To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Ronald R. Allen, Jr., entitled "'This Living, This Living, This Living': Theme and Style in Dorothy Parker." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Lori Hall Burghardt

Lori Hall Burghardt, Major Professor

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"THIS LIVING, THIS LIVING, THIS LIVING": THEME AND STYLE IN DOROTHY PARKER

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

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Ronald R. Allen, Jr.

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ABSTRACT

Dorothy Parker, although a widely read author, has suffered critical neglect. A consideration of her poems and stories reveals two major recurrent themes. The first is one of criticism of all sorts of pretension and hypocrisy. The second theme is of the futility, often attributable to the roles women are forced to play, of romantic relationships and marriage in our society. Parker's style in poetry and prose is perhaps the clearest hallmark of her work. Her prose shows an extraordinary economy of expression, and in her poetry Parker masterfully manipulates lexicon, form, and meter to achieve her witty and irreverent effect even in the face of her typically somber themes.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The United States, somewhat against their will, saw the modern era arrive after World War I, and Dorothy Parker, "the wittiest woman in America,"[1] was in the foremost rank of its ushers. The war "to make the world safe for democracy," the war to end all wars, had been fought and won. Americans could rejoice; they did not know the devastation which had been visited upon Europe. Deep-seated American isolationism had been moved to action only as a result of direct attack on Americans; thus, by the time that the United States entered the war most of the killing was already done. After the jubilation of the Armistice, the old prejudices and fears took control anew. Wilson, hailed as a Savior in Paris, felt himself returning to unsympathetic Jerusalem as he set off on a suicidal whistle-stop tour across the country to plead for implementation of the Fourteen Points, the ratification of the League of Nations charter.[2] But it was to Lodge and Vandenberg and their warnings of involvement abroad that the American people listened. Wilson, broken and defeated, was succeeded by Warren Gamaliel Harding,

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[1]See Joseph Epstein, rev. of You Might As Well Live, by John Keats, Commentary, 51 (1971), 96; William Rose Benet, rev. of Not So Deep As a Well, by Dorothy Parker, Saturday Review, 15 (1936), 5.

[2]See Arthur V. Link, Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); Sigmund Freud and William C. Bullitt, Thomas Woodrow Wilson: A Psychological Study (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), p. 284.

a small town Republican newspaper publisher from Ohio who promised and who himself represented a "return to normalcy" to an American people longing to go back to its less complicated prewar life.

Harding, propelled into office by his good looks and his treacly oratory extolling good old-fashioned American values, surrounded himself with cronies and took a lover with whom he found time to share White House coat closet trysts. Only after his sudden death in office did it become apparent that he, like the America he represented so well, was less circumspect than the stolid, comfortable appearance suggested: the Teapot Dome scandal broke, and his paramour wrote a book which managed to pack most of its content into its title: The President's Daughter, Revealing the Love-Secret of President Harding[3] (as Dorothy Parker remarked, the author was "one who kissed, among other things, and tells"[4]).

The genial Harding was succeeded by Calvin Coolidge, whose no-nonsense Vermont taciturnity dovetailed with America's desire to return to a more innocent day. Coolidge took daily afternoon naps and was the only President who was able to save money on his salary. The bland Coolidge, although not personally like Harding, was like him a reassuring White House symbol that times had not changed at all; there might be an occasional flapper or shiek on the loose, but good gray men were at the country's helm. Upon hearing a public announcement

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[3]Nan Britton, The President's Daughter, Revealing the Love-Secret of President Harding (New York: The Elizabeth Ann Guild, 1927).

[4]Dorothy Parker, The Portable Dorothy Parker (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 453 (hereinafter cited as "Parker").

of the death of Coolidge, Parker turned to her companion and asked, in gentle surprise, "How could they tell?"[5]

Dorothy Parker, with such remarks as this disarmingly hilarious comment on the death of the soporific Coolidge, achieved her first fame as a member of a devil-may-care new generation of Americans to whom little was sacred and all lent itself to irreverence, a new generation of whom Harding and Coolidge were in no sense symbolic. As much as anyone, Parker represented the new wave. A woman, she dared not only to pursue a living based upon her talent, but to do so openly. She held little but contempt for the sentimental cliches which were passed off as popular literature. She associated herself with other people like herself—bright, witty, putting up at least a front of gay indifference.

Although there are few who can recall the time when the latest Dorothy Parker quip was likely to be on the tip of every tongue, Parker is still remembered as a wit. A legend surrounds her. Yet it is just that, a legend, and the flame of legends must cool when there is no additional fuel to be added to the fire. It is unlikely that a few historic bons mots, however choice, would suffice for a continued reputation.

It is on her literary output that Parker's reputation must ultimately rest. That output was not large; nearly all the pieces are

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[5]John Keats, You Might As Well Live: The Life and Times of Dorothy Parker (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 10 (hereinafter cited as "Keats").

collected in the Viking Portable Dorothy Parker.[6] Yet Parker appears regularly in anthologies, and, of the first ten Portables published during the forties (there have now been over seventy-five), only Shakespeare, the Bible, and Dorothy Parker have remained continuously in print.[7]

Oddly, however, Parker's popularity with the public has not seen a corresponding critical interest in her work. Perhaps serious critics have taken themselves too seriously to deign to consider the work of a woman who is after all, well, popular. One does not write articles about Fannie Hurst; one does not write articles about Barbara Cartland; one does not write articles about Dorothy Parker. With a resentment and bitterness that grew as she aged, Parker watched her work be dismissed as merely that of a well-known wit who, in something of an intellectual curiosity, wrote on the side. Perpetuating this view of Parker, the only major published work dealing with her is a 1970 biography, You Might As Well Live.[8] John Keats, the author, is long on hearsay and short on sources; the book is written without textual references. No scholarly considerations of Parker's work are listed in MLA International Abstracts. Parker, despite her popularity, remains a critically neglected figure.

It is time, then, to take a first step toward a new critical evaluation of Dorothy Parker. All authors' work is, of course,

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[6] Parker.

[7] Parker, v.

[8] Keats.

influenced to some extent by the author's own life and the life of her society. Because this is doubly true of Dorothy Parker, one cannot ignore the legend which grew to such proportions that it obscured her work. Yet the major concern here must be with the work itself, which has gone neglected while many have written at length about Dorothy Parker, the woman and the legend. One may identify two themes which predominate in the body of Parker's work: those of social criticism and of the hopelessness of love. That aspect of Parker's work which makes it so uniquely her own—her style—is also of special interest to the critic. Dorothy Parker is not, as has been suggested, an author strictly bound by her own particular niche of time and place. She is a consummate stylist whose concerns are large, important ones, as much of contemporary life as they were of Parker's own heyday fifty years ago.

CHAPTER II

THE WITTIEST WOMAN IN AMERICA

The towering legend which grew up around Dorothy Parker is likely the major factor which has kept her from receiving the serious critical attention which she deserves. She was widely hailed as "the wittiest woman in America," the "wittiest woman America has ever known."[1] Her thin volumes of poetry were immediate best sellers, as unlikely a feat for a book of verse in the twenties as it is now.[2] Even as her works were published, reviewers praised her but, like so many members of a Greek chorus, felt obliged to qualify their remarks by giving her primary identification as "Dorothy Parker the wit" or by damning with faint praise: "there are moods when Dorothy Parker is more acceptable, whiskey straight, not champagne . . . although Miss Millay remains lyrically, of course, far superior."[3]

Parker's early personal life as Dorothy Rothschild, the daughter of a fairly prosperous merchant (her mother had died soon after her birth), a child at a convent school, and later a boarding student at Miss Dana's school, a combination of a women's college and finishing school,[4] gave

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[1]See Benet; Epstein.

[2]Keats, p. 115.

[3]Genevieve Taggart, rev. of Enough Rope, by Dorothy Parker, New York Herald Tribune, 27 March 1927, p. 7, rpt. in Dorothy Nyren, ed., A Library of Literary Criticism (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1960), p. 372.

[4]Keats, p. 21.

no indication of the extraordinary years which would follow. Upon leaving Miss Dana's in 1911, Parker went to New York. For a while she took such jobs as playing piano for a ballet class in order to live.[5] She soon sold her first verses to Frank Crowinshield, who offered her a job writing captions for Vogue ("Brevity is the soul of lingerie, as the petticoat said to the chemise").[6] Thereafter, with dizzying alacrity, she married Edwin Pond Parker (who almost immediately went off to World War I), moved up to Vanity Fair, penned her poems and reviews, and found herself the toast of chic New York society. Yet her life from this point was as marred by unhappiness as it was filled with triumph. Eddie Parker came back to her a stranger and an alcoholic; the marriage disintegrated and Parker embarked upon a long career of unhappy affairs, leaving a string of abortions, suicide attempts, and empty bottles behind her. As her friend Lillian Hellman remarked, Parker always had bad taste in men, "even for writer ladies."[7]

In 1933, with hardly half her life but most of her writing already done, Parker married writer and actor Alan Campbell, with whom she would live off and on (through a divorce and remarriage) until his death in 1963. The two went to Hollywood, where they made large amounts of money and apparently spent more. They worked on several films there, including

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[5]James R. Gaines, Wit's End: Days and Nights of the Algonquin Round Table (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 34 (hereinafter cited as "Gaines").

[6]Keats, p. 30-32.

[7]Lillian Hellman, An Unfinished Woman: A Memoir (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), p. 217.

A Star Is Born.[8] Parker's literary output dwindled progressively, however; before she turned fifty she would hear herself referred to as a writer of another era. Parker seems to have grown increasingly bitter and increasingly unsure of her own talent and, consequently, almost incapable of writing.

What created this legend of "America's wittiest woman" which became so powerful as to deny Parker consideration as an artist even in her own estimation? A brief overview of some of her mots and at some of her critical writing for periodicals should show that her reputation as a wit, for whatever good or bad it ultimately brought her, was not an unearned one. Through her heyday in the twenties and thirties, Parker certainly did nothing to dispel that reputation. Looking back thirty years later, she explained, "silly of me to blame it on dates, but so it happens to be. Dammit, it was the 'twenties' and we had to be smarty. I wanted to be cute. That is the terrible thing. I should have had more sense."[9] Misguided or not, Parker succeeded, and with a vengeance.

With her good friends Robert Benchley and Robert Sherwood, Parker was a charter member of the famed Algonquin Round Table, a group of mostly literary and theatrical types who gathered each day at noon in the Oak Room of New York's midtown Algonquin Hotel. Although Parker would later disparage the Round Table,[10] even going so far as to insist

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[8]Keats, p. 178.

[9]"The Act of Fiction XIII: Dorothy Parker," Paris Review, 4, No. 13 (Summer 1956), 72-87 (hereinafter cited as "Paris Review").

[10]Keats, p. 287.

that she had never been there at all, the Round Table group soon came to represent in the minds of America the sophisticated new, vaguely decadent life into which American literature had settled. Gathered around the table for a leisurely luncheon on a given day might be Parker; Benchley; Sherwood; the pompous and often cruel critic and essayist Alexander Woollcott; Franklin Pierce Adams, in whose daily "Conning Tower" column many of Parker's quips were made available for public consumption; New Yorker founder Harold Ross; playwrights Marc Connelly, Donald Ogden Stewart, and Russel Crouse; Edna Ferber; Heywood Broun; and such theatrical personalities as Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, Ruth Gordon, and Laurette Taylor. In this heady group did Dorothy Parker spend much of her time, not only at the Algonquin but in trips to the theatre (264 plays opened in New York in 1928[11]), forays to such favorite speakeasies as Jack and Charlie's (later to become the Twenty-One club), various vacation outings, and indeed not infrequently to Polly Adler's "house," where Parker would sit and chat in the parlor while Stewart, as he explained, "went upstairs to lay some lucky girl."[12]

The group seemingly never tired of working hard at what would seem to be witty repartee, often with a cruel streak, and Dorothy Parker was their acknowledged champion. Among the more ostentatious forms of these verbal calisthenics performed by the Round Table regulars were passionately

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[11] Gaines, p. 39.

[12] Keats, p. 72; in this vein see also Polly Adler, A House Is Not a Home (New York: Rinehart, 1953).

played word games. Parker, called upon to employ the word horticulture in a sentence, observed, "You can lead a horticulture, but you can't make her think."[13] Such quips quickly spread among her friends, who, because of their various writing and entertainment positions, were able in turn to disseminate them across literate America.

Oddly, for all the time they spent together, Round Table members were never close friends and often knew surprisingly little about one another's private lives. Parker's finances, for example, were always an issue of some disagreement among her friends. She paid for the best clothes and lingerie and had her soap (tuberose scent: the one favored by undertakers for corpses)[14] made to order at Cyclax of London, but she never seemed to have enough money for a cab ride home. Parker's life was a combination of extravagance and apparent pennilessness. Explaining the tiny inexpensive apartments in which she lived, Parker said that she only wanted enough space "to lay my hat—and a few friends."[15] Her meals were taken out, and she rarely dined alone. Entering one restaurant, Parker allegedly met with Clare Boothe Luce, for whom she did not hold the highest esteem. On this occasion, Luce, at an apparent loss for an original remark, gestured for Parker to precede her into the foyer, saying "Age before beauty." Parker, not missing a beat, murmured "Pearls before swine," and swept past.[16]

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[13]Keats, p. 68.

[14]Gaines, p. 77.

[15]Keats, p. 68.

[16]Wyatt Cooper, "Whatever You Think Dorothy Parker Was Like, She Wasn't," Esquire, Oct. 1968, pp. 53, 61, 110-114.

Perhaps a contributing factor to Parker's growing reputation was the fact that she did not speak only of unfortunates such as Luce; her wit, for all its sting, was often directed undilutedly at herself and gave rise to any number of possibly apocryphal anecdotes. Sent an urgent request for her very late manuscript by an editor tearing out his hair over a blank place in his ready-to-run page, Parker dismissed the messenger empty-handed, explaining that she was too fucking busy—and vice versa. Entering a party on another occasion, she inquired of her hostess what some people engaging in a rather juvenile-looking activity in the corner were doing. "Ducking for apples," explained the hostess. "There," mused Parker, "but for a typographical error, is the story of my life."[17]

At times Parker's quips related to her craft, which she purported not to take seriously and usually disparaged. She commented that she was like Verlaine: always chasing Rimbauds. Parker's reputation became such that at times she was asked to produce poems to order. Somerset Maugham, seated at her side at a dinner party, asked her breathlessly if she couldn't write a poem for him then and there. Parker (no doubt rolling her eyes heavenward when Maugham's were turned) obliged and wrote:

> Higgledy piggledy, my white hen,
> She lays eggs for gentlemen.

Maugham, puzzled, remarked that he had always liked those lines. She bestowed a cool smile and finished:

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[17]Keats, p. 47.

You cannot persuade her with gun or lariat
To come across for the proletariat.[18]

At various times Parker reviewed plays for Vanity Fair and the New Yorker and books for the New Yorker and Esquire. It was perhaps at these moments that she was her most devastating, yet her reviews often reveal the depth behind the apparently effortless turn of phrase. Having seen Katherine Hepburn open in a new play, Parker wrote that the actress's performance had "run the whole gamut of emotions, from A to B."[19] Reviewing A. A. Milne's Give Me Yesterday, Parker explained that the play's hero is "caused, by a novel device, to fall asleep and a-dream; and thus he is given yesterday. Me, I should have given him twenty years to life."[20] The trying drama The House Beautiful was, she said, "the play lousy."[21] Parker's comments were often as incisive as they were astringent; of the part of George Tesman in Hedda Gabler Parker says that it is one of those "that can be overdone almost without effort; just one 'Fancy that!' too many and you're gone."[22] As anyone who has seen productions of the play can testify, Tesman's effeteness is easily—and often—overplayed.

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[18]Parker, p. 600.

[19]Keats, p. 10.

[20]Parker, p. 437.

[21]Alden Whitman, "Dorothy Parker, Short-Story Writer, Poet, Critic, Sardonic Humorist and Literary Wit, Dies at Age 73," New York Times, 8 June 1967, p. 1, col. 2, and p. 38, cols. 1-8 (hereinafter cited as Times).

[22]Parker, p. 417.

Parker's observations about the plays she reviewed were not limited to the text and company. Reviewing a sumptuous yet immensely boring spectacle called Aphrodite, Parker described the set: "There is even a brand new drop-curtain, painted with the mystic letters AΦPOΔITH, which most of the audience takes to be the Greek word for 'asbestos.'"[23] At times, Parker even turned her critical eye upon fellow members of the audience. She describes the patrons of Oscar Wilde's An Ideal Husband:

> They have a conscious exquisiteness, a deep appreciation of their own culture. They exude an atmosphere of the New Republic—a sort of Crolier-than-thou air. "Look at us," they seem to say. "We are the cognoscenti. We have come because we can appreciate this thing—we are not as you, poor bonehead, who are here because you couldn't get tickets for the Winter Garden." . . . From the moment of the curtain's rise they keep up a hum of approbation, a reassuring signal of their patronage and comprehension. "Oh, the lines, the lines!" they sigh, one to another, quite as if they were the first to discover that this Oscar Wilde is really a very promising young writer; and they use the word "scintillating" as frequently and as proudly as if they had just coined it.[24]

Her many book reviews reveal a fundamental aspect of Parker's outlook on life, both personal and literary: she found it easier to belittle than to praise. There was perhaps no more fearful thought to a writer than the apparition of an unfavorable review by the Constant Reader, Dorothy Parker's nom de plume for her New Yorker pieces. When she felt a book was not good, she made no attempt to leash her mordant wit. To show that she was not being unfair, however, she often quoted at some

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[23] Parker, p. 431.

[24] Parker, p. 418.

length from the disappointing book being reviewed. Probably her best known scorn is directed to A. A. Milne and his Pooh books. Parker concludes her none-too-long dismissal of The House at Pooh Corner with a retelling of one of the story's more affecting moments, as Pooh teaches a new "Hum" to Piglet:

> "'Well, you'll see, Piglet, when you listen. Because this is how it begins. The more it snows, tiddely-pom—'
>
> "'Tiddely what?' said Piglet." (He took, as you might say, the very words out of your correspondent's mouth.)
>
> "'Pom," said Pooh. 'I put that in to make it more hummy.'"
>
> And it is that word "hummy," my darlings, that marks the first place in The House at Pooh Corner at which Tonstant Weader Fwowed up.[25]

Parker's reviews were not infrequently of authors, like Milne, who were not difficult to deflate. Sometimes Parker could dispose of an entire book in the title of her review alone: "Mrs. Post Enlarges on Etiquette."[26] Similarly, she comments that the title of a then popular novel, Remember Me to God, "sounds like a phrase Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh might exchange as they took leave of each other."[27] One of Parker's lengthier reviews is written, in some wonderment, about the autobiography of evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, "that Somewhat Different Entertainer":[28]

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[25] Parker, p. 518.

[26] Parker, p. 475.

[27] Parker, p. 555.

[28] Parker, p. 497.

> It may be that this autobiography is set down in sincerity, frankness, and simple effort. It may be, too, that the Statue of Liberty is situated in Lake Ontario.
>
> I have never heard Mrs. McPherson preach—a record which, Heaven helping me, I purpose to keep untarnished—but from her literary style, I get the idea. I give you, for your birthday, a typical bit from her opus:
>
> "Quicksand!"
>
> "Pernicious quicksand!"
>
> "Cloying, treacherous, relentless quicksand!"
>
> "The soul-destroying quicksand"—no, no, not "that hung in the well." "The soul-destroying quicksand of unbelief!"
>
> You see? And she can go on like that for hours. Can, hell—does.
>
> On the occasions that she drifts into longer and broader sentences, she writes as many other three-named authoresses have written before her. Her manner takes on the thick bloom of rich red plush. The sun becomes "that round orb of day" (as opposed, I expect, to all those square orbs you see about so much lately); maple syrup is "Springtide's liquid love gift from the heart of the maple wood"; the forest, by a stroke of inspiration, turns out to be "a cathedral of stately grandeur and never ceasing wonder and awe" (argue, if you will, for "cloying quicksand" as the phrase superb, but me, I'll hold out for "stately grandeur") . . . .[29]

The subjects of the barbed reviews were not uniformly chosen for the ease with which they might be picked off, however. Parker was not loath to criticize those who, in critical or in popular evaluation, were the foremost writers of the day if their work did not seem to her praise-worthy. Of Theodore Dreiser's "latest museum piece," Parker wrote, "Nearly six hundred sheets to the title of Dawn; God help us one and all

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[29] Parker, pp. 497-98.

if Mr. Dreiser ever elects to write anything called 'June Twenty-first.'"[30] Sinclair Lewis's The Man Who Knew Coolidge was quite simply "rotten,"[31] and "if Mr. Lewis, in outlining his plot to some friend, had only said, "Stop me if you've heard this," more than two hundred pages of Dodsworth need never have been written."[32] Reviewing Upton Sinclair's Money Writes, Parker wrote that, although "he is a fine novelist . . . as a literary critic he is simply god-awful."[33] "As the book goes on, you have your choice of two impressions of its author, as he is today: either he is the prey of delusions of persecution—and the man, God knows has been beset so sorely and so thoroughly that fantasies of a vast conspiracy against him were almost inevitable; or else he has become a confirmed bellyacher."[34] Possibly the most quoted observation from a Parker review was one from her critique of the revered Countess of Oxford's poised little book Lay Sermons: "The affair between Margot Asquith and Margot Asquith will live as one of the prettiest love stories in all literature."[35]

In her review "The Professor Goes In for Sweetness and Light," Parker exposes the ludicrousness of Happiness, a treatise by William

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[30] Parker, p. 541.

[31] Parker, p. 508.

[32] Parker, p. 524.

[33] Parker, p. 469.

[34] Parker, p. 468.

[35] Parker, p. 456.

Lyon Phelps, a Yale professor widely regarded then as the "arbiter of popular reading taste."[36] Parker describes the views of the professor, "the pride of New Haven,"[37] who writes "presumably for God, for Country, and for Yale":[38]

> The professor starts right off with "No matter what may be one's nationality, sex, age, philosophy, or religion, everyone wishes either to become or to remain happy." Well, there's no arguing that one. The author has us there. There is the place for getting out the pencil, underscoring the lines, and setting "how true," followed by several carefully executed exclamation points, in the margin. It is regrettable that the book did not come out during the season when white violets were in bloom, for there is the very spot to press one.
>
> "Hence," goes on the professor, "definitions of happiness are interesting." I suppose the best thing to do with that is to let it pass. Me, I never saw a definition of happiness that could detain me after train-time, but that may be a matter of lack of opportunity, of inattention, of congenital rough luck. If definitions of happiness can keep Professor Phelps on his toes, that is little short of dandy. We might just as well get on along to the next statement, which goes like this: "One of the best" (we are still on definitions of happiness) "was given in my Senior year at College by Professor Timothy Dwight: 'The happiest person is the person who thinks the most interesting thoughts.'" Promptly one starts recalling such Happiness Boys as Nietzsche, Socrates, de Maupassant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Blake, and Poe. One wonders, with hungry curiosity, what were some of the other definitions that Professor Phelps chucked aside in order to give preference to this one.[39]

Tellingly, Parker was much more likely to find herself tongue-tied when called upon to write about a book she had liked. "When she feels admiration," observed Woollcott, "she can find no words for it."[40]

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[36] Parker, p. 461 (ed. note).

[37] Parker, p. 464.

[38] Parker, p. 461.

[39] Parker, pp. 462-63.

[40] Keats, p. 127.

Woollcott's remark is not entirely accurate: Parker strove for, and found, words to praise the relatively few books she found deserving of it, but those words were often awkward and self-conscious. Yet, difficult as it was for her, she took up the banner for those she admired. She was among the first to see the talent of the young Ernest Hemingway.[41] Championing Samuel Beckett long before he became a Nobel Laureate, Parker proclaimed herself a "devotee" of Waiting for Godot. Ever the careful stylist herself, however, she confessed to a bit of reservation about Murphy: "Some of it is outrageously funny, but the style is so convoluted that, as Huckleberry Finn said of Pilgrim's Progress: The statements was interesting, but tough."[42] Her difficulty in expressing admiration is further revealed in her review of Gide's The Counterfeiters, in which she is reduced to saying that it "is too tremendous a thing for praises. To say of it 'Here is a magnificent novel' is rather like gazing into the Grand Canyon and remarking, 'Well, well, well; quite a slice.'"[43]

The ease with which Parker dismissed poor work and the struggle she had to find words to praise good work likely contributed to her own fate of critical neglect. Parker never bothered defending any of her work which she thought to be good; no author is entirely comfortable singing her own praises. In her comments on that part of her work of which she was not proud, however, Parker was merciless. Doubtless the author's own

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[41] Parker, p. 458; Parker, p. 582.

[42] Parker, p. 554.

[43] Parker, p. 458.

proclamation of the worthlessness of her works makes it easier for others to come to a similar conclusion. Asked about her poetry, Parker immediately corrected an interviewer: "My verses. I cannot say poems. Like everybody was then I was following in the exquisite footsteps of Miss Millay, unhappily in my own horrible sneakers."[44]

The legend of Dorothy Parker, wittiest woman in America, grew to such proportions that, finally, it came to control her rather than she it. As she remarked with some bitterness during the last years of her life, "Why it got so bad that they began to laugh before I opened my mouth."[45] Yet as seen, even in deprecating her own work (if indeed not especially then), Parker was wont to deliver yet another quotable quote. And the critics seemed to assume that the work coming from her typewriter, like the quips coming from her mouth, must be light, droll, irreverent, and ephemeral. Often, at least about the last, they were wrong.

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[44] Paris Review, 78.

[45] Paris Review, 74.

CHAPTER III

THE MAJOR THEMES

The great majority of Dorothy Parker's works fall into one of two major areas of thematic content. The first of these is that of social criticism. Parker was profoundly dissatisfied with the pretense and emptiness she perceived around her, and that disillusionment forms the major motif of her oeuvre. Indeed, the second major theme recurring in Parker's works is in some sense a subcategory of the first; it applies the basic pretensions and emptinesses of the first theme specifically to men and women and comes to the conclusion that the role of woman in her relations with both man and society is one of ultimate bleakness: happiness is not likely to come either with love or without it.

Parker's prose fiction takes a somewhat more restrained approach to the first theme than does her poetry. The short stories focus on the hypocrisy, cruelty, and blindness with which Parker saw society is riddled, while the poetry often takes this disillusionment with life to the extreme of an active courting of death. Most often Parker's stories of outrage at her society take as their subject the insensitive rich. Certainly Parker spent an ample amount of time in the company of such persons in her own life.[1] Unlike Hemingway and Fitzgerald, however,

[1]Keats, p. 93.

Parker refused to write romans à clef about those who were her hosts; she contented herself with characters meant to represent, at least on the first level of meaning, an entire indolent class and not just particular members of it.

The story painting the most extreme portrait of moral bankruptcy is "From the Diary of a New York Lady," subtitled "During Days of Horror, Despair, and World Change." This "Lady" rises at midday, spends the remainder of the afternoon planning her evening and consulting with Miss Rose, her house-calling manicurist, and goes out in the evening to whichever locale she thinks will offer the most raucous time. A possible source for Parker's character is Clarinda, a "female correspondent" of Mr. Spectator.[2] Parker, recognizing that the severest indictment against such people is delivered by themselves, offers a section of the woman's diary during a particularly trying period of her life:

> The most terrible thing happened just this minute. Broke one of my finger nails right off short. Absolutely the most horrible thing I ever had happen to me in my life. Called up Miss Rose to come over and shape it for me, but she was out for the day. I do have the worst luck in the entire world. . . .
>
> Miss Rose came at noon to shape my nail; couldn't have been more fascinating. Sylvia Eaton can't go out the door unless she's had a hypodermic, and Doris Mason knows every single word about Douggie Mason and that girl up in Harlem, and Evelyn North won't be induced to keep away from those acrobats, and they don't dare to tell Stuyvie Raymond what he's got the matter with him. Never knew anyone that had a more simply fascinating life than Miss Rose. Made her take that vile

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[2]Joseph Addison, Richard Steel, et al., The Spectator, ed. Gregory Smith (London: Dent, 1945), v. 3, pp. 5-9.

> tangerine polish off my nails and put on dark red. Didn't notice until after she had gone that it's practically black in electric light; couldn't be in a worse state. . . . Simply heartsick every time I think of my nails. Couldn't be wilder. Could kill Miss Rose, but what can you do?[3]

Parker's none-too-subtle subtitle of the story makes her irony all the more clear here; she is outraged, as the reader must be, that this woman finds her life collapsing around a broken fingernail while millions have nothing to eat.

Parker often chose to deliver her scathing portraits of cruelty and insensitivity by showing the relations of the would-be haute monde with those whom they perceive to be beneath them. One recalls Parker's remark upon hearing that the redoubtable Clare Booth Luce was always kind to her inferiors: "But where does she find them?"[4] Where, indeed, Parker's fiction frequently asks, is any human being to find another who is his or her inferior? The answer, as Parker illustrates through her exposés of the callous rich and their far more sympathetically portrayed "inferiors," is nowhere. Parker's personal devotion to human dignity and justice—her picketing for Sacco and Vanzetti, her struggles for the Spanish Republican Army, her brief fling with communism, her leaving the NAACP as her heir—testifies as well as her fiction to her fundamentally egalitarian outlook. To the extent that Americanism embodies a profound egalitarianism, Dorothy Parker subscribes to that outlook. Yet, as she commented herself, she was concerned first with

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[3]Parker, pp. 329-31.

[4]Times, p. 38, col. 1.

people and their innate dignity and needs: "'It has never happened to me that I've had to choose between betraying a friend and betraying my country, but if it ever does so I hope I have the guts to betray my country.' Now doesn't that make the Fifth Amendment look like a bum."[5]

A favorite device of Parker's for contrasting "superiors" with "inferiors" and putting the former in their deserved places is consideration of servants and masters. "The Custard Heart" is the story of an immensely wealthy woman, a Mrs. Lanier, who is "dedicated to wistfulness, as lesser artists are to words and paint and marble,"[6] and her maid Gwennie, dedicated entirely to her mistress, spending her life seeking "to do what she could to save Mrs. Lanier from pain."[7] The irony of wistfulness in an extraordinarily beautiful and even more extraordinarily rich woman is hardly understated:

> If nothing should happen to the portrait of her by Sir James Weir, there she will stand, wistful for the ages. . . . It is true that, when the portrait was exhibited, one critic expressed in print his puzzlement as to what a woman who owned such pearls had to be wistful about, but that was doubtless because he had sold his saffron-colored soul to the proprietor of a rival gallery.[8]

Not entirely unpredictably, Gwennie becomes pregnant by a newly engaged chauffeur who shortly thereafter absconds. Again the irony is heavy: Mrs. Lanier's coup de grâce in her devotion to wistfulness is a scene, played to a particularly lucky young man singled out from among the many

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[5] Paris Review, 82-83.

[6] Parker, p. 319.

[7] Parker, p. 323.

[8] Parker, p. 319.

who come to pay court, in which she, "at her most wistful,"[9] allows that "If I could only have a little baby . . . a little, little baby, I think I could be almost happy."[10] The reader is not really startled that Mrs. Lanier has taken no notice of Gwennie's affair with the chauffeur or even that she thinks Gwennie's new plumpness, the cause of which does not cross her heavily preoccupied mind, is healthy and even cute. Yet we are taken aback by the unrelievedly bitter ending of the story; it suddenly becomes apparent that Mrs. Lanier is not only an artist in wistfulness, but an artist conscious in the utmost of her art. She is not simply a woman who has ridiculous delusions; she is as cognizant of reality as anyone and has carefully chosen the face she will wear to meet the faces that she meets:

> The exquisite face Mrs. Lanier saw in the mirror drew her closer attention, and she put down the perfume and leaned toward it. She drooped her head a little to the side and watched it closely; she saw the wistful eyes grow yet more wistful, the lips curve to a pleading smile. She folded her arms close to her sweet breast and slowly rocked them, as if they cradled a dream-child. She watched the mirrored arms sway gently, caused them to sway a little slower.
>
> "If only I had a little baby," she sighed. She shook her head. Delicately she cleared her throat, and sighed again on a slightly lower note. "If only I had a little, little baby, I think I could be almost happy." . . .
>
> Mrs. Lanier sat looking after Gwennie, her hands at her wounded heart. Slowly she turned back to her mirror, and what she saw there arrested her; the artist knows the masterpiece. Here was the perfection of her career, the sublimation of wistfulness; it was that look of grieved bewilderment that did

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[9] Parker, p. 323.

[10] Parker, p. 323.

> it. Carefully she kept it upon her face as she rose from the mirror and, with her lovely hands still shielding her breast, went down to the new young man.[11]

Such passages remove Parker's work from the area of mere comment on the foibles of the very rich to scathing condemnation of the cruel artifice which humans often choose to effect.

Parker similarly deflates upper-class and bourgeois pretension in "Horsie,"[12] a story of a decent, hard-working nurse who is charged with the care of a newborn infant for a brief period after it is brought home from the hospital. The reader is infuriated by the condescension of the employers to the nurse Miss Wilmarth; she, after all, is a professional woman earning a living, while they are evidently little more than wealthy social parasites. To this thematic point, the story is fairly commonplace; what sets it apart is the attitude of Miss Wilmarth herself. As much as her employers look down on her, she looks as eagerly up to them. Miss Wilmarth senses that she is out of her league at the Krueger's home, and she shows it in her embarrassment and awkwardness in her conversations with them. We can perhaps blame the Kruegers for their own conduct, Parker implies, but we must hold our society responsible for reducing the normally competent Miss Wilmarth to sniveling inarticulateness before the Kruegers, who are, as she and they heartily agree, her betters.

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[11] Parker, pp. 326-27.

[12] Parker, p. 260.

These stories of outrage at the inequities of a society in which the morally bankrupt rule often take on almost Blakean overtones of innocence and experience. Perhaps the clearest example is found in "Little Curtis."[13] There, Mrs. Matson, yet another formidable, wealthy, and assured personnage, has adopted the child of the title. Curtis embodies innocence in virtually every way imaginable: he is very young and ingenuous, and life to him is still primarily for naive pleasure. Even at his age, however, Curtis is fast gaining experience, thanks to his adoptive mother, who surely is as socially experienced, within the boundaries of the town in which she knows herself to be the crème de la crème, as anyone could be. Curtis must learn not to play with other preschool children who are beneath his undeservedly acquired station of life. Curtis must learn that communication with Mr. and Mrs. Matson is not to be conversation but instead answers, preferably monosyllabic and always delivered with "Sir" or "Ma'am" as an appendage, to the questions they may choose to ask him. Most importantly, Curtis must learn to be grateful, to appreciate his unbelievably good fortune. And he will be constantly reminded of just how good that fortune has been (although, as Mrs. Matson concedes, "Curtis really comes of a very nice family, for an orphan"[14]): the Matsons will tell him of his real parentage "just as soon as he's a little older. . . . I think it's so much nicer for him to know. He'll appreciate everything

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[13] Parker, p. 349.

[14] Parker, p. 349.

so much more."[15] No doubt little Curtis will come to know and to appreciate; indeed, with careful tutelage, he will gain the experience and knowledge of all the upper-class formulae of which his mother is already the possessor. In short, the innocent Curtis, after long training, will become an experienced Curtis whose life is dictated by the same selfishness and prejudice already controlling the Matsons.

Innocence and experience, in the forms of ingenuous unworldliness and maddening superciliousness, again meet head-on in "The Wonderful Old Gentleman."[16] The plot, a relatively minor part of this story, evolves as two sisters and one sister's husband wait for the women's nurse-attended father to die in his upstairs bedroom. The old gentleman and one of his daughters are two of a kind: specifically, they are the kind of the Matsons, the Kruegers, and Mrs. Lanier. The second sister and her husband, the Bains, have turned over their house and, indeed, their lives to the Old Gentleman since a time some years back when Mrs. Whittaker, the other sister, had decided that it "wouldn't have looked right"[17] for him to go on living in his own house with only servants to look after him. Mrs. Bain must frequently wipe her tears; Mrs. Whittaker, however, sits in an aristocratic calm described by Parker in one of her descriptions most carefully calculated to bring about instant dislike:

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[15] Parker, p. 349.

[16] Parker, p. 53.

[17] Parker, p. 56.

> She graciously patronized the very chair she now sat in, smiled kindly on the glass of cider she held in her hand. The Bains were poor, and Mrs. Whittaker had, as it is ingenuously called, married well, and none of them ever lost sight of these facts.
>
> But Mrs. Whittaker's attitude of kindly tolerance was not confined to her less fortunate relatives. It extended to friends of her youth, working people, the arts, politics, the United States in general, and God, Who had always supplied her with the best of service. She could have given Him an excellent reference at any time. . . .
>
> Mrs. Whittaker's dress was always studiously suited to its occasion; thus, her bearing always had that calm that only the correctly attired may enjoy. She was an authority on where to place monograms on linen, how to instruct working folk, and what to say in letters of condolence. The word "lady" figured largely in her conversation. Blood, she often predicted, would tell.[18]

Blood, of course, tells nothing at all, for Mrs. Whittaker shares her lineage with Mrs. Bain; what does tell is money and the necessary amount of arrogance to take the perquisites of that money as a matter of course. As always in Parker, the rich here get richer and the poor, at best, grow no more abject in their poverty. The Old Gentleman leaves his considerable fortune to Mrs. Whittaker, who while on trips "almost never neglected to send her father picture post-cards of various points of interest,"[19] while Mrs. Bain, who years ago gave up leading any sort of personal life in order to devote her waking hours to care for her father, is to receive the Old Gentleman's personal furnishings (and Mr. Bain his set of Thackeray). Yet it is not this loss which Mrs. Bain feels as keenly as the father's casting

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[18] Parker, pp. 54-56.

[19] Parker, p. 57.

off of her black-sheep brother or as keenly as she feels the impending loss of the old man himself. These topics are matters of indifference, if not downright approbation, to Mrs. Whittaker. Like the nurse in Miss Wilmarth in "Horsie," the Bains are as convinced of Mrs. Whittaker's superiority to them in every way as she is herself. They have been well trained, like Curtis, to keep a respectable distance, yet, unlike Curtis, the Bains' training will never flower into the full bloom of calculated social hypocrisy possessed by Mrs. Matson and Mrs. Whittaker. Perhaps at one time they had a chance, but the gifts of arrogance and selfishness were not theirs, and they fail their last test in the social game by feeling genuine human distress at the passing of the man who had mistreated them so badly.

One could suggest that, in the stories discussed above, Parker chooses relatively easy targets for picking off. As she does not in her book reviews limit herself to writing about authors of the ilk of Aimee Semple McPherson, Nan Britton, and A. A. Milne, however, Parker does not always create such remarkably distasteful characters as Mrs. Lanier, the Kruegers, the Matsons, and Mrs. Whittaker (of course, even these people are, as it were, pillars of the community). At times Parker's characters seem sincerely to believe that they are well-meaning in every respect, and they act accordingly. Rather than the active maliciousness of a Mrs. Lanier who knows herself to be playing with wistfulness at the expense of others' well-being, the reader is confronted with a character acting in a manner she truly believes to be thoughtful and consistent with notions of humanity.

"Arrangement in Black and White"[20] is such a story; it tells of the meeting at a party of a white woman, proud not to be a bigot, and a black concert singer. Upon introduction, the woman "her hand at the length of her arm . . . for all the world to see."[21] It cannot be gainsaid that this woman is making at least an attempt far beyond any which a Mrs. Matson would consider, yet the reader senses that her basic attitude is little different from that of Mrs. Matson and that Parker, in narrating, has nearly as little patience with her blindness to her own feelings as she does with Mrs. Matson's all-too-certain knowledge of her feelings. The woman of "Arrangement" tells her host she is eager to meet the vocal artist, but she says, not probably coincidentally, "Let's wait till those people get through talking to him."[22] While waiting, she speaks good-humoredly of her absent husband (who is a bigot even in her estimation) and his childhood with his "old colored nurse, this regular old nigger mammy," whom, it develops, he remembers still: "Why, every time he goes home, he goes out in the kitchen to see her. He does, really, to this day."[23] Unlike her husband, who likes blacks as long as they're servants who know their place, the woman explains:

> Now, me, I don't feel that way at all. I haven't the slightest feeling about colored people. Why, I'm just crazy about some of them. They're just like children—just as easy-going, and always singing and laughing and everything.

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[20] Parker, p. 19.

[21] Parker, p. 21.

[22] Parker, p. 19.

[23] Parker, p. 20.

> Aren't they the happiest things you ever say in your life? Honestly, it makes me laugh just to hear them. Oh, I like them. I really do. Well, now, listen, I have this colored laundress, I've had her for years, and I'm devoted to her. She's a real character. And I want to tell you, I think of her as my friend. That's the way I think of her. As I say to Burton, "Well, for heaven's sake, we're all human beings! Aren't we?" . . .
>
> Oh, I get so furious when people are so narrow-minded about colored people. It's just all I can do not to say something. Of course, I do admit when you get a bad colored man, they're simply terrible. But as I say to Burton, there are some bad white people, too, in this world. Aren't there?[24]

After her bold handshake, the woman ventures into conversation with the singer, speaking "with great distinctness, moving her lips meticulously, as if in parlance with the deaf."[25] Later, she marvels at his "nice manners, and everything. You know, so many colored people, you give them an inch, and they walk all over you."[26] She is equally pleased with her own performance: "I felt just as natural as I would with anybody. Talked to him just as naturally, and everything. But honestly, I could hardly keep a straight face. . . . Oh, wait till I tell Burton I called him "Mister!"[27] Parker's view of this sort of possibly well-intentioned insensitivity could hardly be clearer. The woman's affectations in talking to the black man, her random observations to her host about blacks in general, and especially the intense prejudice she reveals through her very disclaimers of it show that Parker's contempt for comfortable self-delusion and ignorance is almost as great as

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[24] Parker, pp. 20-21.

[25] Parker, p. 22.

[26] Parker, p. 23.

[27] Parker, p. 23.

that which she holds for actual conscious misanthropy in other characters and stories.

The stories discussed thus far have concerned the very rich, and it is tempting to make the general statement that they and the others similar to them, occupying a good portion of Parker's entire output, are strictly limited in their application to a particular specialized group in time and place: that small segment of Americans of fifty years ago who were wealthy. Such a generalization does not, however, stand up under moderately serious consideration of her work; the hypocrisies and sham Parker deplores are as often found in middle classes as they are in the rich she more often chose to portray. This is not, of course, to deny that Parker may have felt a particular revulsion for the unfeeling rich who proved themselves all too content to fiddle as Rome burned. Parker, in an interview, admitted it bluntly: "I hate almost all rich people."[28]

That Parker's great hatred is against inhumanity rather than against the rich in whom she often found evidence of that inhumanity is revealed especially in her story "Mr. Durant."[29] This title character, although he does have his Babbitt-like eye on the main chance, is decidedly not wealthy. His actions, however, are even more abominable than those of any the wealthier characters of other stories, for he unfeelingly and ruthlessly tampers with the mind and the body

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[28]Paris Review, 85.

[29]Parker, p. 35.

of Rose, his naive young secretary. His responses upon learning of her pregnancy, rather than being of concern or pity, are of fury, indignation, and bitterness. His very first response, however, is to tell Rose that he wishes to God he had never seen her. Ever the gallant, Mr. Durant gives Rose twenty-five dollars, "not that he couldn't have used the twenty-five dollars very nicely himself, just then, with Junior's teeth, and all,"[30] to pay for an abortion and to send her back home. The story ends with Mr. Durant's refusal to allow his children to keep a female dog they have found. "First thing you know, she'd be having puppies—and the way they look after they've had them, and all. . . . Disgusting!"[31] Mr. Durant's depths of cruelty are unmatched in Parker's characters, rich or otherwise. Like the "New York Lady" with her diary, Mr. Durant feels himself immensely put upon by the world, but while her blindness to reality outside of herself is at least not actively harmful to others, Mr. Durant's selfishness leads him to action which is malignant in its effect upon others. Parker's portrayal of him underlines her hatred of pomposity, smallness, and cruelty wherever they arise.

Perhaps the best generic term for stories such as those discussed above is "satire." Parker herself, however, did not feel that her work warranted that classification:

> Ah, satire. That's another matter. They're the big boys. If I'd been called a satirist there'd be no living with me. But by satirist I mean those boys in the other centuries. The people

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[30] Parker, p. 41.

[31] Parker, p. 46.

> we call satirists now are those who make cracks at topical topics and consider themselves satirists—creatures like George S. Kaufman and such who don't know what satire is. Lord knows, a writer should show his times, but not show them in wisecracks. Their stuff is not satire; it's as dull as yesterday's newspaper. Successful satire has got to be pretty good the day after tomorrow.[32]

Certainly Parker has more than once been called a satirist.[33] If satire were, as Webster's defines it, "literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn" or "trenchant wit, irony, or sarcasm used to expose and discredit vice or folly," then surely Parker would be the satirist par excellence. Yet the dictionary's definition is, of necessity, incomplete. As Parker suggests herself, satire has an enduring quality which sets it off from mere topical humor—a quality which she was not willing to assert existed in her own work. If it is true that Parker's stories often deal on the superficial level with a certain limited category of people and situations, it is equally true that such acknowledged satiric masterpieces as The Rape of the Lock,[34] "A Modest Proposal"[35] and Don Juan[36] deal on one level with a specific

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[32]Paris Review, 81.

[33]Vernon Loggins, I Hear America . . .: Literature in the United States Since 1900 (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1937), p. 300.

[34]Alexander Pope, The Rape of the Lock, in W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., ed., Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry and Prose (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1951), pp. 85-110.

[35]Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal," in Swift's Satires and Personal Writings, ed. William Alfred Eddy (London: Oxford, 1932), p. 19.

[36]George Gordon Noel, Lord Byron, Don Juan, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

group of satirized subjects in certain very particular and unusual circumstances. Yet, like Parker, we may often tend to think of satirists of being, by definition, "those boys in the other centuries." Whoever the satirist, however, one must read beyond that first level of meaning and extrapolate from it in order to appreciate whatever truly satirical element there may be in a work. The considerations of the stories above have revealed the existence of that deeper level of meaning in Parker's work. Similarly, they show that, if satire is somehow normative, the stories often carry with them a suggestion of a more desirable sort of human nature in the form of some kind of relative social innocent cast against the all-too-experienced barracuda being satirized.

While Parker's short stories written in a satiric mode express her extreme displeasure with life as it is, Parker's poems rooted in the same disillusionment carry the displeasure with life to the extreme of an actual longing for death. There are a few poems which take a view similar to the stories; that is, they introduce offensive characters by way of a model of what not to be and carry an implied or stated model of a more desirable character. The best poem of this sort is one of Parker's better-known works, "Bohemia":[37]

> Authors and actors and artists and such
> Never know nothing, and never know much.
> Sculptors and singers and those of their kidney
> Tell their affairs from Seattle to Sydney.
> Playwrights and poets and such horses' necks
> Start off from anywhere, end up at sex.

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[37] Parker, p. 223.

Diarists, critics, and similar roe
Never say nothing, and never say no.
People Who Do Things exceed my endurance:
God, for a man that solicits insurance!

More often, however, Parker's poems are less ones of social criticism, of satire, than they are of utter despair. In these, death becomes the ultimate happiness; rather than the more usual lament that the spectre of looming death prevents us from any real enjoyment of life, Parker in "The Flaw in Paganism"[38] complains that it is the uncertainty of death and the probability of continued life which interferes with her pleasure:

Drink and dance and laugh and lie,
Love, the reeling midnight through,
For tomorrow we shall die!
(But, alas, we never do.)

Striking a similar note, Parker perhaps consciously evokes Amy Lowell's poem "Patterns"[39] in the description of the carefully and neatly ordered garden and life of the character speaking in her "Story of Mrs. W_____."[40] Like the narrator of "Patterns," Mrs. W_____ winds her way down an apparently comfortable path before coming to a sudden unexpected climax:

My garden blossoms pink and white,
A place of decorous murmuring,
Where I am safe from August night
And cannot feel the knife of Spring.

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[38] Parker, p. 298.

[39] Amy Lowell, "Patterns," in The Complete Poetical Works of Amy Lowell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), p. 75.

[40] Parker, p. 299.

And I may walk the pretty place
   Before the curtsying hollyhocks
And laundered daisies, round of face—
   Good little girls, in party frocks.

My trees are amiably arrayed
   In pattern on the dappled sky,
And I may sit in filtered shade
   And watch the tidy years go by.

And I may amble pleasantly
   And hear my neighbors list their bones
And click my tongue in sympathy,
   And count the cracks in paving-stones.

My door is grave in oaken strength,
   The cool of linen calms my bed,
And there at night I stretch my length
   And envy no one but the dead.[41]

A similar but even more shocking envy of the dead is the theme of "Cherry White,"[42] another poem evocative of the work of a particular poet (this time A. E. Housman, who has been suggested to be Parker's poetic mentor):[43]

I never see that loveliest thing—
A cherry bough gone white with Spring—
But what I think, "How gay 'twould be
To hang me from a flowering tree."

The shock we feel arises from the juxtaposition of the articulated desire for death, unusual in any case, with the symbol of renewed life: the blossoming cherry tree. Yet as in "The Flaw in Paganism," the reader senses that it is life's defiant stubbornness, its very return from the dead, which the poet finds so grating as she longs for the cool certain death herself. April, as has been said elsewhere, is the cruelest month.

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[41] Parker, p. 299.

[42] Parker, p. 299.

[43] Brendan Gill, "Introduction," in Parker, p. xviii.

The most remarkable appreciation of death by Parker is that of her actively soliciting him as a lover. Emily Dickinson was startled, yet finally not displeased, by the unexpected appearance of Death as a suitor. Dorothy Parker, in contrast, frequently displayed her twentieth century willingness to march out onto the road in order to hail Death down, willing to avail herself of Claudette Colbert tricks for so doing should the need arise:

The Trifler

Death's the lover that I'd be taking;
Wild and fickle and fierce is he.
Small's his care if my heart be breaking—
Gay young Death would have none of me.

Hear them clack of my haste to greet him!
No one other my mouth had kissed.
I had dressed me in silk to meet him—
False young Death would not hold the tryst.

Slow's the blood that was quick and stormy,
Smooth and cold is the bridal bed;
I must wait till he whistles for me—
Proud young Death would not turn his head.

I must wait till my breast is wilted,
I must wait till my back is bowed,
I must rock in the corner, jilted—
Death went galloping down the road.

Gone's my heart with a trifling rover.
Fine he was in the game he played—
Kissed, and promised, and threw me over,
And rode away with a prettier maid.[44]

Dorothy Parker's second major theme, as noted at the beginning of this section, is one which applies the prevalent emptiness and senselessness of life, which she notes and deplores in the works of the first

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[44] Parker, p. 76.

theme, specifically to the relations of women to men and to society. Her message about love is no more cheerful than her conclusion about life in general.

Sartre's discussion of romantic love in L'Être et le Néant[45] could have been penned by Parker long before he set it down; it is a position which courses through her work. Briefly stated, Sartre observes that a romantic relationship is one in which the two principals are at first locked in a constant struggle. The two wish in some sense to unite, to become as one; yet in so doing one of the lovers' personae must come to dominate the newly created entity. One personality will triumph and dictate; the other personality will be lost by the wayside. Here complications begin setting in in earnest, for the "loser" will be able to find being only in a vicarious existence through the controlling partner. From the perspective of the "winner," the relationship fast loses whatever interest it had: having subsumed the personality of the other party into his or her own, the dominant party is faced with this other person who is no longer a person at all but rather a shell whose whole existence has been mortgaged into that of the dominant partner. The relationship disintegrates as the subsumed partner fights more and more desperately to retain the being through whom his or her only existence is now found, while the dominant partner wishes more and more to get away from this grasping nonperson.[46] Parker recognizes all of

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[45]Jean-Paul Sartre, L'Être et le Néant (Paris: Gallimard, 1943).

[46]Sartre, pp. 431-84.

this, and possibly more, when she causes one of her characters, desperately alone in such a rapidly disintegrating relationship, to wonder, "I wonder why they hate you, as soon as they are sure of you."[47]

This doomed-from-the-outset quality of love is noted by Parker in numerous stories and poems. From her viewpoint, relationships between men and women are under a shadow from their beginnings—the shadow of a society which has trained its males and females to have different and incompatible needs and wants from such relationships. Parker frequently addresses the dilemma of the woman whose only outlet into the mainstream of life is the vicarious one through her husband's life. Men, for their part, are trained that women are objects worthy of pursuit, yet once possessed not particularly worth keeping. Her "General Review of the Sex Situation"[48] sums up Parker's skepticism about romantic love:

> Woman wants monogamy;
> Man delights in novelty.
> Love is woman's moon and sun;
> Man has other forms of fun.
> Woman lives but in her lord;
> Count to ten, and man is bored.
> With this the gist and sum of it,
> What earthly good can come of it?

The stories written in this vein, like the stories of the first theme, tend to be rather subtler in approach than the poems of similar theme. Many of these stories are comprised entirely of one short encounter between lovers. Always there is an argument arising from the

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[47] Parker, p. 123.

[48] Parker, p. 115.

woman's jealousy or from the man's tiring of the relationship. Occasionally the two temporarily obscure their difficulties and end the story happily ("Here We Are,"[49] "The Sexes"[50]); more often they do not ("The Last Tea,"[51] "New York to Detroit,"[52] "Too Bad"[53]). Even in the stories with momentarily happy endings, however, the reader cannot fail to note the pettiness of the feelings on which the arguments are based. The reconciliations are not brought about by mature consideration of the problems involved, but, in the two stories mentioned, by the man's assuring the woman that she has just the biggest, prettiest eyes in the whole world:

> "And beautiful eyes," he said, "and beautiful hair and a beautiful mouth. And beautiful hands. Let me have one of the little hands. Oh, look atta little hand! Who's got the prettiest hands in the world? Who's the sweetest girl in the world?"[54]

The reader recognizes that such endearments, however touching, do not actually dispose of the problems at the root of the argument and that similar problems and arguments will continue to arise as long as that root remains. "Here We Are," a story about newlyweds on their honeymoon train trip into New York, gives an illustration of this proposition.

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[49] Parker, p. 125.

[50] Parker, p. 24.

[51] Parker, p. 182.

[52] Parker, p. 291.

[53] Parker, p. 170.

[54] Parker, p. 28.

The two have just made up after their marriage's first, but all too obviously not last, fight:

> "We won't go all to pieces," she said, "We won't fight. It'll be all different, now we're married. It'll all be lovely. Reach me down my hat, will you, sweetheart? It's time I was putting it on. Thanks. Ah, I'm so sorry you don't like it."
> "I do so like it!" he said.
> "You said you didn't," she said. "You said you thought it was perfectly terrible."
> "I never said any such thing," he said, "You're crazy."
> "All right, I may be crazy," she said. "Thank you very much. But that's what you said. Not that it matters—it's just a little thing. But it makes you feel pretty funny to think you've gone and married somebody that says you have perfectly terrible taste in hats. And then goes and says you're crazy, beside."[55]

"Too Bad," "Glory in the Daytime,"[56] and "Dusk Before Fireworks"[57] focus on the dilemma of the wife who is expected to stay at home and find enough ladylike household activities to keep her satisfied. Both "Too Bad" and "Glory in the Daytime" deal with women who are terribly unhappy and unfulfilled in their home lives (which is to say their whole lives). The married couples in both stories are virtually incommunicado: there is no particular ire, but the husbands and wives find to their chagrin that they have nothing to say to the other. Parker enters into the thoughts of both Mr. and Mrs. Weldon in "Too Bad" and finds that each does in fact have things to say, but that they dare not say anything which risks boring the other. Instead of talking about matters of any importance to either of them, they trade

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[55] Parker, p. 133.

[56] Parker, p. 276.

[57] Parker, p. 135.

banalities which, together with little personality quirks of each (these, again for fear of giving offense, of possible unpleasantness, go unmentioned), build animosity within them. Finally, unable to go on as they are and unable to articulate and deal with their difficulties, they divorce. The social roles they felt themselves obligated to play have destroyed their marriage, for the roles proved unsatisfactory, yet were so strongly felt as requirements that the Weldons dared not step for even a moment outside of those roles to consider their lives.

In "Dusk Before Fireworks" Parker deals with a possible alternative to divorce for the unhappy wife: taking a lover. Yet the woman of this story finds that her attempted solution of the problem is in fact no solution at all. The same impossibilities of romantic love arise in this as in all such relationships, and she soon finds herself reduced as neatly to existence as a mere function of her lover, with its accompanying hysterical clinging, as she had ever found her existence subsumed into her husband's.

The woman's decision to take a gigolo lover in "Dusk Before Fireworks," like Mrs. Murdock's devotion to sentimental drama in "Glory in the Daytime," illustrates the need of women for something beyond the careful supervision of their maids to occupy their time meaningfully. Yet by choosing for her stories such ways in which women must fill their time, Parker underlines the dilemma of the wife in a society in which wives are expected to stay at home. In order for their lives to have any activity at all, the activity must be created from among the very few possibilities open to them and be "paid for with the

money of unwitting husbands, which is acceptable any place in the world."[58]

Three of Parker's best pieces concern women who chafe under the roles which they find themselves forced by society to play. Two of these, "The Waltz"[59] and "A Telephone Call,"[60] are written as monologs of women in trying social cum sexual situations; the third, "The Lovely Leave,"[61] concerns a wife left behind by a World War II soldier.

"The Waltz," perhaps Parker's most anthologized prose work, is composed of the thoughts of an unfortunate young woman at a dance, led about the floor by a young man of less than minimal grace, interspersed between the words she actually speaks to him. This dual structuring is ideally suited for emphasizing the dual realities under which the young woman must operate. First, her disdain for this particular young man extends to her equation of her willingness to dance with him with her eagerness to be in a midnight fire at sea. The second, equally true, reality is that she feels compelled by social dogma not only to dance with him but to be fawningly appreciative of him in so doing, to insist despite "the splintering of bones" that she would "simply adore to go on waltzing."[62] The word "no," Parker implies, is an unseemly word for a proper young woman's vocabulary—at least up until

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[58] Parker, p. 135.

[59] Parker, p. 47.

[60] Parker, p. 119.

[61] Parker, p. 3.

[62] Parker, p. 51.

arrival at that considerably more advanced stage at which "yes" becomes the unsuitable response.

A story on this line could certainly be of significant meaning if it stopped at this point, yet Parker gives "The Waltz" its greatest depth by showing that, for the woman of the story, the "real" reality is not simply comprised of that which goes on in her mind, as opposed to an utterly false social exterior. By allowing the waltzer's thoughts to progress sufficiently between blows to her shin, Parker makes the reader aware that the young woman's antipathy for the young man is not as extreme as she tells herself it is:

> Look at the spirit he gets into a dreary, commonplace waltz; how effete the other dancers seem, beside him. He is youth and vigor and courage, he is strength and gaiety and—Ow! get off my instep, you hulking peasant![63]

Social machinations, we see, are peculiar things: although personal feelings, to the extent that they are what we believe they are, do not enter into our social façades if we are polite, yet the social façade may well creep into our personal reality.

The protagonist of "A Telephone Call" faces a similarly difficult situation: she desperately wants, needs, her male friend to call her. She recognizes that her first call to him was probably an overbold step, and that to call him again rather than waiting for his promised return call would pass all bounds of decency—or at least of the lover's etiquette which she accepts—even though, if her friend were female, she knows that she would "just telephone and say, 'Well, for

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[63] Parker, p. 49.

goodness' sake, what happened to you?'"[64] It is she who, in her lone anguish, wonders why they hate you as soon as they are sure of you:

> I know you shouldn't keep telephoning them—I know they don't like that. When you do that, they know you are thinking about them and wanting them, and that makes them hate you. . . .
>
> I think he must still like me a little. . . . It isn't all gone, if he still likes me a little, even if it's only a little, little bit. . . .
>
> They don't like you to tell them you're unhappy because of them. If you do, they think you're possessive and exacting. And then they really hate you. You always have to keep playing little games.[65]

Like Miss Wilmarth in "Horsie" and the Bains in "The Wonderful Old Gentleman," the protagonists of "The Waltz" and "A Telephone Call" suffer because they, through long social indoctrination, have come to believe that they are in some sense inferior. In their case, they believe that their being women bounds them within certain confines of acceptable conduct. As with the other characters, the reader is not quite as furious with the outrageous social code itself as with the fact of its very success in convincing the downtrodden that they are in their rightful place.

"The Lovely Leave" is unique among the Parker stories in that it ends on an upswing: there may be hope after all. To be sure, the couple in the story is similar to many other Parker marriages in their jealousy, posturing, and bickering. The husband alone seems to lead any sort of significant existence; the wife is jealous of his being a man and his consequent ability to be involved in affairs of

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[64] Parker, p. 124.

[65] Parker, pp. 119, 121-22.

importance while she is left alone; and the husband is insensitive to his wife's feelings of estrangement. What sets "The Lovely Leave" apart from the others, however, is the fact that the husband and wife manage, for one moment, to break away from acting out their socially defined, foreordained roles and really say what they feel to each other. To be sure, their outward situation undergoes no visible change as a result of this exchange (the man continues out the door into the world while the wife stays behind) but the mere fact that there have been sincere assurances of love and concern, a momentary glimpse of the real human feeling behind the façade, suffices to make their parting bearable. Parker recognizes that such honesty is heady stuff and emphasizes the difficulty with which the wife and the soldier husband arrive at it:

> "I'm trying to tell you something. Just because you've got on that pretty suit, you think you should never hear anything serious, never anything sad or wretched or disagreeable. You make me sick, that's what you do! I know, I know—I'm not trying to take anything away from you, I realize what you're doing, I told you what I think of it. Don't, for heaven's sake, think I'm mean enough to grudge you any happiness and excitement you can get out of it. I know it's hard for you. But it's never lonely, that's all I mean. You have companionships no—no wife can ever give you. I suppose it's the sense of hurry, maybe, the consciousness of living on borrowed time, the—knowledge of what you're all going into together that makes the comradeship of men in war so firm, so fast. But won't you please try to understand how I feel? Won't you understand that it comes out of bewilderment and disruption and—and being frightened, I guess? Won't you understand what makes me do what I do, when I hate myself while I'm doing it? Won't you please understand? Darling, won't you please?"
>
> He laid down the little napkin. "I can't go through this kind of thing, Mimi," he said. "Neither can you." He looked at his watch. "Hey, it's time for me to go."
>
> She stood tall and stiff. "I'm sure it is," she said.
>
> "I'd better put on my blouse," he said.
>
> "You might as well," she said.
>
> He rose, wove his belt through the loops of his trousers,

> and went into the bedroom. She went over to the window and stood looking out, as if casually remarking the weather.
>
> She heard him come back into the room, but she did not turn around. She heard his steps stop, knew he was standing there.
>
> "Mimi," he said.
>
> She turned toward him, her shoulders back, her chin high, cool, regal. Then she saw his eyes. They were no longer bright and gay and confident. Their blue was misty and they looked troubled; they looked at her as if they pleaded with her.
>
> "Look, Mimi," he said, "do you think I want to do this? Do you think I want to be away from you? Do you think that this is what I thought I'd be doing now? In the years—well, in the years when we ought to be together."
>
> He stopped. Then he spoke again, but with difficulty. "I can't talk about it. I can't even think about it—because if I did I couldn't do my job. But just because I don't talk about it doesn't mean I want to be doing what I'm doing. I want to be with you, Mimi. That's where I belong. You know that, darling. Don't you?"
>
> He held his arms open to her. She ran to them.[66]

Although revelations such as these are manifestly not easily made, the frankness and breaking down of neatly defined roles of the meek, happily accepting wife and the duty-obsessed unemotional husband are the only avenues Parker admits for a possibly happy relationship. The story offers no real solution to the underlying difficulties; it is positive only insofar as the couple admits that they have a problem with which they must deal instead of refusing to admit the problem even as it gnaws away at them and at their marriage—the latter attitude being the one otherwise taken by Parker's wives and husbands.

As in the poems discussed with respect to the social comment strand of Parker's work, those which come under the broad umbrella theme of the inherently unsatisfactory lot of women in life and love

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[66] Parker, pp. 16-17.

are, with rare exception, less subtle than the stories of the same theme. While the stories consider to varying degrees this unhappy lot of women, the statements they make must be inferred; the poems, in contrast, are often explicitly and unabashedly didactic. Among the most unrelentingly bitter of such poems on the ultimate unhappiness of love is "Sonnet for the End of a Sequence":

> So take my vows and scatter them to sea;
> Who swears the sweetest is no more than human.
> And say no kinder words than these of me:
> "Ever she longed for peace, but was a woman!
> And thus they are, whose silly female dust
> Needs little enough to clutter it and bind it,
> Who meet a slanted gaze, and ever must
> Go build themselves a soul to dwell behind it."
>
> For now I am my own again, my friend!
> This scar but points the whiteness of my breast;
> This frenzy, like its betters, spins an end,
> And now I am my own. And that is best.
> Therefore, I am immeasurably grateful
> To you, for proving shallow, false, and hateful.[67]

"Ballade of a Great Weariness" similarly spells out her view of the inevitable situation of lovers:

> . . . . . .
> Oh, beggar or prince, no more, no more!
> Be off and away with your strut and show.
> The sweeter the apple, the blacker the core—
> Scratch a lover, and find a foe![68]

In "Somebody's Song," Parker takes the inevitability of the result a step further. Even though, intellectually, there is knowledge of love's pitfalls, emotionally there continues an unabated eagerness

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[67] Parker, p. 304.

[68] Parker, p. 100.

for new love. The fact that one knows a new affair will end no differently than previous affairs—that is to say miserably—is no effective restraint upon one's engaging in that new affair and even hoping that it, somehow, will be different after all:

> This is what I vow:
> He shall have my heart to keep;
> Sweetly will we stir and sleep,
> All the years, as now.
> Swift the measured sands may run;
> Love like this is never done;
> He and I are welded one:
> This is what I vow.
>
> This is what I pray:
> Keep him by me tenderly;
> Keep him sweet in pride of me,
> Ever and a day;
> Keep me from the old distress;
> Let me, for our happiness,
> Be the one to love the less:
> This is what I pray.
>
> This is what I know:
> Lovers' oaths are thin as rain;
> Love's a harbinger of pain—
> Would it were not so!
> Ever is my heart a-thirst,
> Ever is my love accurst;
> He is neither last nor first:
> This is what I know.[69]

Two poems are not as direct; they make statements which, like those of the stories, are less explicitly stated. One of these, "Penelope,"[70] is considered at some length below in the second section on Parker's style. The other such poem is "The Second Oldest Story":

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[69] Parker, pp. 81-82.

[70] Parker, p. 222.

Go I must along my ways
   Though my heart be ragged,
Dripping bitter through the days,
   Festering, and jagged.
Smile I must at every twinge,
   Kiss, to time its throbbing;
He that tears a heart to fringe
   Hates the noise of sobbing.
. . . . . .
Weep, my love, till Heaven hears;
   Curse and moan and languish.
While I wash your wound with tears,
   Ease aloud your anguish.
Bellow of the pit in Hell
   Where you're made to linger.
There and there and well and well—
   Did he prick his finger![71]

Here Parker again underlines the inequality of men and women. Only upon a second reading is one likely to realize the irony: men, who in public life are the strong, brave, and relied-upon sex, are the ones who in their relationships are privileged to rant and agonize, while women, dependent and meek in public, must provide the bedrock foundation for the relationship.

An attempt to classify all of Parker's stories and poems into one of two neat thematic boxes must remain less than entirely satisfactory. As with any artist of her stature, certain of the works resist and indeed transcend categorization; others simply do not quite fit into either of Parker's two most prevalent themes as they have been described above.

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[71] Parker, p. 218.

Two stories, "Clothe the Naked"[72] and "Soldiers of the Republic,"[73] stand out because they, rather than taking a sardonic view of unsympathetic protagonists, revolve around characters who represent positive ideals. Both stories are far from being tales of foolish optimism; the admirable central characters in each case endure extraordinary hardship. As always in Parker, there are foils supplied whose presence underlines the heroic virtue of Big Lannie in "Clothe the Naked" and of the soldiers; interestingly, the foil in "Soldiers of the Republic," instead of being an unflatteringly drawn social lion, is the first-person narrator herself. In the determined industriousness, the innate selflessness, and the great capacity for love of Big Lannie, as well as in the poignant humanity, even chivalry, of the soldiers, Parker breaks her usual pattern by portraying primarily virtue rather than vice or vicious ignorance. One notes nonetheless that the possessors of this virtue are abjectly poor; Parker still is unwilling to acknowledge it in the rich.

"The Standard of Living"[74] takes as its theme a notion which might be called Parker's Theory of Relativity. Annabel and Midge, the story's characters, find that all of the fun goes out of their playing "What would you do if you had a million dollars" when they price a single necklace and learn, to their horror, that it alone would eat up

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[72] Parker, p. 360.

[73] Parker, p. 165.

[74] Parker, p. 29.

fully a quarter of the sum they formerly believed to be infinite. The game takes on its old lustre anew, however, when they convert it into "What would you do if you had ten million dollars?" Their old standard of living is insufficient in the face of the expense of pearls; they feel the need for a new, better standard of living, one relatively sufficient to meet the high cost of items of necessary luxury. It is true, as one observes immediately, that the story of the young stenographers' fantasy is prima facie one of Parker's most good-humored, least bitter efforts. Yet beneath even it is a suggestion of her theme of the general malignancy of society: our lives are inordinately affected, if not indeed controlled, by our pursuit of and desire for lucre, and the more we have the more we are likely to imagine we need.

One of Parker's most adroit stories is "Mrs. Hofstadter on Josephine Street."[75] One could charge that, in a story like "Arrangement in Black and White," it is easy enough to paint a portrait of a bigoted and offensive white woman who meets a black concert artist, but in "Mrs. Hofstadter" Parker attempted, and accomplished, the nearly impossible (especially for the time of the story, written around forty years ago): she described an utterly offensive black man, Horace Wrenn, without at the same time giving racial offense. Indeed, by delivering an indictment of him, Parker a fortiori concedes his equality—one does not write stories ridiculing the helpless and inferior—thereby

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[75] Parker, p. 155.

elevating the black to an unaccoustomed place in the white literature of the time. Perhaps Wrenn's most offensive characteristic, indeed, is his own refusal to accept his blackness because he actually looks down on blacks:

> "Why, do you know," Horace said, "that girl of mine, she's taken for white every day in the week. Yes, sir. I bet there's a hundred people, right in this town, never dreams that girl of mine's a colored girl. And you're going to meet my sister, too, some of these days pretty soon. My sister's just about the finest hairdresser you ever set your eyes on. And never touches a colored head, either. She's just about like what I am. I try never to say an unkind thing, I don't hold nothing against the colored race, but Horace just doesn't mix up with them, that's all."
>
> I thought of a man I had once known named Aaron Eisenberg, who changed his name to Erik Colton. Nothing ever became of him.[76]

Implicit in the story, of course, is not only an indictment of a Horace Wrenn with his outrageous beliefs and insufferable, unctuous loquacity, but once again to some degree of the society which has so molded him.

Dorothy Parker's longest and perhaps best short story, winner of the 1929 O. Henry award,[77] is "Big Blonde."[78] In it Parker makes her most comprehensive statement about what she perceived to be the bitter realities of life and love. The story is about Mrs. Hazel Morse and her life through a job modeling lingerie, through a husband whom she loses when she loses her being in his, through a long period in which she is not exactly a prostitute and not exactly anything else, and

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[76] Parker, p. 159.

[77] Keats, p. 144.

[78] Parker, p. 187.

through too much alcohol. Parker's portrayal of Mrs. Morse is as devastating a portrait of utter bleakness and despair as exists in modern literature. "At her middle thirties, her old days were a blurred and flickered sequence, an imperfect film, dealing with the actions of strangers."[79] Unlike so many of Parker's stories, "Big Blonde" offers no positive characters who suggest ways in which its protagonist might have better ordered her life. Unlike most central characters in Parker stories, Hazel Morse is neither actively or passively wicked nor is she heroically good; she simply is the way she is, and life, with Mrs. Morse as little more than a pathetic bystander, turns the existence of the big blonde into one of perpetual misery. Finally, when alcohol is no longer much help in taking the hard edge off the emptiness and cruelty of life, Mrs. Morse comes to the same conclusion that Parker does in many of her poems (although the unrelieved despair of the prose hits much harder than the jaunty verse): the best answer, the only ultimately satisfactory response, to this life is to end it. Ironically, Mrs. Morse is foiled (as Parker was) in her attempt to commit suicide; after finding that "gay young Death would have none of her," she returns to her bottle.

Parker ties together both of her great themes, and more, in The Ladies of the Corridor,[80] a play written in collaboration with Arnaud d'Usseau in 1952. It is set in a New York City residental hotel for

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[79] Parker, p. 187.

[80] Dorothy Parker and Arnaud d'Usseau, The Ladies of the Corridor (New York: Viking Press, 1954 (hereinafter cited as "Ladies").

ladies, one of the sort in which Parker spent much of her own life. The play has three plots which evolve simultaneously about several of the hotel's residents; they are held together by the comment of a clucking chorus of elderly and longtime ladies of the corridor. Parker's first great theme, that of the basic emptiness of human life and the gratuitous ill will which often accompanies it, is embodied in this chorus of disapproving women. As one of them, Mrs. Gordon, observes, "Still waters run dirty."[81] Their own lives have long since been empty; the only activity left to them is belittling and casting aspersions upon their mutual enemies and, as soon as a back is turned, upon each other. They well play out the descriptions given of them by T. S. Eliot in "Sweeney Erect,"[82] from which the title of the play is taken:

> The ladies of the corridor
> Find themselves involved, disgraced
> Call witness to their principles
> And deprecate the lack of taste.

The selfishness and cruelty of which humans are capable is also portrayed in one of the three central plots, that of Mrs. Nichols, a semi-invalid who is cared for by a son, still barely young, whom she holds exactingly under her thumb. The son, Charlie, is desperate to cut apon strings and make his own life as a teacher, but the mother, cornered, does not hesitate to use blackmail of the most unsavory kind to keep her hold on him:

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[81] Ladies, p. 71.

[82] T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Erect," in T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1962), p. 25.

Mrs. Nichols: . . . But of course there are other matters.
Charles: What other matters?
Mrs. Nichols: Why, Charles, what a curious thing to ask! The obligations of a human being.
Charles: Grace, what are you talking about?
Mrs. Nichols: I'm talking about the most important thing of all—duty. Doctor Whittaker has a tremendous duty to those children. Those little boys are in his charge. He dare not expose them to—
Charles: To what?
Mrs. Nichols: Need we go into that?
Charles: Are you telling me that you feel you have a duty?
Mrs. Nichols: Yes, Charles, I am.
Charles: To whom?
Mrs. Nichols: To those little children, Charles. As I get nearer the grave, I realize that I must do what is right, painful though it may be to me and mine. If you're not going to tell Doctor Whittaker the truth, then I must.[83]

Parker's theme of the hopelessness of love is most clearly seen in the plot revolving around Lulu Ames, a newly arrived widow from Akron, and Paul Osgood, a younger man with whom she falls in love and who is, at least for a time, in love with her. But the Parkerian-cum-Sartrean inevitability does soon come around: Lulu begins to exist, and happily, only for Paul, and Paul quickly loses interest in this shell of a formerly beloved woman who is now nothing more than an extension of himself.

Both of the major themes figure heavily in the third plot of the play, that revolving about Mildred Tynan, a young woman who has taken refuge from her sadistic and unfaithful California husband in New

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[83] Ladies, pp. 92-93.

York—and in alcohol. Certainly romantic love has been a spectacularly disillusioning failure for her. In her plight, she receives cold shoulders, complaints, and snide remarks from her fellow hotel residents; the only person who has any genuine concern for her is (another Parker convention) the hotel maid. A heavy loser in both love and life, Mrs. Tynan, like Hazel Morse, decides that death must surely be better than this life and responds affirmatively to a bellman's suggestion: "Who do you think you are anyway? Nothing but an old bag who can't pay her bill. Why don't you get wise? Why don't you take a running jump for yourself?"[84]

Parker said that The Ladies of the Corridor "was the only thing I have ever done in which I have great pride,"[85] and her pride was not misplaced. Although the play's ending was tampered with by those concerned that its view was too bleak,[86] Parker's version of it, without the upswing, represents in some sense a culmination of her art. Certainly the play is close to being a literal culmination, for Parker's output in the fifteen years she lived after The Ladies of the Corridor was very slight. It is also an artistic culmination in that

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[84]Ladies, p. 115.

[85]Paris Review, 84.

[86]Keats, p. 264.

it presents succinct comments on both the prevalent inhumanity of human beings and on the impossibility of romantic love—Parker's two great themes.

It has been suggested that literary interest in Parker is essentially the interest one has in a museum piece: it is unparalleled in its description of a certain place and time, but it has little to say beyond those boundaries.[87] Such a belief is not an accurate one. Like the absurdists who postdate her considerably, Parker looked around her and saw a human condition marked by its irrationality and apparent hopelessness. Considerations of humanity were, as they always have been and certainly are now in the face of the new materialism of the seventies which has come hard after what was a largely illusory period of self-congratulatory social consciousness of the late sixties, swept aside in favor of the dollar. Millionaires and shopgirls alike recognized, and recognize, its supreme importance. As for any human relationships in which one may seek succor, they are almost certainly doomed from before their beginning.

Unlike utter absurdists who, like Beckett, come to their work with a moral tabula rasa, Parker's work, although despairing, posits a clear notion of the way humans ought to act, the way they must be before having any kind of decent life. Whether through sizzling portraits of negative characters or, less frequently and at less length, through poignant studies of the selfless, Parker points toward

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[87] Edmund Wilson, "A Toast and a Tear for Dorothy Parker," in Classics and Commercials (New York: Farrar & Strauss, 1950), p. 168; Gill, pp. xvi-xvii.

a far-off, possibly better world. In her conclusion of "Inventory," one of her poems, Parker explained, "Three be the things I shall have till I die: Laughter and hope and a sock in the eye."[88] The laughter goes throughout her work; although she deals with the bitterest of human experiences, Parker always manages to amuse with her droll irreverence. The hope is there—if only we see what we're like, perhaps we can change—yet it is stated only in undertones and it is not very assured. The sock in the eye works two ways for Parker; it is at once the injury done by a cruel society to a feeling person and the literary right cross with which Parker retaliates to do what damage she can, although she knows it to be precious little, to this society which hits while you're not looking.

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[88] Parker, p. 96.

CHAPTER IV

STYLE AND STYLISTICS

The hallmark of Dorothy Parker's style at its best, in both poetry and prose, is her economy of expression. She worked hard at what writing she forced herself to do—"I never write five words but I change seven—"[1] and the results of her labor are well-crafted and concise.

If Parker's prose style has a major drawback, it is that she can't pass up a good line. One recalls her rueful comment that she, like her contemporaries in the twenties, felt compelled to be smarty. This quality tends to take the form of a very conscious sort of artistry in which the writer manages not only to be clever but, not a little egregiously, to call attention to the cleverness. Although this sort of writing provides for frequent chortles, it also may well interrupt the flow of the prose and eventually become grating on the reader. Parker's prose work shows a definite chronological development in this area: her earliest work is shot through with gratuitous side comments, with narrator's intrusions, while her later work rarely employs such devices. Most of Parker's earliest work consisted of pieces for magazines composed of several short sketches running in the same patterns: a hypochondriac, a bluff know-it-all patriot, a consciously clever lady, a wife who can talk of nothing but her children, and

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[1] Paris Review, 83.

similar stock creations. The insertions of the too-clever quips come throughout these sketches, and Parker almost never resists ending the description of each person with a wisecracking tag line (of the hypochondriac's likelihood of fainting should she encounter a germ: "So, one rather imagines, would the germ."[2]).

As Parker began to write stories rather than mere sketches she also began what seems to have been a concerted effort to edit out the gratuitous side comments which affect the flow of a story more than they do that of a mere sketch. No more would her prose feature such blatantly peremptory summaries of meaning for the reader who might be a bit slow.

Many of Parker's stories, especially the early ones, solve the problem of intrusive narration by allowing the characters to tell the story for themselves; that is, they are largely composed of conversation. As pronounced an example as any of this device is "Arrangement in Black and White"; the section quoted above shows that Parker had found ways of getting her points across through the mouths of others without having, as narrator, to announce them.

Another favorite device of Parker's in making her points about the people in her stories is to enter their thoughts. More frequently than having the narrator intrude to the extent of actually saying that this person had that thought, Parker chooses the rather subtle form of an imperceptible intrusion of the particular person's thought or style of speech into the narration itself. Thus, in describing

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[2]Dorothy Parker, "Our Tuesday Club," Ladies' Home Journal, July 1920, pp. 4, 88.

Mr. Durant's sending off the pregnant Ruby, the narrator (otherwise third person) reports, "He laughed indulgently, had made himself pat her thin back. In his relief at the outcome of things, he could be generous to the pettish."[3] The point is, of course, that Rose is not pettish and Mr. Durant is not generous. Similarly, the narrator enumerates her surviving remembrance of the first dinner Horace cooks in "Mrs. Hofstadter on Josephine Street": "I can bring back, while faintness spirals up through me, an impression of waxen gray gravy, loose pink gelatine, and butter at blood-heat, specialties finer than which Mrs. Hofstadter on Josephine Street had never et."[4] The vocabulary of Annabel and Midge likewise makes little, almost unnoticed entrance into the narration of "The Standard of Living." At one time Annabel and Midge made an attempt to introduce one of their co-workers to their game:

> She explained the rules to Sylvia and then offered her the gambit "What would be the first thing you' do?" Sylvia had not shown the decency of even a second of hesitation. "Well," she said, "the first thing I'd do, I'd go out and hire somebody to shoot Mrs. Gary Cooper, and then . . ." So it is to be seen that she was no fun.[5]

In this one brief passage, Parker manages to imply the deadly seriousness with which the girls take their game ("the decency of even a second of hesitation") and to indicate simultaneously the girls' would-be high society view of themselves and their actual naiveté:

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[3]Parker, p. 41.

[4]Parker, p. 167.

[5]Parker, p. 31.

the calculatedly highfalutin "So it is to be seen" is followed by the decidedly colloquial "that she was no fun."

With a few notable exceptions ("Big Blonde," The Ladies of the Corridor and "The Lovely Leave" are three obvious ones), Parker does not deal at great length with character development; she is usually too concerned with telling her story and making her point in the most concise fashion possible. What she lacks in frequency of deep study of motivation and psychological makeup, however, she compensates for in the brief yet amazingly comprehensive descriptions with which she is capable of introducing a character. Certainly an outstanding example of such a description is that of Mrs. Whittaker in "The Wonderful Old Gentleman," quoted above. The first line of "Arrangement in Black and White" gives the only description of the proudly unbigoted woman we are to have, but it is all we need:

> The woman with the pink velvet poppies twined round the assisted gold of her hair traversed the crowded room at an interesting gait combining a skip with a sidle, and clutched at the lean arm of her host.[6]

Two sentences suffice to give a complete description of the employment agency lady who favors the narrator and her husband with Horace Wrenn's services in "Mrs. Hofstadter": she "was built in terraces; she was of a steady pink, presumably all over, and a sky-wide capability. She bit into each of her words and seemed to find it savory, and she finished every sentence to the last crumb."[7]

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[6]Parker, p. 19.

[7]Parker, p. 155.

"Big Blonde" begins with such a succinct description of Hazel Morse. It tells exactly the sort of woman she is in one paragraph; the novella-length story which follows does so almost automatically from this introduction:

> Hazel Morse was a large, fair woman of the type that incites some men when they use the word "blonde" to click their tongues and wag their heads roguishly. She prided herself upon her small feet and suffered for her vanity, boxing them in snubtoed, high-heeled slippers of the shortest bearable size. The curious things about her were her hands, strange terminations to the flabby white arms spattered with pale tan spots—long, quivering hands with deep and convex nails. She should not have disfigured them with little jewels.[8]

Here are Mrs. Morse's somewhat cheap beauty, her harmless silliness in small things, a suggestion of the somewhat unexpected inner sensitivity, and the decay which has already set in and which will come to drive her to attempt to destroy herself.

Dorothy Parker as a poet is, if nothing else, a conscious and careful stylist. Despite the fact that her craftsmanship was often used on calculatedly flippant verse, Parker sometimes, if rarely, allowed herself to probe more deeply, and the result is some very fine, stylistically excellent, poetry. Various aspects of Parker's style will be considered below; most of these concern ways in which she achieved this determined flippancy, although poems in which she goes beyond light verse well into that ill-defined haze of "poetry" will also be looked at in conclusion.

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[8]Parker, p. 187.

Dorothy Parker's most quoted and well-known poems are probably those which, like her bon mots, were on the tips of everyone's tongue in the Roaring Twenties. A deft stylistic touch may be observed in even these couplets and quatrains. Their very metric regularity is often a device which reinforces their meaning, as seen in the two below.

Harriet Beecher Stowe

The pure and worthy Mrs. Stowe
Is one we all are proud to know
As mother, wife, and authoress—
Thank God, I am content with less![9]

Alexander Dumas and His Son

Although I work, and seldom cease,
At Dumas père and Dumas fils,
Alas, I cannot make me care
For Dumas fils and Dumas père.[10]

In the Stowe poem, the plodding, regular, stately rhythm is just the right touch for dealing with the stately and, implicitly, exceedingly dull Mrs. Stowe. Similarly, the plodding regularity of the Dumas poem suggests the determinedly dutiful yet dreadfully boring exercises of the would-be reader.

Such short, epigrammatic poems, dependent as they are on riveting the reader's or listener's attention as they make their rapid ironic point, can tolerate little tension or poetic counterpoint of the kind

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[9]Parker, p. 220.

[10]Parker, p. 221.

discussed by such New Critics as Wellek and Warren.[11] That is, since the message conveyed is likely to have a twist rather than be simply straightforward and since there is very little time to establish a basic line against which in turn to establish tension or a counterpoint rhythm, the epigram must rest largely upon regular rhythm, allowing the message to carry the weight of the poem. Parker's careful regularity, which avoids any sing-song effect due to brevity and allows the ironic poems themselves to dominate without any special rhythmic interference is well illustrated in "Partial Comfort":

> Whose love is given over-well
> Shall look on Helen's face in hell,
> Whilst they whose love is thin and wise
> May view John Knox in paradise.[12]

Even in very short poems a metric substitution may satisfactorily be made if, as Fussell dictates, it has "the power to persuade us that, given the local pressures of emotion and utterance, it is entirely inevitable."[13] Parker's verse shows a sensitivity to this requirement; "Godspeed" is an apt illustration.

> Oh, seek, my love, your newer way,
> I'll not be left in sorrow.
> So long as I have yesterday,
> Go take your damned tomorrow![14]

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[11]See Style in Language, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York: MIT, 1960), p. 206.

[12]Parker, p. 219.

[13]Paul Fussell, Jr., Poetic Meter and Poetic Form (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 102.

[14]Parker, p. 103.

The only non-iambic foot (with the exception, of course, of the hypermetric even lines) is the one beginning the second line, and it does seem "inevitable." The spondee here underlines the speaker's defiance; it enables her to emphasize both that, unlike others who may be in her situation, there will be no great upheaval on her part, and that she is entirely convinced—or wishes to seem so—about her negation.

That Parker was comfortable only in writing such relatively slick, epigrammatic verse is apparent not only when one surveys the body of her work but in certain of her poems as well.

Interior

Her mind lives in a quiet room,
A narrow room, and tall,
With pretty lamps to quench the gloom
And mottoes on the wall.
. . . . . .
Her mind lives tidily, apart
From cold and noise and pain,
And bolts the door against her heart,
Out wailing in the rain.[15]

For a Lady Who Must Write Verse

Unto seventy years and seven,
   Hide your double birthright well—
You, that are the brat of Heaven
   And the pampered heir to Hell.

Let your rhymes be tinsel treasures,
   Strung and seen and thrown aside.
Drill your apt and tidy measures
   Sternly as you drill your pride.

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[15]Parker, p. 215.

Show your quick, alarming skill in
   Tidy mockeries of art;
Never, never dip your quill in
   Ink that rushes from your heart.
. . . . . .

Never print, poor child, a lay on
   Love and tears and anguishing,
Lest a cool, benignant Phaon
   Murmur, "Silly little thing!"[16]

As with her reviews and stories, these poems amount to almost a confession that Parker's poetry was largely framed negatively because she dared not trust herself, for fear of others' reaction to it, to write her poems otherwise.

Through her careful control of lexicon, form, and meter, Parker often succeeds in adding a cynical invulnerability, a certain calculated hardness to her verse. One favorite lexical device of Parker's is the sudden juxtaposition of colloquial language, often at the end of a poem, with a language which has theretofore been more formal. This turn of language often reinforces a similar surprising turn of sentiment—of the message being conveyed. Examples of such slap-in-the-face combined shifts of idiom and tone may be seen in the above "Goodspeed" and in "One Perfect Rose":

A single flow'r he sent me, since we met.
   All tenderly his messenger he chose;
Deep'hearted, pure, with scented dew still wet—
   One perfect rose.

I knew the language of the floweret:
   "My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose."
Love long has taken for his amulet
   One perfect rose.

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[16]Parker, p. 238.

Why is it no one ever sent me yet
One perfect limousine, do you suppose?
Ah no, it's always just my luck to get
One perfect rose.[17]

Parker juxtaposes the quaint, tender, old-fashioned words of the first two stanzas ("scented dew," "floweret," "amulet") with a surprisingly unsentimental modern reaction to them—couched in appropriately modern words ("limousine," "it's always just my luck to get"). Also worth nothing is the refrain-like final line of each stanza; a spondaic substitution precedes a (regular) iambic foot. In the first two stanzas, the spondee serves to suggest a dreamlike, enchanted lingering over the tender and lovely symbol of the rose. Without changing actual metric form, Parker uses context to give the final repetition of the spondaic substitution an entirely different connotation: big deal.

With few exceptions, Parker spurns such traditional formal comic devices as ludicrous enjambment, interior rhyme, strained feminine or triple rhyme, and so forth. One is tempted to speculate that she found them too easy, yet simultaneously too difficult to use while maintaining her chosen cynical persona. The few exceptions, however, are, as might be expected since she deemed them suitable for public display, classics of their consciously ludicrous, Ogden Nash-like kind (one notes also the surprising lexical turn in the final line of "Parable"):

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[17] Parker, p. 104.

Parable for a Certain Virgin

Oh, ponder, friend, the porcupine;
   Refresh your recollection,
And sit a moment, to define
   His means of self-protection.
. . . . . .

Recall his figure, and his shade—
   How deftly planned and clearly
For slithering through the dappled glade
   Unseen, or pretty nearly.

Yet should an alien eye discern
   His presence in the woodland,
How little has he left to learn
   Of self-defense! My good land!
. . . . . .

Or should pursuers press him hot,
   One scarcely needs to mention
His quick and cruel barbs, that got
   Shakespearean attention;
. . . . . .

How sharply armored, he, to fend
   The fear of chase that haunts him!
How well prepared our little friend!—
   And who the devil wants him?[18]

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Should Heaven send me any son,
I hope he's not like Tennyson.
I'd rather have him play a fiddle
Than rise and bow and speak and idyll.[19]

A formal device which Parker does use a great deal is closely related to the sudden lexical turns described above; indeed, it is the same sudden tonal, attitudinal shift, simply without the added jar of so clearly a changed vocabulary:

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[18] Parker, pp. 213-14.

[19] Parker, p. 221.

Love Song

My own dear love, he is strong and bold
   And he cares not what comes after.
His words ring sweet as a chime of gold,
   And his eyes are lit with laughter.
He is jubilant as a flag unfurled—
   Oh, a girl, she'd not forget him.
My own dear love, he is all my world—
   And I wish I'd never met him. . . .[20]

Sweet Violets

You are brief and frail and blue—
Little sisters, I am, too.
You are Heaven's masterpieces—
Little loves, the likeness ceases.[21]

As already indicated, albeit in passing, Dorothy Parker is a careful metrical artist. One further example will be mentioned; in it one senses the regularity of the seamstress's task—the "dip and dart—" through the similar and entirely regular dip and dart iambs which, until the last line, comprise the poem. The surprising final turn is intensified through its containing the poem's first metrical irregularity. The shocking message is emphasized by a concluding spondee; the end comes after only the second (rather than the fourth) foot, and the reader hardly knows what hit her.

The Satin Dress

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

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[20]Parker, p. 106.

[21]Parker, p. 310.

See the stitches curve and crawl
Round the cunning seams—
Patterns thin and sweet and small
As a lady's dreams.

Wantons go in bright brocade;
Brides in organdie;
Gingham's for the plighted maid;
Satin's for the free!

Wool's to line a miser's chest;
Crape's to calm the old'
Velvet hides an empty breast;
Satin's for the bold!

Lawn is for a bishop's yoke;
Linen's for a nun;
Satin is for wiser folk—
Would the dress were done!

Satin flows in candlelight—
Satin's for the proud!
They will say who watch at night,
"What a fine shroud!"[22]

A sort of reverse use of substitution is seen in "Epitaph." Monotony is broken by an anapestic substitution in each line prior to the final one; indeed, the penultimate line features a regularly placed double anapestic substitution (on the even feet). The reason for all this is to render the final line, the first entirely regular one, suggestive of a monotonous eternity into which the speaker only then settles; the final phrase is repeated to create the same, intensified effect.

The first time I died, I walked my ways;
I followed the file of limping days.

I held me tall, with my head flung up,
But I dared not look on the new moon's cup.

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[22]Parker, p. 81.

I dared not look on the sweet young rain,
And between my ribs was a gleaming pain.

The next time I died, they laid me deep,
They spoke warm words to hallow my sleep.

They tossed me petals, they wreathed me fern,
They weighted me down with a marble urn.

And I lie here warm, and I lie here dry,
And watch the worms slip by, slip by.[23]

Of special metrical interest is Dorothy Parker's use of dactyls. As Karl Shapiro remarks in his A Prosody Handbook, the dactyl is appropriate for "droll and frisky effects"; although it is often considered mournful, the dactyl is, he suggests, "probably even better suited to comic and exuberant effects than to elegaic ones."[24] The meter is one of Parker's favorites, and, with its peculiar combination of morbid and jocund qualities, it is not difficult to see why. Parker rarely deigns to use the dactyl in a traditionally comical, nursery-rhyme meter sort of way, but on that rare occasion she uses it to outstanding comic effect:

The Life and Times of John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelly, and George Gordon Noel, Lord Byron

Byron and Shelley and Keats
Were a trio of lyrical treats.
The forehead of Shelley was cluttered with curls,
And Keats never was a descendant of earls,
And Byron walked out with a number of girls,

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[23]Parker, p. 79.

[24]Karl Shapiro and Robert Beum, A Prosody Handbook (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 43.

But it didn't impair the poetical feats
Of Byron and Shelley,
Of Byron and Shelley,
Of Byron and Shelley and Keats.[25]

More often, though, Parker's use of the dactyl is not as overtly for comic effect. It is perhaps not idle to speculate that she was influenced somewhat by classical dactylic meter; certainly she studied Latin for a number of years.[26] One of her poems, in fact, takes Catullus as its main character. It seems reasonable to suggest that Parker may have gravitated toward this meter as a function of her enunciated unwillingness, or at least hesitancy, to plunge her quill, as she said, into the ink flowing from her heart. If dactyllic meter is widely considered to be mournful, it is also widely considered to be flippant; the meter provides its own, built-in deflator. It is not difficult to see how a poet terrified of being called a "silly little thing" by a "benignant Phaon" would be attracted by it.

Given this dual effect, the dactyl is bound to lend a sort of negative, denying quality to whatever is written in it. If one is to make light of life and doubt that it has meaning, as Parker often does, then the reputedly nonserious dactyl is an appropriate instrument to use in surgery. The dual traditional readings of the dactyl make it the ideal vehicle for the renowned Parker cynicism, the bitterness at

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[25] Parker, p. 219.

[26] Keats, p. 23.

the inexplicability of life tinged with coyness, the waving of a jaunty handkerchief at the abyss.

Comment

Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song,
A medley of extemporanea;
And love is a thing that can never go wrong;
And I am Marie of Roumania.[27]

Coda

There's little in taking or giving,
  There's little in water or wine;
This living, this living, this living
  Was never a project of mine.
Oh, hard is the struggle, and sparse is
  The gain of the one at the top,
For art is a form of catharsis,
  And love is a permanent flop,
And work is the province of cattle,
  And rest's for a clam in a shell,
So I'm thinking of throwing the battle—
  Would you kindly direct me to hell?[28]

Although her verse is predominantly of this self-consciously cynical kind, utilizing lexicon, form, meter, or a combination of these for deflation of seriousness, Parker occasionally allows herself to break through her self-imposed barriers; when she does, she is often revealed as a fine, sensitive lyric poet. "Penelope" is perhaps the finest poem which transcends the usual Parker poetic persona:

In the pathway of the sun,
  In the footsteps of the breeze,
Where the earth and sky are one,
  He shall ride the silver seas,
    He shall cut the glittering wave.
I shall sit at home, and rock;

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[27]Parker, p. 96.

[28]Parker, p. 240.

Rise, to heed a neighbor's knock;
Brew my tea, and snip my thread;
Bleach the linen for my bed.
They will call him brave.[29]

The basic meter of the poem is trochaic, yet lurking behind the opening trochees of the first three lines are anapests. They give a stronger force to the words which follow, respectively "pathway," "footsteps," and "world." These are justifiably emphasized, for they are emblems of the routes of adventure open to the man but closed to the woman. This sexual discrepancy is made all the more apparent by the return to the strong trochee in the openings of lines four and five: "He shall . . . He shall." In these two lines without anapestic substitution it is important not to have any suggestion of monotony in the life of Ulysses which too strict a meter might impart; Parker avoids this by posing the normally three-syllable "glittering" into a trochaic foot. Elision occurs, but the tension created suffices to remove the danger of monotony. Suddenly, though, the focus returns to the woman waiting at home, and the response is both formal and metric. The lines jump back, all in a row, to the extreme left margin, and they take on an absolutely regular meter in describing the monotonous little tasks through which the woman at home pretends that she is busy. So complete is the lack of tension that the rhyme scheme shifts from abab to couplets ddee; some semblance of interest might arise from even holding one line in abeyance for the duration of the succeeding line before we see what the rhyme will be. The final line,

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[29] Parker, p. 220.

a reference to the male (who else would be expected to have the last word?), appropriately rhymes with and is on a margin with line five, the last line of the earlier description of Ulysses. This final line, making its understated yet emphatic point about the absurdity, the unfairness of a system which mandates a real living with all laud for men and a totally unacknowledged pseudo-existence for women, could conceivably be scanned as a dochmaic with all syllables accented. In other words, it is an almost ametrical, totally stressed statement, and it is intended to be in as sharp contrast to the extreme regularity of the preceding lines as is the male's exciting, adventurous life to the female's hopelessly monotonous and boring existence.

That Dorothy Parker's poetry is deserving of more praise than is usually given it may also be seen in her control of meter, form, language, and imagery in "Bric-à-Brac":

> Little things that no one needs—
> Little things to joke about—
> Little landscapes, done in beads.
> Little morals, woven out,
> Little wreaths of gilded grass,
> Little brigs of whittled oak
> Bottled painfully in glass;
> These are made by lonely folk.
>
> Lonely folk have lines of days
> Long and faltering and thin;
> Therefore—little wax bouquets,
> Prayers cut upon a pin,
> Little maps of pinkish lands,
> Little charts of curly seas,
> Little plats of linen strands,
> Little verses, such as these.[30]

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[30]Parker, p. 215.

Since the poem is occupied with a discussion of trite and meaningless activities done by lonely people who have no better way—no way of any significance or importance—to fill their time, it is appropriate that the meter is similarly commonplace and, like the lives of lonely people, with virtually nothing irregular or unexpected. The poem goes on in its monotonous trochaic tetrameter, rhyming alternate lines in the accepted humdrum manner. Knit one; purl two. The unoriginality and the mundaneness of the meter are crucial to the poem's meaning, for it is itself an artifact, like the other little handicrafts, of a lonely mind which has no other way in which to occupy itself. Each of the two metrical irregularities are intentionally done to enhance the poem's effect and meaning. The first, "painfully," is a dactyl used to draw out the description of the ship in the bottle; the two unaccented syllables take away the iambic bounce and emphasize the long, drawn-out process. The second irregularity, "Long and faltering and thin," represents a trochee followed by two unaccented syllables (that is, a pyrrhic substituted for the expected trochee). This must cause the rhythm itself to falter and thereby to underline the meaning and effect of the phrase.

"Bric-à-Brac" is composed of two octets. It is also, more to the point, constructed of two sets of images (opening and closing) around a central statement which elaborates these images. As in much of Parker's poetry, the final line is of special interest; here, the speaker suddenly makes it clear that these "Little verses" are on a par with the ships in bottles, the landscapes, the morals: insignificant occupations for the unoccupied mind. The triteness and metaphysical

smallness of all these activities is stressed by Parker's insistent repetition of "Little," eleven times in the sixteen line poem, as the first word of each phrase enumerating yet another senseless time-filler. Her use of "Bottled painfully" has already been mentioned but merits further attention in terms of vocabulary selection. The more expected word here would have been "painstakingly," but Parker, by choosing "painfully," is able to achieve a certain morbid quality in her portrayal of this ship, agonizingly put into the bottle and agonizing to look at once it is there.

Each of the images Parker presents is in keeping with her tone, which manages to combine a certain cynicism ("Little things to joke about") with a sense of the emptiness and unhappiness present when one is driven to manufacture these "Little things that no one needs." Such people must face "lines of days/long and faltering and thin." The series of images depicting the tangible products of loneliness are certainly successful in establishing a vivid picture and a certain pathos: "Little landscapes, done in beads . . . Little morals, woven out . . . Little maps of pinkish lands . . . Little charts of curly seas." All these images are notable for their lack of grandeur; they create, on the contrary, clear pictures of undistinguished handiwork.

One might argue that "Bric-à-Brac" would be a better poem and still convey the same essence were it presented as simply a series of images connected only by implication rather than by internal explanation. William Carlos Williams, a contemporary of Parker, insisted along these

lines that there could be "no ideas but in things."[31] While the description of the "lonely folk" is exceptionally apt and quite short, there is from such a viewpoint some merit to the argument for leaving it out. That this would be even possible is a tribute to Parker's skill as a poet, for it argues that her message—her "ideas"— come across quite clearly in her "things"— her words and images—themselves.

The above brief examples reveal that Dorothy Parker is a better poet, certainly a more careful stylist, than her almost nonexistent critical reputation would suggest. Perhaps the most apt insistence thus far made on her skill is, surprisingly, her own in "Fighting Words":

> Say my love is easy had,
> Say I'm bitten raw with pride,
> Say I am too often sad—
> Still behold me at your side.
>
> Say I'm neither brave nor young,
> Say I woo and coddle care,
> Say the devil touched my tongue—
> Still you have my heart to wear.
>
> But say my verses do not scan,
> And I get me another man![32]

Unlike some later authors who have looked around, seen a world of indifferent (if not actively cruel) irrationality, and proceeded to write their impressions following the evident guideline that their form should be one of apparent careening incoherence following their function

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[31]William Carlos Williams, quoted in Richard Ellman and Robert O'Clair, eds., The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 286.

[32]Parker, p. 114.

of commenting on that perceived irrationality of the universe, Dorothy Parker portrays a world of disorder and despair through a most careful and tidy style. Even Parker herself recognized that she possessed this talent; she allowed that her word did have precision—"all I realize I've ever had in prose writing."[33] No amount of rage at the world provokes Dorothy Parker to sputtering indignation; she is always able to find exactly the right word or turn of phrase to create the impression she wishes to leave.

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[33]Paris Review, 78.

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VITA

Ronald R. Allen, Jr., was born May 24, 1955, in Knoxville, Tennessee, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Ronald R. Allen. He attended Pleasant Ridge Elementary School, Northwest Junior High School, and West High School, from which he graduated in 1973. He served as student council president, editor of the school newspaper, and president of Quill and Scroll. As a senior at West, he was named a National Merit Scholarship finalist and received the Woodmen of the World American history award and the Alfred L. Jobe English award. He also won a letter on the West golf team. Among Mr. Allen's extracurricular activities were the Knoxville Oratorical Contest, which he twice won, participation in Carousel Theatre, in which he played roles including Caliban and Scrooge, and membership in the Broadway Baptist Church, in which he continues to be active.

Mr. Allen matriculated at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 1973. That year he became a member of the first group chosen for the College Scholars program and was the founding editor of the College Scholars Newsletter. While a sophomore he served as a legislative aide in the Tennessee General Assembly; from this experience evolved his undergraduate thesis, Women and Women's Rights Legislation in the Tennessee House of Representatives in 1975. As a specialist in comparative literature, Mr. Allen earned the equivalents of major concentrations in French and in English, with a minor in German. His extracurricular activities in college included serving as captain of the UT

Varsity College Bowl team, writing reviews and features for the Daily Beacon, and membership in Vol Corps. Mr. Allen's academic affiliations include Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Kappa Phi, Pi Delta Phi, Delta Phi Alpha and Phi Eta Sigma. He also received the 1977 Eleanora R. Burke award for nonfiction writing, the 1977 Kind Memorial German scholarship, the 1976 Alumni Association scholarship for foreign travel, the Mortar Board Senior Citation, and the Chancellor's Citation for Extraordinary Achievement. He was awarded the degree of Bachelor of Arts summa cum laude, ranked first in his class, in June 1977.

Mr. Allen received the Master's degree in English in August 1978 on the basis of work done for graduate credit prior to his receiving the bachelor's degree and during the summers of 1977 and 1978. Among other positions, he has worked with the Tennessee Valley Authority Division of Law and as an aide to the Knox County Legislative Delegation. In his spare moments Mr. Allen is a student at the Yale Law School, where he is a member of the class of 1980.