching honeymoon.

The bride's fixation on her hat can therefore be construed as her means of diverting her husband's attention from the impending honeymoon which, due to her constant refusal to

acknowledge it, seems destined to fail along with their marriage. Ross Labrie writes that, “Although a feminist all her life, Dorothy Parker portrayed women as not only victims of an insensitive and predatory male sex, but, inasmuch as women welcome the roles which society has ordained for them, as gullible destroyers of themselves” (52). He groups this story’s bride along with several other of Parker’s heroines whose descriptions are “tightly bound through the underlying image of the show horse” (49). That is to say that Parker may have viewed the bride in “Here We Are” as eager to dress the part of whatever role she was expected to play within their society yet naïvely ignorant of the underlying expectations that accompany her new hat. She sees herself as victim to her husband’s wandering attention as he praises an old, retired hat as well as another woman’s appearance, thereby causing her to view her new hat as an ineffectual object or, in other words, as an illustration of her own undesirability as a married and therefore sexual woman. As a result, she attempts to redirect the objectification of her hat and utilize the argument it provokes to create a distance between her husband and herself that discourages physical intimacy.

Their exchange over this hat, exaggerating the woman’s passionate assumptions and the man’s puzzled attempts to comprehend her anger, provides an excellent example of Parker’s dexterity in showcasing the unspoken rules of gender conduct as they are represented in the treatment of material objects. Prized by its wearer not because it is comfortable or overly flattering but because it “cost twenty-two dollars” (139), this hat seems to serve as a modern version of a dowry – proof that the young wife is dressing the part of a highly-lucrative commodity within this marriage. As the wife considers herself to have correctly assumed this role, her husband’s inability to express his admiration for the hat serves as an indication that this marriage is doomed to fail, especially given what she considers “such a bad start” (143). The husband’s desperate attempts to find the correct words to express adequate appreciation for the

hat, however, lead the couple back to the uncommunicative language of the beginning of the story. Though he has progressed from “I do so like it!” to “Why, I love that hat!” until finally declaring, “I love the damned hat...I’m crazy for it” (ibid), his wife remains unconvinced. As he declares that “Here we are married! Here we are,” she responds with a question: “Yes, here we are...Aren’t we?” (ibid). The ambiguous effect of such a resolution leads the reader to an assumption that the language barrier and a lack of shared values reflected in their discussion of a hat may, in fact, be fundamentally unresolvable.

“A Telephone Call”

First appearing in The Bookman in 1928, this story’s heroine is one of Parker’s most disillusioned. Written as the interior monologue of a woman who is desperate for her inattentive lover to telephone her and thereby dependent upon the telephone itself, the story follows this heroine’s progression from amusing anxiety to desperate pleading.

The majority of this woman’s pleas are directed at God, a presence that she depends on yet is in constant fear of offending. As God continually fails to answer her impassioned prayers, she narrows her focus at one point to the telephone itself. She personifies the telephone on two levels: one, into a powerful entity that is equally capable as God to grant her desire; and two, as another perceived opponent to her happiness at which she is able to lash out unharmed with the fury that has resulted from her feelings of inferiority and futility. In demanding of the telephone, “Couldn’t you ring? Ah, please, couldn’t you?” (82), she is giving voice to the question that she feels forbidden to ask her lover. The telephone is meant to serve as ambassador between the couple, providing the medium for them to successfully communicate with each other. Unable to bear the hellish reality of its silence, she imagines a demonic quality to the physical appearance of the telephone, giving some measure of justification to her violent reaction as she confronts the “damned, ugly, shiny thing” and charges, “It would hurt you to ring, wouldn’t it? Oh, that would

hurt you. Damn you, I'll pull your filthy roots out of the wall, I'll smash your smug black face in little bits. Damn you to hell" (ibid). As she recovers from the force of her hysterical, threatened reaction, she tries to revert back to the "sweet" person she used to be, imagining that she can do so simply by moving "the clock to the other room" (ibid). The two objects, then, become linked in her bid to remedy her lover's silence; as long as the temporal reality of the situation is removed, the telephone is transformed from an object that has not yet performed its function to one that may still do so at any moment, and the violence she has just expressed towards the telephone is replaced by the former image of "the way I was when I first met him" (ibid).

In his poem "the telephone," Charles Bukowski offers a masculine interpretation of the female devotion to this particular object, describing it as "their manner of / measuring where they / are or are not" (6-9). Observing his wife speaking for hours to "one of her / gender" (25-6), he describes these telephone conversations as the forum in which women are able to "speak of / real and imagined / injustice, / they let loose their / poison, they justify their / beliefs and positions" (16-23). He demonstrates little awareness of what these beliefs or positions may be, and does not seem particularly inclined to inquire further; rather, he distances himself from the entire practice in deeming himself merely the pitiable man who "has to pay the phone bill" (43). Though he concedes that problems "with men" (13) are often the catalysts of such impassioned telephone conversations made by women, his association with the object itself is purely practical and impersonal. In terms of commodity value, the fact that the male speaker reveals himself as the one paying the bill and therefore worthy of pity since his wife is creating a financial burden for him provides the most interesting element of comparison with Parker's story. As the masculine provider for the household, the male speaker of Bukowski's poem would appear to prefer maintaining the telephone's silence – or rather, distancing his wife from the object through which she communicates her emotional dissatisfaction with the state of society she finds

herself in.

In contrast, Parker's speaker is directing her highly personalized and emotional demonstrations against the phone itself and is met with the object's infuriatingly "smug" silence. Her desire to achieve communication via this particular object having met with such disillusioning failure, she becomes even more enslaved by the personification of the objects around her, deciding that she will count to "five hundred by fives" and "If he hasn't telephoned me then, I'll call him" (85). The reality of the situation is adjusted so that she becomes her own clock, and the story ends with her rhythmic counting: "five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five..." (ibid). As the ellipses give way to the blank page of the text, the reader is left facing the empty futility inherent in this woman's doomed dependance on her silent telephone.

Sondra Melzer describes this story as "a female response to the demands of a male-identified social context; the speaker's passivity, accommodation, and frustration are the expected characteristics of her role" (53). The speaker cannot rebel against the two masculine entities in the text, God and her lover; therefore, her only option is to rebel against the very object that has proved itself so ineffective as a means to promote a successful relationship. Melzer continues to argue that "The reader who probes deeply discovers beneath the surface humor, the contemptuous despair of a woman who finally defines herself and her relationship with her man in terms of disappointment, rejection, guilt, and humiliation. Behind the parody of social behavior, there is a sentient being suffering slowly and alone for her 'sins' as a woman" (63). The primary sin committed by this woman appears to have been her threatened destruction of the telephone itself, the symbol of her dependance on the man who must remain in control of when and how the speaker may communicate with him. The masculine version of fetish remains true for this object, which has completely overwhelmed this woman's individuality, forcing her

into an automatic recitation of the number of seconds she must endure before the validating male gaze falls once more upon her, allowing her to resume her normal life.

“The Lovely Leave”

Published in 1943 at the height of American involvement in World War II, this story’s heroine, Mimi McVicker, has voluntarily isolated herself from normal human companionship for as long as her husband is away at war. To substitute, Mimi becomes preoccupied with the objects around her that she hopes will serve to reunite her with the man who, in his capacity as a uniformed lieutenant, feels more like a stranger to her than a spouse.

The emotional as well as physical separation between this couple is made apparent from the beginning of the story. When Steve calls to let his wife know that he will be coming home on a 24-hour leave, she hears the voices of other pilots in the background demanding the phone; Steve defers to them despite his wife’s wish to talk longer. She resents these “wild young voices...voices of those who shared his new life” (275). Her husband now has two identities, while she remains tethered to the home and the domestic identity as wife that she has fruitlessly continued to maintain for him. Sheila Ruth rationalizes Mimi’s resentment over her situation with the theory that, “Women are expected to serve men physically, taking care of their homes, property, clothing, or persons...Men are freed to spend their time on socially valued activities for which they receive all kinds of material and psychological rewards” (Ruth 86). The fact that Steve is absent from the home does not change the fact that Mimi feels programmed to perform such tasks regardless.

The “great blank distance” (ibid) that has grown between Mimi and Steve manifests itself to her in the telephone that she is cradling, “looking at it as if all frustrations and bewilderments and separations were its fault” (ibid), before dropping the receiver in disgust. As she continues to objectify her disappointment in her husband’s inaccessibility by way of the telephone call,

Mimi realizes that she is joining the ranks of that “dismal league” (ibid) of women who become overly sensitive to any perceived slight or unhappiness and then revel in their own malcontent. When she refuses to subjugate herself within such melancholy, her attitude towards the telephone shifts dramatically and she praises it as the “kind, faithful telephone that had brought her the lovely news” (Parker 276).

As she ruminates over her husband’s approaching visit, time itself develops an material quality, visualized as “a thin little row of hours dropping off like beads from a broken string” (277). The anticipated day grows in value until it resembles a shiny gold coin, and the sense of responsibility Mimi feels to fashion it into a cherished memory becomes all-consuming and, ironically, rather regimented.

Her preparations are described in a way that is reminiscent of the instructions one might find in a women’s magazine to care for a delicate garment. The garments she purchases for herself, while being more than she can afford, are deemed essential in order for her to properly adorn herself for her husband. Her nightgown, “a delightful thing of soft chiffon patterned with little bouquets, with innocent puffs of sleeves and Romney neck and blue sash” (278) is oddly reminiscent of the dress worn by the speaker in “Afternoon.” The sprigged pattern is replaced in this version with small bouquets, perhaps an allusion to her wedding. The fact that this gown “could never withstand laundering” (ibid) signifies that, unlike the poem’s dress, this garment is reserved for youth and passion, and that wearing it is a temporary pleasure. To protect it, Mimi hurries home to “fold it in a satin sachet” (ibid), a reminder of the fabric so explicitly described in “The Satin Dress.” Just as the poem’s speaker finds herself disillusioned by the outcome of her dress/man, Mimi finds herself lacking the bold nature associated with such fabric. Though she tries to wrap herself in seductive materiality, just as her nightgown is luxuriously wrapped in its satin sachet, the seduction itself remains an unrealized fantasy, and the gown remains folded

within its box.

In preparing their home for her husband's visit, Mimi further destroys her budget by shopping for perfume, bath oil, cocktail ingredients, salted biscuits, six pots of fuchsias, and the most current magazines. Though some of these items are superfluous purchases, "it made her feel desired and secure to have rich new stores of them" (278). Frustrated by her husband's absence and apparent unconcern, these objects serve as substitutes for his attention. In this regard, Mimi is inadvertently subjugating herself once more to the role of the lonely, discontented wife that she has already tried to reject by playing the part of the overzealous consumer trying to fill a void with fuchsias and biscuits.

As the evening of Steve's visit arrives, the more authentic Mimi appears to have disappeared even further into her mental image of how a better wife would make these hours play themselves out. Putting on the black dress, she sees herself as "a chic unknown, the details of whose costume she sought to memorize" (279). Despite her meticulous preparations, she remains paralyzed with shyness when she hears the doorbell ring. To compensate, she uses her perfume bottle to create a vaporous bubble in which she would like to be able to hide from the reality of the moment. Though the gathered objects have been carefully chosen to attract the attention of her husband, Mimi becomes a victim of the fragility and ultimate anonymity inherent to a world constructed around material details.

As Steve focuses on various neutral objects such as the chair he is sitting in or the bathtub he is longing to stretch out in, Mimi tries to bring his attention back to the two of them. When she asks if he admires her new black dress, his reply is reminiscent of the young husband in "Here We Are" who cannot distinguish one article of woman's clothing from another. While Mimi fumes against his shortsightedness, Steve finds himself in the predicament described by Cathy E. Fagan wherein "Puzzled men wondered what was wrong, while women raged silently

at an enemy they could not, dared not name and searched in vain for a way to possess the power they glimpsed but still could not own” (Fagan 236-37). The power in this relationship remains in Steve’s grasp as he steadfastly focuses on his bath, a magazine he wishes to read, and the belt buckle of his uniform. As these objects take precedence over the objects Mimi has gathered, the distance between him and his wife increases. Mimi realizes that her feminine objects have provided nothing but disillusionment and are now “too present, too insistent” (Parker 284). These items that have become part of Mimi’s fantasy have ultimately become nothing but stark reminders of the harsh reality facing a woman who had identified herself too closely with material objects, believing that they will provide the allure and sparkle that she cannot locate within herself. Rather than serving to empower Mimi, the objects further disempower her in her relationship with Steve. In addition to losing their value as commodities and failing to enhance Mimi’s sexual appeal, the objects themselves become symbols of Mimi’s waning identity as a woman of social value.

“The Garter”

As the previous stories have demonstrated the familiar themes of objects serving in the context of idealization and disillusionment, this final story provides a distressingly realistic approach to the idea of a woman’s body actually being appropriated by a particular object. Published in The New Yorker in 1928, “The Garter” is one of Parker’s personalized monologues in which she herself is the protagonist. From the opening line, “There it goes!” (99) to the closing one, “[W]hat would you do if you were I, and...” (101), there is a loss of fundamental control present throughout the story. Feeling her garter break yet powerless to remedy the situation, Parker describes her reactions in such a way as suggests that she has lost control of her own identity and appropriated the characteristics of the garter itself.

Without her garter firmly attached as it should be, Parker describes herself as unable to

function within “a room full of strangers” (99). She longs for “the perfumed sanctity of my boudoir” or “the dressing room forty yards away” (ibid). In these strictly feminine domains, she would have the ability to remedy her own situation and reemerge as the confident woman she normally presents herself as. Ironically, it is her femininity that prevents her from expressing “the thoughts that arise in me,” which would be so violent as to “have this room emptied in thirty seconds, flat” (ibid). Due to the constraints of her gender, she is prohibited from both language and action, forced to remain “cornered, like a frightened rat” (ibid).

Her one consolation is that she is sitting down when the garter breaks, so the world does not witness her tragic circumstance. It is in this image that the qualities of Parker and the garter seem to begin merging. Just as the garter has slid down her leg, so does she perceive herself as having slid “the depths to which a human being can sink” (ibid). In her humiliation, she becomes firmly fastened to her chair and is now the one who is physically “holding my stocking up” (100).

Unable to abandon her post, as the garter has abandoned its own, Parker’s personality begins to evaporate. Afraid to meet new acquaintances since they will likely “try to shake hands with me,” she imagines that those observing her will begin to remark that, “She’s terrible...Sits in a corner and sulks all evening – never opens her yap” (101). When a gentleman begins to approach her, she realizes that she cannot escape him as she has become as non-functioning as the garter itself. As she speculates whether he would be understanding enough to assist her, or if he is the type who would become disinterested by the mention of “Real Things, Things that Matter” (ibid), she decides to appeal to his sensitivity towards the female gender, assuming that “he’s got a sister or a mother or something” (ibid). Being a “Real Thing” herself at this moment, the animated version of a garter, she calls out to him from her sustained perch on her chair and asks him what he would do “if you were I” (ibid).

The fact that the story ends at this point leaves the reader with an overwhelming curiosity as to what this man's response would have been. Regardless of what assistance he may actually have provided Parker to remedy her situation, the question remains as to what the male response would be when an object becomes dysfunctional and therefore unable to maintain the fetishized appearance of the female form desired by the male-viewer. The female response, as Parker has demonstrated, is to aggrandize said object into a physical quality, causing its absence to affect both physical and mental freedom. She provides in this story, as in her previously mentioned works, a rather disheartening view of the limitations placed upon women who function so completely within a material world.

At the same time, it is this story that is perhaps the most illustrative of the theories that have been discussed throughout this study. It is exclusively in "The Garter" and one other autobiographical monologue, "But the One on the Right," that Parker "explicitly names herself as the protagonist" (Helal 77). By 1928 when "The Garter" was first published, Parker had been accustomed to having both her work and her personal identity scrutinized by the public. This emerging literary celebrity, as Kathleen M. Helal points out, forced Parker to address "not only the star image of her created by her fame, but also a cultural definition of femininity that could not explain her masculine characteristics" (78). The "bad boy" image Parker had garnered for herself at the Algonquin Round Table is alluded to in "The Garter" as she speculates on the words she could utter in order to empty the room and provide her a clear path to the restroom; however, her feminine instincts of decorous martyrdom curb her tongue. Instead, she remains seated and speculates that "Love and fame will pass me by, and I shall never know the sacred, awful joy of holding a tiny, warm body in my grateful arms. I may not set down imperishable words for posterity to marvel over; there will be for me nor travel nor riches nor wise, new friends, nor glittering adventure, nor the sweet fruition of my gracious womanhood. Ah, hell"

(Parker 99-100). The masculine benefits she has appropriated by being a famed writer would allow her to exit the domestic sphere in order to enjoy grand adventures abroad, yet the pleasure of this thought is consistently juxtaposed in her mind with the more traditional, feminine joys of motherhood.

Interestingly enough, it is fact that her garter has broken and is chaining her to an inert position that is causing such speculations to run through her mind. As Helal argues, “the ‘phenomenon of Dorothy Parker’ is also part of a larger shift in American culture from older social hierarchies based on wealth and political power to a new hierarchy based on image” (Helal 79). Though Parker dressed like a woman, her writing assumed the “bad boy” attitude of a man’s work, and she was accorded her celebrity status as a result of this fact. However, in “The Garter,” she is portraying herself as no more independent of the masculine fixation on fetishized objects than any of her heroines. As her garter falls to her knees, so does Parker’s celebrated image of herself as a more worldly woman than her contemporaries. In this monologue, she assumes the identity of her object and, in so doing, relegates herself to the status of objectified female whose identity becomes secondary to the object that was once in her possession but is now possessing her.

However, it is in the final line of “The Garter” when Parker asks the male passerby what his reaction to a similar situation would be that she attempts to regain her feminist posture against such objectification. Rather than asking this to rescue her from her predicament, Parker wants him to reveal what the masculine reaction to such a situation would be. In asking for a male perspective of a failed garter, she is forcing him to close the gap between spectacle and narrative and finally feel that similitude with the female figure that causes the male-viewer to experience the anxiety of a castration complex. The ability for a male-viewer to fetishize such object would then become endangered, and the objectified woman would be able to step out

from behind said object's shadow and experience life to the fullest of her capabilities as an individual.

CONCLUSION

Nearly fifty years after Parker's "Any Porch" was first published, Betty Friedan began to publish portions of her own feminist manifesto, The Feminine Mystique, in two of the magazines that had consistently published Parker's work: McCall's, and Ladies Home Journal. Considered revolutionary in the 1960's, Friedan's sentiments were strikingly similar to those expressed in Parker's work. Remarking on the limited subject matter of McCall's, for example, Friedan quotes the opinion of one of the magazine's male writers who argued that "Our readers are housewives, full time. They're not interested in the broad public issues of the day. They are not interested in national or international affairs. They are only interested in the family and the home" (qtd. in Friedan 37). Friedan describes herself as listening to this conversation with one ear while the slogan "*Kinder, Kuche, Kirche*" echoed through her mind, a perceived reemergence of the Nazi campaign to limit a woman's social roles according to her biology.

Friedan's response was to argue in The Feminine Mystique that "This was America. The whole world lies open to American women. Why, then, does the image deny the world? Why does it limit women to 'one passion, one role, one occupation?'...[W]hen did women decide to give up the world and go back home" (ibid). What seems most disturbing to Friedan is the idea that even as women were gaining the opportunity to pursue certain lifestyles that had formerly been available only to men, they remained unaware of their own potential, viewing themselves as "childlike, nonassertive, helpless without a man" (Bordo 2367). Such women were therefore voluntarily choosing to restrict their activities and interests to that domestic sphere that had held previous generations of American women captive.

Dorothy Parker's writing illuminates her as a strikingly similar, though much more

caustic, forebear of Betty Friedan's, and a shared frustration over her own female contemporaries' disinclination to disentangle themselves from the constraints of a limited social value is evident in her poems and short stories. Though she wrote primarily about women and the traditional roles laid out for them, Parker's work is, in itself, indicative of the fact that she was not so strictly bound by the limitations of her gender. In illustrating her heroines' disillusionment via the objects surrounding them, Parker became a pioneer of the feminist critique that would eventually be upheld by Betty Friedan and subsequent feminist theorists. Dorothy Parker's literary endeavors provided a means of self-enlightenment and an introduction to consciousness raising. By reading Parker, more women of her generation could begin to recognize that they were not bound to live secondarily to the pleasure-viewing of others but rather could reinvent the definitions and recast the value of such objects as a means of enhancing their own individuality.

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