More Than a Jester: Dorothy Parker's Use of the Popular Magazine Market for Social Criticism

Megan Dempsey

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons
More Than a Jester: Dorothy Parker's Use of the Popular Magazine Market for Social Criticism

by

Megan Dempsey

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Master of Arts

May 2014
Abstract

The re-evaluation of texts written by women from newer critical perspectives has allowed for more nuanced critical analyses of Dorothy Parker’s writing compared to the earliest commentaries which often conflated her biography with her literature or focused on her humor without acknowledging the underlying social criticism. This thesis is one such analysis, examining how Parker used the popular magazine market as a venue for publishing short stories that criticized class inequity, racism, and gender norms in the middle and upper classes during the first decades of the twentieth century. The content within popular magazines created an image of the ideal life, formulated around dominant ideologies and prejudices particular to the editors’ tastes and intended to attract specific readerships. Parker’s magazine short stories were not only literary products of her culture; they were also commodities that contributed to the creation of that culture and attempted to subvert or dismantle the hypocrisy and inequity of the dominant ideologies marketed to the intelligent masses by popular magazines.

In “A Certain Lady,” “From the Diary of a New York Lady,” and “Song of the Shirt, 1941,” all published in the New Yorker, Parker presents self-absorbed, materialistic female stereotypes in social situations representative of the stories’ time periods to suggest that cultural forces beyond the characters’ control inform and validate their negative behaviors. She uses the New Yorker as a venue for publishing criticism of the upper-class culture that created the materialistic, status-obsessed New York society women who made up a substantial portion of the magazine’s readership. Parker’s New Yorker stories critique the values of the New York upper class that caused the ideology of consumption to become internalized by the magazine’s elitist readers.
Parker subverts traditional uses of racial difference to criticize racial hypocrisy among the upper classes in “Arrangement in Black and White,” also published in the *New Yorker*, and “Clothe the Naked,” published in *Scribner’s Magazine*. “Arrangement in Black and White,” published in the late 1920s, exhibits Parker’s characteristic humor to satirize the internalized racist beliefs of a woman who claims to be above the race question. By contrast, in the late 1930s, after Parker had become actively involved in political activities protesting social injustices, she publishes “Clothe the Naked” without any attempt to use humor or satire to mask her criticism of the treatment of poor blacks at the hands of rich whites.

From a feminist perspective, “The Sexes,” “Here We Are,” and “The Lovely Leave” demonstrate how men and women in specific historical contexts perform socially constructed gender roles, particularly when interacting with the opposite sex. These stories anticipate Judith Butler’s theories on performative gender identity. The stories were published in *The New Republic, Cosmopolitan*, and *Woman’s Home Companion* respectively, and such publication choices suggest an effort on Parker’s part to satirize popularly held notions about gender reinforced by these magazines, thus subverting each magazine’s dominant ideology.

This study is essential to the re-examination of Parker’s works that recent critics have begun, to elucidate Parker’s important role as an early feminist and insightful social critic. It contributes to the body of scholarship on Parker by considering short stories that others have not and by contextualizing those stories within the magazines that promoted the very ideas about class, race and gender that Parker critiques.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: The <em>New Yorker</em>’s Leisure-Class Readers</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: The Realities of Race</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Performative Gender and Social Expectations</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

In 1963, after decades of publishing poetry, short stories, and numerous book and theater reviews, Dorothy Parker commented, “I want to be taken seriously as a short story writer and, by God, I hope to make it” (Day 109). Although her literary works have never gone out of print, she is more well known for the acerbic bon mots that have become legendary, for her numerous failed suicide attempts and fondness for drinking, or for the short, memorable verses that she began to tell people she wished she had never written (Day 112). The re-evaluation of texts written by women from newer critical perspectives has allowed for more nuanced critical analyses of Parker’s writing compared to the earliest commentaries which often conflated her biography with her literature or focused on her humor without acknowledging the underlying social criticism. Parker should be taken seriously as a short story writer, particularly for her skill at using the form within popular magazine culture to criticize class inequity, racism, and gender norms in the middle and upper classes during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Nearly all of Parker’s short stories were initially published in popular magazines—many in the New Yorker, to which she was a founding contributor, but also in publications like Scribner’s, The New Republic, Cosmopolitan, and Woman’s Home Companion. Her stories were commodities consumed by a population of middle and upper class leisure readers who would have also been confronted with numerous advertisements and social announcements in the same pages. Taken all together, the content within these magazines created an image of the ideal life, formulated around dominant ideologies and prejudices particular to the editors’ tastes and what they thought their consumers would want to read. Through her stories, Parker negotiates conflicting
ideals in her own life and her society: her public persona was feminine and provocative in a manner expected of a progressive woman in her time, yet her intelligence and wit allowed her to hold her own in a dominantly male social circle.

Although she considered herself a feminist, Parker also believed that she needed to write like a man in order to be successful. Her skillful negotiation of these conflicting positions made her a successful female writer among her male contemporaries. Few critics have undertaken analysis of Parker’s works in relation to their publication venues, yet the magazines in which the stories were published are a significant indication of how Parker accomplished such negotiation. She was adept at writing short stories that would appeal to editors and readers while putting into circulation her criticism of the dominant cultural attitudes and prejudices that the magazines perpetuated. Thus, Parker’s short stories were not only literary products of her culture; as commodities, they contributed to the creation of that culture and attempted to subvert or dismantle the hypocrisy and inequity of the dominant ideologies marketed to the intelligent masses by popular magazines.

Serious literary criticism of Parker’s works began to appear after her death in the late 1960s. Emily Toth examined the use of humor by Parker and Erica Jong, concluding that Parker could not envision a way out of the restrictive gender roles of her society while Jong and other women used humor to escape the confines of patriarchal society. Paula Treichler argued in “Verbal Subversions in Dorothy Parker: ‘Trapped Like a Trap in a Trap’” that Parker uses language in addition to humor to subvert gender expectations. In her notes, Treichler indicates that much of the writing on Parker appeared in anecdotal or biographical magazine articles and reviews. Treichler and Toth initiated a feminist
critical examination of Parker’s writing that moved beyond simply demonstrating that her poetry and stories were autobiographical, which had been the common practice when writing about Parker. Evidence of this tendency can be found in the bio-bibliography *Dorothy Parker*, first published by Arthur Kinney in 1978.

In more recent years, feminist criticism of Parker has been complemented by an analysis of her writing as works of social criticism. Suzanne Bunkers’ “‘I Am Outraged Womanhood’: Dorothy Parker as Feminist and Social Critic” addresses this topic most directly, examining how Parker’s female protagonists are not only victimized by patriarchal society but are incapable of fighting back against their oppression. Andrea Ivanov-Craig, in her essay “Being and Dying as a Woman in the Short Fiction of Dorothy Parker,” writes a feminist critique of how Parker parodies traditional feminine behaviors to begin transforming the way we think about gender, examining Parker’s most popular stories: “The Waltz,” “Big Blonde,” and “A Telephone Call.” In “Premium Swift: Dorothy Parker’s Iron Mask of Femininity,” Ellen Pollak observes Parker’s critique of the American cultural elite and the “social hypocrisy of gender relations” in a particular book review that Parker published in the *New Yorker* (203).

Amelia Simpson’s “Black on Blonde: The Africanist Presence in Dorothy Parker’s ‘Big Blonde’” focuses on the story that earned Parker an O. Henry Prize but from a critical perspective unlike any other that has been applied to Parker. Simpson employs Toni Morrison’s theory of the Africanist presence in American literature to examine how the minor black characters play pivotal roles that influence the fate of the white protagonist. Simpson’s essay is the only one to address Parker’s use of race in her fiction, and she focuses on what Morrison describes in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness*
and the Literary Imagination as the subconscious manner in which the American identity created by white authors rests on the existence of an Africanist presence. In contrast, the current study considers two of Parker’s stories that put racial difference and American racism front and center.

Only a few critics have evaluated the choice of publication venue on the intention and interpretation of Parker’s short stories. One such essay is Robert D. Arner’s “Textual Transmission and the Transformation of Texts: On the Dialogic Margins of Dorothy Parker’s ‘The Waltz’” which, like other criticism, focuses on one Parker’s most anthologized stories. Arner writes an insightful analysis of how the meaning and possible interpretation of “The Waltz” could have been impacted by both a particular publication and more importantly by editorial changes that were made to the text by those publications. “The Waltz” was initially published in the New Yorker, was collected in Parker’s short story anthology After Such Pleasures, and was also published in Scholastic, a magazine targeting high school students. Arner considers how the story would have been received differently by readers in each situation and how the story may have been transformed both editorially and interpretively in each publication. In “‘Such a Congenial Little Circle’: Dorothy Parker and the Early-Twentieth-Century Magazine Market,” Angela Weaver argues that Parker uses the mass magazine market to subvert the feminist ideals reinforced by the advertisements and content of women’s magazines. However, Weaver focuses primarily on the poems, reviews, and non-fiction essays that Parker published, leaving a gap of criticism to show how Parker’s short stories, of which she published numerous in popular magazines, have a similar objective. Marina Coslovi evaluates the publication of some of Parker’s stories in two Italian magazines as
compared to the American magazines in which they were originally published in
“Dorothy Parker and Italian Women’s Magazines.” She explores how certain stories
would have been read and interpreted by an Italian audience compared to the original
New York audience. Catherine Keyser includes a study of Parker in her book *Playing
Smart: New York Women Writers and Modern Magazine Culture.* She argues that Parker,
Lois Long, and Anita Loos “exaggerate the presence of the flesh” to “point out
distortions of the female body in modern mass cultural fantasies” (17). According to
Keyser, Parker criticizes the endorsement of celebrity and glamorous bodies in
middlebrow magazines through her stories in *Harper’s Bazaar.* The current study will
expand on the ideas presented by Arner, Weaver, Coslovi and Keyser by considering how
Parker’s publication of stories that are critical of social ideologies in magazines that
promoted those ideologies demonstrates a savvy manipulation of the magazine market to
maybe not change her society but to at least draw attention to the hypocrisy and social
inequity exhibited by her peers, particularly concerning issues of class, race, and gender.

Chapter one considers Parker’s use of the *New Yorker* as a venue for publishing
criticism of the upper-class culture that created the materialistic, status-obsessed New
York society women who made up a substantial portion of the magazine’s readership.
Upper-class New York City socialites—and those in the middle class who aspired toward
more—had a distinctive culture characterized by conspicuous wealth and consumerism, a
culture that was reinforced by the advertising and original content published in the *New
Yorker.* Simultaneously blending in with but standing out against such materialism were
Parker’s short stories, which often featured just the kind of women who were being
targeted by magazine advertisements for furs, jewels, and the most fashionable Parisian
couture. Through her use of blatant stereotypes and humor, Parker critiques not only these women, but also the ideology of consumption promoted by the *New Yorker* and practiced by its elitist readers. In “A Certain Lady,” “From the Diary of a New York Lady,” and “Song of the Shirt, 1941” Parker presents self-absorbed, materialistic female stereotypes in recognizable social situations to encourage the reader’s familiarity with such people and their social surroundings and to suggest that forces beyond the characters themselves are responsible for the stereotypical (usually negative) behaviors. Reading these stories within the context of the *New Yorker* issues in which they appeared emphasizes Parker’s criticism of the cultural values that created and even encouraged the ostentatious consumerism of the middle and upper classes, the very societal values espoused by the *New Yorker*’s editorial policies and advertising.

Parker similarly criticizes the hypocrisy of the upper class on the issue of race: sophisticated New York urbanites liked to think they were progressive in their ideas about racial equality but internalized prejudices and subtle forms of racism were evident all around Parker. Chapter two demonstrates how Parker subverts traditional uses of racial difference to criticize racial hypocrisy among the upper classes in “Arrangement in Black and White,” also published in the *New Yorker*, and “Clothe the Naked,” published in *Scribner’s Magazine*. As Parker became more interested in social issues—particularly issues of inequality—she used her magazine publications as a venue for airing her thoughts about the hypocrisy of segregation and upper-class attitudes towards African Americans. The strikingly different tones between “Arrangement in Black and White” and “Clothe the Naked” demonstrate a decade of growth for Parker as a social critic and her diminishing interest in being considered a humorist. “Arrangement,” published in the
late 1920s, exhibits Parker’s characteristic humor to satirize the racist beliefs of a woman who claims to be above the race question. The focus of the satire is the white female protagonist and her husband, whose blatantly racist views she shares in an attempt to defend her own supposedly enlightened stance on race while in fact revealing her own deeply internalized racist beliefs. By contrast, in the late 1930s, after Parker had become actively involved in political activities protesting social injustices, she publishes “Clothe the Naked” without any attempt to mask her criticism of the treatment of poor blacks at the hands of rich whites with humor or even satire. Over the years, Parker lost interest in using humor to get her message across and encountered greater difficulty publishing more serious stories like “Clothe the Naked.” Still, she wrote and published such stories in magazines to ensure they reached a wide readership.

The final chapter considers how Parker’s stories featuring heterosexual couples anticipate Judith Butler’s theories on performative gender identity. From a feminist perspective, “The Sexes,” “Here We Are,” and “The Lovely Leave” demonstrate how men and women in specific historical contexts perform socially constructed gender roles, particularly when interacting with the opposite sex. The stories were published in The New Republic, Cosmopolitan, and Woman’s Home Companion respectively, and, like other stories, the choice of publication suggests an effort on Parker’s part to satirize popularly held notions about gender, thus subverting each magazine’s dominant ideology. When examined together, these three stories, published across three decades and in three magazines with different agendas, criticize socially constructed female and male behaviors and the attitudes and gender expectations of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s that played a significant role in determining how women and men should behave.
Parker’s biographers and early reviewers and critics tended to conflate her literary writing with her life experience, taking for granted that the “I” speaker in her poems should be read autobiographically and that her unflattering portrayals of stereotypical women in prose are meant to be representative of misogynistic attitudes she supposedly held about her contemporary females. In 2005, Rhonda Pettit edited the first and only published collection of literary criticism of Parker’s work, *The Critical Waltz: Essays on the Work of Dorothy Parker*, the essays in which acknowledge Parker’s talent as a humorist, feminist, and writer. In her introduction to the collection, Pettit explains that there is little consensus about Parker’s work, “but the nature and terms of the debate have evolved in such a way to suggest that it stands up to closer and more complex scrutiny” (19). This paper will contribute to that conversation by expanding the scope of analysis to consider Parker’s use of short stories published in popular magazines to write social criticism about class, race, and gender attitudes of New York society in the 20s, 30s, and 40s.
Chapter One: The New Yorker’s Leisure-Class Readers

In 1925, Harold Ross started a new magazine, calling it the New Yorker to indicate the publication’s intended audience. He asked his literati friends to be members of the founding board of editors; most of the men declined, fearing to be associated with a publication that was expected to be “the outstanding flop of 1925” (Meade 145). Dorothy Parker, however, agreed to serve on the editorial board, possibly for want of something to do and possibly because it provided her yet another opportunity to solidify her position as a serious writer among her predominantly male Algonquin Round Table associates. Although the future of the new magazine was uncertain, and the man behind the initiative questionable in his cultural standards, the intentions of the New Yorker were lofty and Parker likely wanted to be a part of it.

In the first issue, the following statement of purpose was published:

The New Yorker starts with a declaration of serious purpose but with a concomitant declaration that it will not be too serious in executing it. It hopes to reflect metropolitan life, to keep up with the events and affairs of the day, to be gay, humorous, satirical but to be more than a jester.

... It has announced that it is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque. By this it means that it is not of that group of publications engaged in tapping the Great Buying Power of the North American steppe region by trading mirrors and colored beads in the form of our best brands of hokum. (New Yorker, Feb. 21, 2)
The *New Yorker* intended to provide content for culturally hungry Manhattanites, those who live and breathe New York City and itch to know the "Goings on" and "Talk of the Town." Its editors' assertion that they were not publishing for the "old lady in Dubuque" would have appealed to the middle-class New Yorkers who were aspiring to the social status that Thorstein Veblen had identified as the leisure class. In 1899, only a couple of decades prior, Veblen published *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in which he coined the term "conspicuous consumption" and defined leisure as the non-productive (i.e. non-industrially productive) consumption of time enjoyed by a class whose wealth afforded them the opportunity to be predominantly idle and who thus considered manual labor beneath them. The *New Yorker*’s ubiquitous advertising for expensive material goods—seemingly in contrast with not "tapping the Great Buying Power"—and regular articles about gossip and leisure activities were aimed at those for whom this status would be just within reach if they only shop at the right stores, attend the right events, and appropriately demonstrate conspicuous consumption.

In their drive to "not be too serious" but to be "more than a jester," the editors of the *New Yorker* sought to achieve a delicate balance of fact, humor, satire and entertainment. This is just the sort of combination that would have appealed to Parker, whose reputation for wit and satirical mockery had already been established in her previous periodical writing and her verbal banter with the Round Tablers. Additionally, Parker's knowledge of *New Yorker* founder Ross—whom she considered deficient in literary matters (Meade 134)—probably suggested to her that this opportunity would provide her with an outlet for bringing attention to any number of social values and cultural institutions she deemed worthy of her harsh yet insightful critiques. And through
her *New Yorker* short stories, Parker did indeed critique the very society of which she was an integral part.

Parker’s first *New Yorker* publications, a poem and the short story, “A Certain Lady,” appeared in the magazine’s second issue on February 28, 1925. In this and her *New Yorker* stories to follow, she employs a tone of detached observation, engaging humor, and conspiratorial mockery to deceive the reader into believing Parker could not possibly be insulting him/her. Yet the values Parker critiques in this and other quintessential *New Yorker* stories are the very values the *New Yorker*’s readers exhibited and embraced in their quest for leisure. The literary quality of Parker’s writing was often undermined by her early critics because of her frequent use of light humor and feminine subjects, but such dismissal ignores the deeper social critiques Parker engaged in and her skill at using the magazine market to condemn accepted social behaviors of the very class that so enjoyed her stories.

“A Certain Lady” is a brief character sketch that invites the reader into a hierarchical New York City where the measure of success is the cost of one’s apartment and a conspicuous appearance of leisure. The narrator starts by telling us, “My friend, Mrs. Legion, is one of those few, as tradition numbers them, who are New Yorkers by birth. This gives her an appreciable edge on the parvenus who are Manhattanites only by migration” (“A Certain Lady” 33). We soon learn, however, that Mrs. Legion lives on Riverside Drive—not the more prestigious Park Avenue—establishing the invidious distinction Veblen observed whereby one’s residence is a singular mark of wealth and respectability. Mrs. Legion is conscious of this distinction:
After she has met you, Mrs. Legion is supplying you with all the ground floor information as to why she lives on Riverside Drive, instead of Park Avenue. . . . Not for the worlds, she promises you, would she dwell in any other section of the city. Yet, oddly enough . . . she may be found frequently inspecting and pricing Park Avenue apartments, and hopefully calling up real estate agents to inquire if the rents in that part of town have taken a change for the better since her last inquiry.” (33)

At the top of the hierarchy of respectability are Veblen’s leisure class, the residents of Park Avenue who are the envy of women like Mrs. Legion; Mrs. Legion and her peers occupy the middle tier by virtue of being born in New York, but their more affordable Riverside Drive apartments distinguish them from the highest level of leisure; the lowest are those “parvenus” who have risen in status but will never be fully accepted because they are not native to Manhattan and will always be considered outsiders. The narrator informs us that Mrs. Legion spends her days trying to mimic the “Avenue dwellers” by keeping current with the society notes in magazines, dropping nicknames “with an easy casualness,” and knowing exactly how to “assemble her costumes,” tilt her hat and coif her hair (34). What she lacks in actual status, Mrs. Legion makes up for by mimicking the role she wants to assume, that of the Park Avenue leisure woman.

Mrs. Legion aspires to the level of respectability afforded to the leisure class in a society that equates status with wealth. According to Veblen, in American industrial society, “the possession of wealth presently assumes the character of an independent and definitive basis of esteem. . . . Wealth is now itself intrinsically honorable and confers honor on its possessor” (Veblen 37). He goes on to explain that inherited wealth, which is
acquired passively rather than productively, is the most admirable kind, a fact which accounts for the subtle yet apparently important distinction between Park Avenue and Riverside Drive in Mrs. Legion’s New York. The years during which Veblen published his ideas on conspicuous consumption and the invidious distinction of the upper classes were economically similar to the years in which Parker was writing: there was a period of ostentatious wealth and prosperity among a small minority followed by economic depression that caused considerable class conflict and labor strife. In the 1890s, Veblen was responding to his observations of such economic disparity; Parker was doing much the same throughout the 1920s and 30s. Although his peak periods of production were the last decades of the nineteenth century, Veblen was in New York editing *The Dial* in the nineteen-teens and *The Theory of the Leisure Class* had a resurgence in popularity such that a “cheap edition” costing 50 cents was brought out by the publisher in 1912 (Spindler 87). Additionally, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* was reviewed and approved by *Vanity Fair* after its reissue in 1918, and H. L. Mencken published an article titled “Professor Veblen” in a 1919 issue of *The Smart Set*, exaggeratedly proclaiming “the ascendancy of Veblen over Dewey as the great thinker in the literary weeklies” to satirize the popularity of Veblen’s influence (Spindler 89). It is more than reasonable to assume that Parker, who was gaining interest in the socialist movement and closely associated with Mencken and *Vanity Fair*, would have substantial knowledge of Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* and that she recognized Veblen’s turn-of-the-century critique of American society as reflecting the same cultural attitudes and behaviors that Parker witnessed in New York society twenty-five years later and satirized in this character sketch of Mrs. Legion.
For example, Mrs. Legion voluntarily forgoes individuality for the appropriate measure of wealth and leisure in her appearance, just like the women with whom she associates, in order to be accepted among the elite:

To look at her, you realize instantly that it must indeed take time and thought and research for her to assemble her costumes, to get them so faithfully like those worn by all other women of her circumstances. Mrs. Legion and her friends dress with the uniformity of the Tiller girls. Their hats are of the same shape and worn at the same angle, their coiffures meticulously alike, their dresses follow one another closely in material and design, their shoes are of the same last. Not until she has sedulously effaced all traces of individuality does Mrs. Legion feel that she is smart enough to appear in public. ("A Certain Lady" 34)

Parker’s deadpan description of Mrs. Legion’s desperate attempts to fit in with the more reputable leisure class echo Veblen’s straightforward delivery of what he clearly considers some of the most irrational and illogical assumptions about respectability in American society. Veblen’s scathing criticism of the leisure class and the establishment of conspicuous consumption and idleness as marks of respectability is delivered with the same kind of understated sarcasm and biting wit that made Parker notorious in her time. For example, he states, “Prowess and exploit may still remain the basis of award of the highest popular esteem, although the possession of wealth has become the basis of commonplace reputability and of a blameless social standing” (37-38, emphasis added). He does not believe that the leisure class is blameless nor that they have earned the arbitrary social standing they enjoy; his argument rests on the fact that the mere
possession of wealth as the basis of respectability is a phenomenon created by industrial America's sharp divisions between laborers and capitalists. Through Parker's character sketch of Mrs. Legion, we see that Mrs. Legion occupies the tier just below the leisure class, those for whom productive work is considered degrading and who aspire to achieve the blameless social standing of the truly wealthy.

Mrs. Legion's activities, values, and beliefs mirror those of the New Yorker reader; she represents the upper middle class women for whom a life of leisure is desirable but who has not yet attained the wealth of the true leisure class. Yet as Veblen indicates, with regards to women in particular, modern industry had reached such a level of efficiency that "leisure in women is possible so far down the scale of reputability that it will no longer serve as a definitive mark of the highest pecuniary grade" (Veblen 107). For women, indicators of wealth like leisure time and expensive clothing are not exclusive to the upper class. Women in the middle class could adopt certain characteristics to appear wealthier. Thus, other differences, like living on Riverside Drive and not on Park Avenue, become important to maintaining the arbitrary distinctions of respectability. The rest of Mrs. Legion's activities that we learn about from the narrator—gossiping over "lavish and imaginative tea" (34), patronizing off-color theater productions, and shopping endlessly—demonstrate her suitability for a life of leisure.

The publication of "A Certain Lady" in the second issue of the New Yorker marks Parker's attempt to hold a mirror up to the magazine's readers and dare them to see what she sees: that their social distinctions rely on arbitrary markers of success and respectability. But the mirror she holds is distorted through humor and stereotype that leave room for the reader to deny she is being accused or attacked. The female New
Yorker readers are willing participants in what Veblen calls an invidious comparison between the classes:

The end sought by accumulation is to rank high in comparison with the rest of the community in point of pecuniary strength. So long as the comparison is distinctly unfavorable to himself, the normal, average individual will live in chronic dissatisfaction with his present lot. (Veblen 39)

Once a person has achieved the measure of status she sought in comparison to her neighbors, she will want to continue to amass wealth in order to widen the gap between herself and those who have less. Parker’s story highlights how consumerism, pretention and superficiality have been internalized by leisure class women, and she publishes that story in a magazine full of consumer influences which claims to rise above superficiality and yet reinforces the same cultural pretentions of the Manhattan leisure class. Mrs. Legion relies on such popular magazines to keep her informed of the “comings and goings” of the leisure class, the latest styles in the stores, and the cultural events to patronize: “Breathlessly she pursues the society notes in the daily papers; promptly on their days of publication she buys the magazines dealing with the activities of the socially elect” (33). Thanks to Dorothy Parker, Mrs. Legion herself now occupies the pages of one such publication that will instruct a middle class woman on how to “rank high in comparison with the rest of the community.”

The issue of the New Yorker featuring “A Certain Lady” includes the magazine’s regular sections, “Talk of the Town,” “Goings On,” and “Where to Shop.” A reader of this issue finds “A Certain Lady” on page 14, after she has perused the “Talk of the
Town," which always spans several pages at the beginning of the magazine, and "Goings On," which occupies page 20 in this issue. Upon reaching “Goings On,” the reader is lured in by the subtitle, “The New Yorker's conscientious calendar of events worth while [sic]” (New Yorker, Feb. 28, 20). Those readers who, like Mrs. Legion, “sporadically . . . [go] in for culture in a really big way” (“A Certain Lady” 35), can easily skim the listings and find plenty to occupy her leisure time for the week. Mrs. Legion would have found opportunities to hobnob with the leisure class she so aspired to join.

In the same issue, the New Yorker reader will find “Where to Shop” with two columns listing “Those Famous Little Shops of New York.” The Beauty and Culture section lists five stores for the stylish Manhattanite to choose from; the Books section has only one entry. These columns reveal the standards that were set for New Yorker women by the magazine industry and the pervasive commercialism with which readers were bombarded. The column explains, “To the New Yorker of perception they [the little shops] are indispensable—and the very cleverest of these shops reach this audience through its own personal magazine” (New Yorker, Feb. 28, 28). This statement calls to both advertiser and consumer, encouraging shop owners that the best place to market themselves is in the pages of the New Yorker and persuading the consumer that the only place to discover the best shops is in the New Yorker. The important task of shopping is emphasized for the reader just as it has been for Mrs. Legion, whose shopping “has never yet reached a stage even approaching completion” (“A Certain Lady” 34). As she is reminded in the pages of the magazine of all the fashionable shops she has not yet visited, the reader can sympathize with Mrs. Legion who visits the stores every day, “if not to purchase, then to look around and get an idea or so” (34). Shopping is an essential
activity for Mrs. Legion, who needs “time and thought and research . . . to assemble her costumes” (34), and the aspiring leisure class Manhattanite requires guidance from the New Yorker to accomplish the same goal. To describe this behavior in Veblen’s terms, living a life of leisure is not an easy task; one must devote him/herself to the “arduous . . . business of learning how to live a life of ostensible leisure in a becoming way”:

Closely related to the requirement that [one] must consume freely and of the right kind of goods, there is the requirement that he must know how to consume them in a seemly manner. His life of leisure must be conducted in due form. (Veblen 64)

The fictional Mrs. Legion and her real-life counterparts—the New Yorker readers—rely on this magazine of metropolitan life to know the right places to shop, the right events to attend, and the right people to associate with in order to maintain the appropriate appearance of leisure. Veblen described how wealth and leisure arbitrarily equal respectability in industrialized America; in “A Certain Lady,” Parker demonstrates how magazines like the New Yorker validate these arbitrary markers of respectability by emphasizing the materialism and consumerism valued by Mrs. Legion and her peers.

By the mid-1930s, the country had become a very different place for many people than it was in the prosperous 20s. The Great Depression was ushered in, Prohibition was on the verge of repeal, and the Algonquin Round Table where Parker had established her literary relationships and spent much of her own conspicuous leisure time ceased to be a gathering place for daily lunches. Parker had become increasingly politically active beginning with her protest of the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927 and eventually declared herself a Communist in 1934 (Barranger 9). Whether or not she
actually joined the Communist Party is unclear, but she was forthright about her leftist leanings and was actively involved with numerous organizations that were considered Communist (Meade 271). Her acute awareness of class inequalities naturally translated into her writing. One example is the short story published in the *New Yorker* on March 25, 1933, "From the Diary of a New York Lady." Although the story itself follows the daily activities of a New York woman of leisure, there is a small but significant piece of evidence that this story, like the others here discussed, is more than a caricature of a self-involved upper-class woman: Parker gave the story the subtitle, "During Days of Panic, Frenzy, and World Change."

Those few words indicate that Parker was highly aware of the irony of her and her friends' social situation. Manhattan's leisure class felt little change to their lives during this period that destroyed the lives of many in the lower classes. "Diary" is a first person account from another nameless female character who spends her days obsessing over what to wear to the theater that evening and the color of her nails. Her days are a revolving cycle of idleness and social engagements involving sleeping until noon, finding a man to accompany her to the theater and attending a lively party with the same people and same entertainment as the party she attended the night before. She records these events daily in her diary in a chopped, hurried manner, indicative of how little time she has for something as productive as writing. The repetitive form of the story and the woman's activities create what Ken Johnson describes as a sense of perpetual motion "that consigns the stories' characters to an endless experiencing of their own superficiality and emptiness" (287). Johnson goes on to argue that the point of many of Parker's stories is to portray "shallowness itself" (288, original emphasis); yet Parker is
making a broader social critique than Johnson acknowledges. An analysis of the *New Yorker* issue in which this story appeared demonstrates that such repetitive superficiality and shallowness is a symptom created and reinforced by the consumerist values that persisted for the middle and upper classes in New York City through the Depression. The leisure class described by Veblen barely feels the pinch of the economic crisis, and middle-class aspirants to that class continued to pursue upward social mobility.

 Appropriately, the first full page ad on the inside cover of the March 25th issue of the *New Yorker* is for nail polish and details exactly what shade one should wear to present a particular image of oneself. Seeing such an emotional appeal to women to understand the importance of their choice of nail polish color nearly justifies the New York woman’s obsession with her manicurist’s poor decision in “Diary”: “Didn’t notice until after she had gone that the damn fool had put that revolting tangerine-colored polish on my nails; couldn’t have been more furious” (327, original emphasis). The advertisement identifies the color rose as the most versatile and sophisticated choice; notably, the manicurist in the story is named Miss Rose, a characteristic irony that illuminates Parker’s familiarity with the superficial yet fashionable trends of the day. Similarly, an advertisement for Russeks Fifth Avenue dresses delineates all of the colors to choose from in satin gowns: “If peach isn’t your color, consider dusty pink—dusty blue—nile—all-black—all-white” (*New Yorker*, Mar. 25, 1). Like nail color, the importance of dress color is emphasized by the consumer culture; a woman like the unnamed protagonist must be conscientious about what she chooses to wear when going out. Thus on Thursday evening, she “can’t decide whether to wear the new blue with the white jacket or save it till tomorrow night and wear the ivory moire” (“Diary” 330, original
emphasis). Add to the previous advertisements three ads for different styles of corsets, the accusation that “foolish is she” whose “coiffure is not alluringly feminine” (New Yorker, Mar. 25, 51), and the news that the length of one’s coat has surpassed the length of one’s skirt as the talk of spring fashion and the New York woman has been sufficiently saturated with precise expectations about her appearance.

Evidence of such cultural saturation reinforces Veblen’s assertion that for women of the leisure class, dress is particularly important in establishing one’s respectability because it allows the woman to present herself as completely distanced from manual labor:

It has come about that obviously productive labor is in a peculiar degree derogatory to respectable women, and women’s dress, to impress upon the beholder the fact (often indeed a fiction) that the wearer does not and can not habitually engage in useful work. Propriety requires respectable women to abstain more consistently from useful effort and to make more of a show of leisure than the men of the same social classes. (126)

With Parker-esque sarcasm, Veblen goes on to state that “It grates painfully on our nerves to contemplate the necessity of any well-bred woman’s earning a livelihood by useful work” (126). Parker’s protagonist in “Diary” could hardly be accused of having done anything productive in the course of the five days she records, thus situating her firmly as a leisure woman. Parker creates this character and shares her story in the pages of the New Yorker to demonstrate how all of this obsession with corsets and hairstyles and nail color traps women in what Johnson terms an “eternal spin”: “[Parker] has created the particular situations with her own distinctive fictional technique of repetition .
to satirize superficiality in a number of its manifestations, and to condemn such superficiality to eternal, repeating perpetual motion” (Johnson 73). By situating her critique within the pages of the *New Yorker*, Parker simultaneously condemns the cultural manifestations that emphasize and even reward such leisure-class superficiality.

Not only the advertisements but also the *New Yorker* articles present readers with strong messages of consumerism that undermine the magazine’s proclaimed commitment to cultural enlightenment. “On and Off the Avenue” devotes more than a page in the magazine to “Feminine Fashions,” critiquing and offering suggestions on the deluge of fashion advice in the ads. This article is delivered with standard *New Yorker* sarcasm, but nonetheless reveals and reinforces a preoccupation with appearance, designers, and style. “Diary” satirizes, with an element of exaggeration, the kind of New York woman the magazine fosters in its readership. Historian George H. Douglas dubbed magazines like the *New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair* and other New York City magazines the “smart magazines” for promoting the image of the “smart,” sophisticated, modern city dweller. As Catherine Keyser points out, “These publications targeted a middle-class audience and presumed that this readership longed for luxury and elite social status” (5). She argues that Parker and other female humorists who published in these magazines “[employ] caricature and wisecrack to expose social convention. . . . Through ironic narration and internal monologue, they establish the friction between interior experience and external markers of status and identity” (Keyser 8). Humor and irony serve as a mask that makes “Diary” a palatable and entertaining story for *New Yorker* readers while simultaneously exposing through stereotype and hyperbole the absurdity of common elitist attitudes and behaviors, the very attitudes and behaviors that are not so subtly reinforced by the magazine itself.
By 1941, when the world was a significantly different place than it was in the 1920s, the *New Yorker*’s editorial perspective and style had changed little. Just as the *New Yorker* was nearly silent on the economic hardships faced by most of the population during the Great Depression, so too did it pay little attention to the world-changing events happening in Europe in the 1940s. Although much of Parker’s energy was now spent writing Hollywood screenplays, she was also very politically active and continued to contribute to the *New Yorker*. Like many of her fictional stories before it, “Song of the Shirt, 1941” uses the unfaltering elitism of the *New Yorker* as a backdrop for exposing the cluelessness of a superficial upper class to the world around them. Like the accusatory subtitle of “Diary,” Parker includes the year “1941” in the title of this story to ensure the reader cannot deny the story’s historical context despite the rest of the issue’s near absence of the subject. The date also serves to distinguish Parker’s work from the nineteenth-century poem by Thomas Hood “The Song of the Shirt,” the title and theme of which Parker appropriates for her story.

Hood’s reputation as a British comic poet in the Victorian age traveled across the ocean and persisted into the twentieth century. His poem “The Song of the Shirt” was published in the 1843 Christmas issue of *Punch*, tripling the magazine’s circulation as it became one of his best known poems. Hood poeticized the desperate conditions of impoverished seamstress workers whose plight was also being described in a series of *Times* news articles about underpaid, overworked laborers. In 1916, the poem was referenced in an article in *The New Republic* about the Chicago garment workers’ strike, identifying Hood as one of the earliest writers to acknowledge that the garment trade “was founded on the misery of the poorest of those who live to work” (“Cheap Clothes”
Collections of Hood’s works were republished throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States, making him accessible to the American reading public. John Keats and Rhonda Pettit have observed the influences of Hood on Parker’s poem “Now at Liberty” and the story “Big Blonde”; the social criticism Hood exhibits in “The Song of the Shirt” would have resonated with Parker, who was an advocate of fair labor practices and keenly aware of labor injustices in the United States.

Published in the *New Yorker* on June 28, 1941, just six months before the attack on Pearl Harbor that would propel the United States into World War II, Parker’s “Song of the Shirt, 1941” describes the actions of the lovely Mrs. Martindale, whose generosity and patriotism are always on display for all to see, qualities which are “renowned among her friends, and they, as friends will, had gone around babbling about it” (“Song” 263). Mrs. Martindale represents the leisure women who may not have known a single day’s work until the increasing inevitability of war changed the social expectations of women who would need to take men’s places when they went off to fight for their country. Now, rather than signifying poverty or low-class status, labor, or at least voluntary labor, among leisure class women becomes a mark of generosity and selflessness. Mrs. Martindale is a satirical representation of the poor, slaving seamstress Hood depicts in his poem a century earlier.

Mrs. Martindale is characterized as a delicate woman of the leisure class, just as Veblen described them. Veblen posited that more so than men, upper-class women were expected to appear frail and essentially incapable of manual labor to emphasize their respectability as women. At the time of his writing, he identified the corset as an

---

excellent example of this way of thinking: “The corset is, in economic theory, substantially a mutilation, undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject’s vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work” (Veblen 121). Such an ideal for women persisted, even if the corset did not, so that forty years later Parker would write of Mrs. Martindale:

To see her, so delicately done, so finely finished, so softly sheltered by her very loveliness, you might have laughed to hear that she was a working-woman. ‘Go on!’ you might have said, had such been your unfortunate manner of expressing disbelief. (“Song” 264)

Mrs. Martindale adheres to the upper-class societal ideal of a delicate appearance, but the speaker tells that not only does Mrs. Martindale work, but “she worked doubly hard, for she was unskilled at what she did, and she disliked the doing of it” (264), characteristics that make her sacrifice of leisure all the more noble and exemplary of her “big heart.” She works as a volunteer for a war relief organization sewing hospital gowns for wounded soldiers and her ineptitude for sewing makes the task difficult and tiresome for a woman of leisure who is not accustomed to long hours of labor under the supervision of a stern and critical female supervisor. Parker satirizes women like Mrs. Martindale by mocking both her lack of her skill and her struggles as a laborer.

Compare Mrs. Martindale, who is clearly upper class and performing seamstress duties voluntarily in support of the war effort, with Hood’s nameless nineteenth-century seamstress in “unwomanly rags” (Hood 3), “In poverty, hunger and dirt” (6), who must “work—work—work / Till the eyes are heavy and dim / . . . a slave / along with the barbarous Turk” (11-14) and whose wages are “A bed of straw / A crust of bread—and
Parker satirizes the leisure women who volunteer to labor as if they were working class to prove their patriotism and generosity without ever having to experience the actual hardship women of the working class endure. Peter Simonsen describes Hood’s poem as “reformist . . . inasmuch as it did not envision radical changes in the social fabric but aimed to generate sympathy for the poor” (57), just as Parker’s works are not necessarily revolutionary but raise awareness for those willing to listen. While the language of Parker’s “Song” superficially suggests that Mrs. Martindale is similarly deserving of the reader’s sympathy, the narrator’s ironic tone and Mrs. Martindale’s exaggerated generosity prove otherwise. Hood sought to draw attention to the horrifying working and living conditions of poverty-stricken seamstresses in 1843; Parker mocks and draws attention to the superficiality and falseness of upper-class volunteerism a century later.

Midway through the story, we learn that the work at “Headquarters” is about to be suspended for the summer holiday, a time when everyone leaves town—everyone who could afford to vacation in the country, that is—and it “was only sensible” to suspend the volunteer efforts until they returned in the autumn. Mrs. Martindale is anticipating weeks of “earned leisure” (“Song” 266). The common practice of upper-class retreat from the city in the summer months is reinforced in the June issue of the New Yorker, which features no fewer than fifteen advertisements for vacation resorts, everywhere from the Jersey shore, the Poconos, and the Hamptons to Virginia, Maine and even Canada. There is no shortage of vacation options from which the New Yorker reader (people like Mrs. Martindale) can choose. However, when the women are asked to take garments home to sew, Mrs. Martindale is the first to volunteer and offers to sew three times more gowns
than any of the other women grudgingly accept. Mrs. Martindale’s gracious sacrifice of her leisure time is ironically foregrounded by her earlier observation of uniformed soldiers and sailors for whom there would also be no summer retreat. Upon seeing them, Mrs. Martindale is reminded of a friend who “made a practice of stopping uniformed men on the street and thanking them, individually, for what they were doing for her. Mrs. Martindale felt that this was going unnecessarily far” (“Song” 264, original emphasis). Parker satirizes the variety of means for leisure women to conspicuously display their support for soldiers and the idea that some tactics are more acceptable and respectable than others, just as some women are thought to be more acceptable and respectable than others.

The narrowness of the leisure class’s superficial appearances of altruism culminates in “Song” when Mrs. Martindale receives a phone call from a friend who is seeking additional jobs for the woman she has been employing who must support herself and her disabled daughter. Mrs. Wyman, the friend, has “been sort of thinking up jobs for her to do for me right along, but next week we’re going to the ranch, and I really don’t know what will become of her” (269, original emphasis). This conversation operates on several levels to reveal the attitudes of the leisure women to the working class. Mrs. Wyman’s sense of noblesse oblige inspires her to reach out to another “generous” woman who might have jobs to sustain the desperate mother. Mrs. Martindale, despite the pile of sewing she brought home from Headquarters, must rack her brains to try to think of somebody—“Oh, there must be somebody!”—who could use “the wonderful little woman” (269). Mrs. Martindale’s selflessness only extends as far as what will help her appear to be generous enough to earn the respect due to the leisure class. Both women are
unable to actually grasp the needs of the working poor and make a difference. Mrs. Martindale turns back to her sewing in the final paragraph, “and as she stitched, faithful to her promise and to her heart, she racked her brains” (269). Within the pages of the New Yorker, Parker calls out these women for their false altruism, misplaced generosity, and obliviousness to the needs of the real world. The rest of the content in the magazine, however, explains how such women come to see the world the way they do.

The appearance of this story—with its frequent references to patriotism, injured soldiers, and the war effort—in the June 28, 1941 issue of the New Yorker stands in stark contrast to the “Talk of the Town” gossip column that precedes it and the amusing article following it: S. J. Perelman’s “How To Take A Bath,” which is a “canvass made by [Harper’s] Bazaar of seven distinguished ladies . . . to elicit their bathing secrets” (Perelman 17). After finishing Parker’s description of Mrs. Martindale faithfully stitching away, oblivious to the real needs of the world around her, the New Yorker reader would turn the page to find Perelman’s introduction:

I was turning over a pile of back numbers of Harper’s Bazaar this morning, using a pitchfork and taking care to keep them well away from the root system of the plants, when, on page 83 of the May issue, I suddenly encountered a naked young person presenting her saucy derriere at me. God’s handiwork is ever sacred to me, and I should still be leaning on the handle of my fork and studying it had I not discovered it was simply window dressing for some text at the left. I hate to be dis-loyal to Miss Derrier but, juicy piece though she was, the piece she illustrated—Elinor Guthrie Neff’s “How to Take a Bath”—was juicier. (17)
The shift in tone at the turn of a page is made all the more apparent by the fact that “Song of the Shirt” is not overtly humorous in the manner for which Parker had become notorious. In fact, as Andrea Ivanov-Craig argues, with the publication of “Big Blonde” in 1929, Parker’s prose writing took on more serious ironic and satiric tones, moving away from the straight humor and sarcasm that characterized much of her poetry and her book reviews in particular. By 1939, Parker was claiming, “There is nothing funny in the world anymore” (qtd. in Ivanov-Craig 232). In light of this, her appropriation of Hood’s poem seems even more suitable as a means of publishing social criticism in a popular magazine. In his time, Hood too was known as a comic poet and spent much of his career negotiating attempts to escape such characterization while still creating works that would be publishable in an increasingly commercialized periodical market. Simonsen argues that “The Song of the Shirt” was Hood’s most successful “poem of social awareness and protest” (58), through which he successfully distributed his message about seamstress’s deplorable lives in a popular medium with a widespread audience. Like Parker’s commentaries on social issues as delivered through her short stories, Hood’s writing was not revolutionary; rather it was intended to raise awareness about real social issues for the people most influenced by consumer culture through the commercial periodicals.

On the surface it may seem that Parker is simply portraying for humorous intent the pretention and superficiality of New York middle- and upper-class women. Norris Yates has argued that, “Miss Parker’s women too often are preoccupied with status” (270), but he fails to recognize that Parker is critiquing more than this preoccupation. Reading “A Certain Lady,” “From the Diary of a New York Lady,” and “Song of the Shirt, 1941” in the context of the surrounding New Yorker content and with Veblen’s
critique of the leisure class in mind demonstrates that this preoccupation with status is not
contrived by the women themselves but is rather an internalization of American cultural
values of conspicuous consumption and the link between wealth and respectability. The
status-obsessed women in these stories are responding to cultural messages delivered to
them through publications like the *New Yorker* and to societal pressure to exhibit “a
conspicuous performance of vicarious leisure” indicative of the highest respectability
(Veblen 107). Mrs. Legion is the “heiress of the ages” (“A Certain Lady” 35) because
she has inherited the expectations, interests and beliefs of her society that limited her role
to collecting and displaying her wealth through expensive clothing and a well-adorned
home. The unnamed protagonist of “Diary,” and the many unnamed women like her who
are aspiring to leisure-class status, ignorant of the poverty and despair rampant among the
working class around them, performs the behaviors required of her to achieve such status
as they are outlined in the pages of the *New Yorker*. Mrs. Martindale and Mrs. Wyman, in
their misguided attempts to be useful and generous, are as oblivious to the realities of the
world as one would think the editors and contributors to the *New Yorker* are upon
flipping through any issue published during some of the most historically significant
times in American history. The *New Yorker’s* elitist nature was a source of pride for
many of its founders; however, one of them also used it over the years as a venue for
publishing only slightly veiled criticism of the very attitudes and behaviors the magazine
perpetuated in New York culture.
Chapter Two: The Realities of Race

Parker first showed an interest in political activism when she protested the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927. From then on, she considered herself in sympathy with the underdogs, including African Americans. While living and working in Hollywood in the 1930s, she witnessed the degrading racial discrimination faced by black actors, who were nearly always cast in the comic role of the kindly, ignorant, shuffling servant. When asked to perform in a charity sketch with a well-known black actor who was to play just such a role, she refused, stating, “Black people have suffered too much ever to be funny to me” (qtd. in Day 165). Although her strongest activism surrounded labor issues and her writing tended to focus on women, two stories in particular show her consciousness of racism; the drastic difference in tone between the two stories shows the growth of her seriousness towards the issue over a ten year period. “Arrangement in Black and White,” published in the New Yorker in 1927, exhibits characteristic Parker humor and satire. “Clothe the Naked,” published in Scribner’s in 1938, is notably serious and more overt in its message, similar to other stories she published in the late 1930s and 40s when she had become much more socially conscious and tried to distinguish herself as more than a humorist.

As previously stated, the New Yorker was intentionally aimed at an elite upper-class audience and was popular among those in the middle class who aspired to higher social status. Issues of race and segregation in the early twentieth century would have been considered too politically dangerous a topic for its pages unless masked in the parody and humor that were hallmarks of the New Yorker’s editorial style. An example of this is the magazine’s publication of Parker’s “Arrangement in Black and White,” which
Marion Meade calls “a rather bold attack on racism” and one of Parker’s best stories (189). Editor Harold Ross had no problem publishing the story in 1927 because, as Parker recalls, he “thought it was a scream” (Parker qtd. in Meade 305). At the time, Parker was unconcerned with his motive for including the story in the *New Yorker*, as long as it got published (Meade 305), guaranteeing it would reach a wide audience of just the class that Parker satirizes in the story.

The main speaker in “Arrangement in Black and White” is an unnamed, white, upper class woman. She is attending a party without her husband, whom she references frequently, and implores the host (also presumably white and upper class) to introduce her to the black singer Walter Williams, the party’s guest of honor. The story is primarily a dialogue between the woman and her host, and for a short time, the dialogue includes Mr. Williams, but the woman completely dominates the conversation and thus is the main focus of the story. Her dialogue reveals deep-seated racism that has been so internalized, the woman seems unaware of how deprecating her statements are. She spends much of her time convincing the host how much more open-minded she is than her husband:

I don’t see why on earth it isn’t perfectly all right to meet colored people. I haven’t any feeling at all about it—not one single bit. Burton—oh, he’s just the other way. Well, you know, he comes from Virginia, and you know how they are. (“Arrangement” 20)

Her repetitive insistence that “I haven’t any feeling at all” about meeting African Americans is contradicted by statements and actions making it clear that she is concerned about how her race consciousness is perceived by others. When she meets the actor, she conspicuously extends her hand for him to shake “so for all the world to see”—something
she internally debated earlier but decided to do because she would not “for the world have him think I had any feeling” (21). Her obsession with what others see and would think suggests she has not formulated any opinions that are entirely her own; she is strongly influenced by the expectations others have for her. Those expectations have been established by her husband, the guiding influence in the life of a 1920s woman, and the societal messages communicated to women in the upper classes.

Parker captures the hypocrisy of the self-proclaimed open-minded socialite through the speaker’s satirical yet authentic representations of typical attitudes. The woman declares:

Oh, I get so furious when people are 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? (“Arrangement” 21)

The speaker vacillates between platitudes about equality and ignorantly racist statements, seeking constant validation for her ambiguous opinions from the white host. She has internalized both the assumption that sophisticated people are above the race question and the rhetoric of racial superiority that pervades the white upper class. The duality of her attitude exhibits the contradictions and hypocrisy inherent in middle- to upper-class New Yorkers’ views on race in the early twentieth century. Philosophically, they “think nothing of it;” in practice, they fear as the speaker does that “so many colored people, you give them an inch, and they walk all over you” (“Arrangement” 23). Again Parker’s
social critique goes deeper than merely satirizing the ignorant society woman: she is criticizing the racist attitudes of the entire “sophisticated” society.

Although the controversial issues and opinions about racial conflict are conspicuously absent from the *New Yorker* issue in which “Arrangement” appears, the internalized racism the story portrays is evident in its columns. For example, “Talk of the Town” includes a rant about Manhattan’s traffic problem that assigns the blame to immigrant workers:

> Park Avenue is being widened…but ten minutes after the job is finished, Park Avenue will be choked. Moreover, a couple of Italians will start digging a hole in it somewhere to get at a pipe. (*New Yorker*, Oct. 8, 32)

In an article littered with sarcasm and irony, this particular statement comes across as instinctual and internalized discrimination. The disdain for “others” felt by the white cultural elite is so deep-seated and natural that disparagements like these are tossed out casually. The assumption of superiority exhibited by Parker’s protagonist is echoed by the *New Yorker* journalist who is inconvenienced by the city’s immigrant workers.

The speaker in “Arrangement” claims to love “all those darling old spirituals” (“Arrangement” 22) and expresses to her host amazement at “the way they all have music in them” (21, emphasis added), undermining the singer’s musical genre, one that is associated with his race, and attributing his unique talent to a genetically racial characteristic. Her assumptions satirize common notions of inherent racial differences and represent what Alain Locke referred to in his 1925 essay for *Survey Graphic*, “Enter the New Negro,” as “the great discrepancy between the American social creed and the American social practice” (5). Particularly among the upper classes and the intelligentsia,
racial equality in ideal thought and in practice had yet to become reconciled and evident in social situations, as in party that sets the scene for “Arrangement.” In fact, the party itself, hosted by a white patron for the benefit of a black artist, retains elements of the “philanthropic allowances” that Locke warns needed to be overcome in order to achieve truer equality. In other words, the dependency of African-American artists on white patrons for support and promotion allowed ingrained attitudes about black inferiority to persist under the guise of philanthropy. Parker illustrates this fact in the speaker’s comment to her host: “Well, I think you’re simply marvelous, giving this perfectly marvelous party for him, and having him meet all these white people, and all. Isn’t he terribly grateful?” (“Arrangement” 19). Her host, indicating a slightly greater sophistication in terms of race relations, weakly responds, “I hope not” (19).

Except for this response, which is essentially ignored by the woman, the host does little to contradict or correct the woman’s thinly veiled racism throughout their conversation. In a 1939 review of Parker’s collection *Here Lies*, in which “Arrangement” appeared, Mina Curtiss attacks Parker’s decisions to focus on a “vulgar, stupid woman,” to allow the host to invite “such an obvious snob . . . to do honor to a distinguished artist,” and to “[subject] his guest to an introduction to so cheap and arrogant a person” (77). The point missed by Curtiss is that the host is representative of other white intellectuals who refused to speak out against the segregation and racism that was pervasive in their society. Overtly anti-racist sentiment would have been considered too political for the *New Yorker*, so Parker had to mask her criticism in the humorous stereotyping and exaggeration of a character the editor and its readers were accustomed
to seeing in her stories: the snobbish upper class woman. The host’s quiet complicity is secondary to the protagonist’s overtly racist statements, but complicit nonetheless.

In other *New Yorker* columns, such quiet acquiescence is achieved by ignoring activities representative of black culture and focusing on those that appeal to white sophisticates. Racial segregation, a social problem against which Parker had strong feelings, affected the magazine market as much as other areas of society. For example, within the same *New Yorker* issue as "Arrangement" is an emotional complaint of the two new squash courts that have ruined the architectural beauty of the Harvard Club. The article blends playful anger at the increasing popularity of the sport, which the writer undoubtedly thought should remain elite (and white) with a real concern for the aesthetic quality of the building that houses the exclusive club for Harvard alumni. Absent from any of these articles are references to the very real issues of segregation and discrimination in sports generally and at the Harvard Club specifically. Such veiled racism among the cultural elite towards blacks is satirized by Parker through the stereotypical white woman and the unresponsive white host in “Arrangement.”

Segregation was also evident in the magazine publishing market. Two periodicals that gained popularity in New York were created to address the lack of publishing venues for black writers created by such segregation. *Crisis* began publication in 1910 as the official publication of the NAACP and *Opportunity*, the National Urban League’s journal, was started in 1923. These journals provided venues for the burgeoning black writers of the Harlem Renaissance to share their literature with the black community and served as a counter to the established literary magazines whose editors were reluctant to engage “the race question” from the black writers' perspective. W. E. B. Du Bois was a
driving force behind *Crisis*, and expected its writers to present a positive portrayal of blacks in its pages. Although he had extensive cooperative associations with the white world, particularly white philanthropists whose money could support the work of the NAACP, "He felt that white artists were concerned first of all to please a white audience and that this audience would not hear the truth about black people, but must have its stereotypes confirmed" (Hart 613).

Through "Arrangement" (and later to be discussed, "Clothe the Naked"), Parker managed to break the pattern described by Du Bois. Although in some other stories, Parker positions blacks in servant roles and characterizes them with stereotypical black dialects, in "Arrangement" she makes sure to avoid such stereotypes to emphasize the stereotypical attitudes of the white characters instead, jarring the white audience out of the expectation to "have its stereotypes confirmed" and instead satirizing the audience itself through the white woman's veiled racism and her host's refusal to confront it. To emphasize the stereotyped white woman and her obliviousness to the realities of racism, Parker assigns the black actor minimal speaking lines and a passive presence. The focus of the story is instead on the woman's inherent racism. The actor's side of the conversation is limited to polite, inconsequential responses: "'How do you do?' he said" ("Arrangement 21); "'I'm so glad,' he said" (22). When he does try to engage the woman in an intellectual conversation, she cuts him off:

‘Tell me, where on earth do you ever get all those songs of yours? . . .’

‘Why,’ he said, ‘there are so many different—’ ‘I should think you’d love singing them,’ she said. ‘It must be more fun. All those darling old spirituals. (22)
The speaker in “Arrangement” praises the African American singer for his “spirituals” and distinctly and repeatedly uses the term for slave songs from which the modern genres of jazz and blues developed, demonstrating her ignorance in matters of both race and culture.

Likewise, the absence or insignificance of traditionally black cultural activities is apparent in the New Yorker’s discussions of music. The Great Migration at the turn of the century brought blues and jazz to northern cities like New York, ushering in a new era of music inspired by black culture. Yet the “Goings on About Town” column identifies six music events of traditional (white) genres. It will be some time before the New Yorker begins to include jazz and blues venues in its listings of “worth while” [sic] entertainment. A full page “Music Events” article is devoted to a defense of the magazine’s treatment of classical composers. Readers had suggested that the magazine’s critics treated classical composers too casually, not affording them their due respect. The New Yorker columnist’s reply is, “If we can acquire a properly appreciative frame of mind by thinking of Brahms as our contemporary, we feel that we have not violated the ashes of the composer” (New Yorker, Oct. 8, 71). It is implied, therefore, that sophisticated New Yorkers should listen to classical composers as if they were their contemporaries to appreciate the relevance such composers have to the current society, despite their historical removal from it. The increasing popular interest in contemporary black composers like Duke Ellington and Bessie Smith, both of whom were performing in New York City in the 1920s, would not be evident in the pages of the New Yorker until the next decade, when the magazine began including regular columns about jazz.
The juxtaposition of Parker’s “Arrangement,” with its criticism of the hypocritical nature of the elite’s attitudes toward blacks, to the silence on the part of this issue with regards to black culture in New York City is noteworthy. In the late 1920s, the *New Yorker*’s stance on race reflected that of its intended audience: racial equality in philosophy but not in practice. Parker’s story draws attention to the hypocrisy of this stance through an ignorant and dominating speaker who is completely unaware of how society has infused her with a sense of racial superiority. In expressing her superficial acceptance of blacks, she illuminates the racist themes pervasive in her culture. In “Enter the New Negro,” Locke acknowledged:

> It does not follow that if the Negro were better known, he would be better liked or better treated. But mutual understanding is basic for any subsequent cooperation and adjustment. The effort toward this will at least have the effect of remedying in large part what has been the most unsatisfactory feature of our present state of race relationships in America, namely the fact that the more intelligent and representative elements of the two race groups have at so many points got quite out of vital touch with one another. (3)

Parker creates a social situation that could reasonably serve as an impetus for the kind of mutual understanding Locke advocates. However, she then demonstrates the pervasive, intrinsic racism of some and the inability or unwillingness to contradict or confront such racism of others that keep the races “out of vital touch.” “Arrangement in Black and White” is thus a pointed criticism of the attitudes and behaviors regarding race relations internalized by the *New Yorker*’s intellectual readers.
A decade later, Parker’s social consciousness had heightened to the point that she wrote another story about race without using the upper-class white protagonist as a foil. Although the story’s climax results from the actions of a white, upper-class woman, “Clothe the Naked” the main characters are a black woman, Big Lannie, and her blind grandson, Raymond. Parker’s perception of poverty and community among African Americans is reflected in her portrayal of Big Lannie’s struggle to find work that will support her and her disabled grandson and in the charity she receives from her willing and generous neighbors. The white characters are clearly in place to contrast the sense of shared responsibility in black communities and to criticize white attitudes toward working class blacks.

Harold Ross did not want to publish “Clothe the Naked” in the New Yorker when Parker submitted it in 1938. It was the first of her submissions ever to be rejected by the magazine (Meade 303). After also being rejected by Harper’s Bazaar, the story was eventually accepted by Scribner’s, which was considered a first-class literary magazine at the time. The problem with the story for Ross and the New Yorker was its distinct lack of humor; unlike “Arrangement in Black and White” which masks its social criticism in exaggeration and satire, “Clothe the Naked” is a serious story with an overt agenda. A year later, when Parker submitted a similarly serious and political story about the Spanish Civil War, Ross also rejected it and, according to Parker, told her “God damn it . . . why can’t you be funny again?” (Parker qtd. in Meade 304). Parker had a difficult time living down her reputation as a humorist especially among those with whom she was closest in her Algonquin Round Table days. As stated earlier, Parker had lost interest in being funny as she became more politically active and tuned into social inequities in American
society. Literary outlets such as *Scribner’s*, which respected her reputation but were less focused on humorists and satirists, became necessary for her to publish these more serious, politically oriented stories. Still they were published, suggesting that her literary qualities were not solely dependent on her humor.

In “Clothe the Naked,” we meet Big Lannie, who has taken on responsibility for her blind grandson after her daughter dies in childbirth. In order to take care of the child, Big Lannie must take time off from her employment as a laundress for a number of white women. The attitudes of her employers mirror the racist sentiments expressed in “Arrangement”:

> The ladies were sharply discommoded, after her steady years, but they dressed their outrage in shrugs and cool tones. Each arrived, separately, at the conclusion that she had been too good to Big Lannie, and had been imposed upon, therefore. “Honestly, those niggers!” each said to her friends. “They’re all alike.” (“Clothe” 359)

In “Arrangement,” Parker’s presentation of this pervasive assumption that blacks callously take advantage of the generosity of whites is softened by assigning the racist attitude to the white woman’s husband while the woman herself (unconvincingly) tries to distinguish herself from such attitudes. Now, Parker gives voice directly to the racist whites without masking it in satire or exaggeration.

Raymond, who is described as a “light-colored baby” (359), is a happy child who “[does] not know anything but good” (361) and spends his youthful days walking the streets of his neighborhood where people call out to him cheerfully and children stop their play to indulge their curiosity about him, speak to him “in soft, careful tones,” let
him explore their faces with his hands, and say “gentle good-bys” to him (361). Going out is the best part of each day and each night he happily recalls the laughter he heard in the streets. His physical blindness becomes allegorical in shielding him from unpleasantness, particularly the poverty of his neighborhood which “ended in a dump for rusted bed-springs and broken boilers and staved-in kettles” (361). Yet despite the poverty, Big Lannie’s neighbors are helpful and generous. They look after Raymond when Big Lannie manages to secure a day’s work, they bring him the clothes that no longer fit their own children, no matter how ragged they have become, and they offer food when it is clear that Big Lannie cannot afford any herself. The sense of community and selflessness among Big Lannie’s unnamed neighbors is evident and stands in stark contrast to the superficial “generosity” of Mrs. Ewing, the white woman who eventually offers Big Lannie her job back.

Mrs. Ewing is considered “a personage in the town. . . . She was a woman rigorously conscious of her noble obligation” (362). She manipulates Big Lannie, keeping her “in a state of stimulating insecurity by referring, with perfect truth, to the numbers of stronger, quicker women who were also in need of work” (363). Big Lannie works exceptionally hard for the woman because her and Raymond’s livelihood depend desperately on the meager earnings she takes home from a few days’ work in Mrs. Ewing’s house. When Raymond finally outgrows all of his second-hand clothes and has not even a pair of shoes to go outside in, Big Lannie is devastated to have to refuse him his only enjoyment in life. She approaches Mrs. Ewing and begs for some of Mr. Ewing’s old clothes:
She looked at the floor and mumbled so that Mrs. Ewing requested her to talk up. When Mrs. Ewing understood, she was, she said, surprised. She had, she said, a great, great many demands on her charity, and she would have supposed that Big Lannie, of all people, might have known that she did everything she could, and, in fact, a good deal more. . . . She said that if she found she could spare anything, Big Lannie was kindly to remember it was to be just for this once. (364-5, original emphasis)

There is no hiding Parker’s disdain for the hypocrisy of so-called charitable women who fail to see the needs of those right in front of them. She is similarly critical of this attitude at the end of “Song of the Shirt, 1941,” when Mrs. Martindale fails to acknowledge her ability to help someone in need, but this description in “Clothe the Naked” is much more overt, less satirical.

Big Lannie is not home when Raymond puts on Mr. Ewing’s old clothes, which are too big for him, and heads out into the street. There, in the place he always felt secure and welcomed, dressed in the white man’s flopping shoes and full-dress coat, he hears for the first time the laughter of derision: “It was like great flails beating him flat, great prongs tearing his flesh from his bones. It was coming at him, to kill him” (366). He stumbles back to Big Lannie’s, falling in a heap of tangled, too-big clothes, where Big Lannie eventually finds him hurt and crying. Mrs. Ewing’s blindness to Big Lannie and Raymond’s reality forces Raymond to see the truth. Whereas the generosity of the black neighbors enables Raymond to live a happy, carefree childhood despite his disability, the loaded charity of Mrs. Ewing destroys his happiness and innocence.
Meade calls "Clothe the Naked" a "dull, heavy-handed manifesto" and a "dutifully proletarian" story (303) inspired by Parker's active involvement in Communist activities at the time she wrote it. Meade describes the ending as too violent for the plot that leads up to it, claiming that Raymond is "almost beaten to death by white workmen" (303). However, the story is actually more open to interpretation than Meade allows. Parker's description of Raymond's encounter with cruelty shows no signs of physical abuse at another's hands; rather she describes his mental anguish at realizing the world is not the joyful, accepting place he grew up thinking it to be. Presumably, because he has never left the neighborhood, the cruelty is actually inflicted by Raymond's black neighbors, but this fact is not important. What matters is the reason they mock and pity him: the white man's too-big dress clothes signify Raymond's humiliation and dependence on the blind charity of wealthy whites.

Similarly, Kinney reads the story as illustrative of "the virtues of communism over capitalism" (141) and claims that "the use of race is unnecessary" (142). However, if that were the case, why would Parker deviate so far from the characters and themes with which she had already had so much success? Race is central to this story in which Parker criticizes not only the insensitivity to poverty created by capitalist culture but also the role that racism plays in that insensitivity. She makes it clear that in this story, she is concerned with the unique struggles of working-class blacks, struggles that transcend capitalism and are rooted in the internalized assumptions about African Americans that are residual from slavery and are alive in segregation. Her criticism of white blindness to these assumptions is central to both "Clothe the Naked" and "Arrangement in Black and White."
The publication of this story in *Scribner's* suggests that the story has greater literary merit than editors or critics who restrict Parker to the role of humorist acknowledge. In the late 1930s, issues of *Scribner's* were devoid of cartoons unlike many other popular publications, and advertisements were limited to the beginning and end of the issue rather than scattered throughout, interrupting the flow of content. The focus is on the writing, and the writing is markedly more serious than that of publications such as the *New Yorker* or *Harper's Bazaar*. A series printed in the magazine spanning the year that "Clothe the Naked" was published exhibited photography representative of "Life in the U.S.," claiming to expose readers to photographs that gave a true portrayal of American life. Many of the photographs are landscapes and inanimate objects, as opposed to Parker's humanist representation of real life for working class blacks in America.

In the same issue of *Scribner's* as "Clothe the Naked" is a travel article titled "Zulus Also Fall in Love." The first paragraph describes:

> Down in an obscure, out-of-the-way corner of Natal, enclosed and guarded by barren, rolling hills, lives the dwindling remnant of what was once a dominant race of splendid savages. Magnificent of body, dignified of demeanor, elegant in their ornaments and harmonious in every movement, here are the only Zulus to be found today who have kept their racial strain pure. (Gatti 90)

The lengthy article is a romanticized representation of Zulu courtship and marriage rituals. The writer is curious and admiring in his discussion of the Zulus he met on his travels, and these "splendid savages" are sharply contrasted with the representation of
Big Lannie and Raymond in Parker's story, who are perceived as a different type of savage by white employers like Mrs. Ewing. While its presence in *Scribner's* suggests the literary merit of "Clothe the Naked," it also subverts the dominant ideologies concerning racial difference that were pervasive in a number of magazines.

In the period between the publication of "Arrangement in Black and White" in 1927 and "Clothe the Naked" in 1938, Parker had become very active in social movements, participating regularly in Communist Party meetings and in activities organized by entities that were associated with the Party. Her political activism was heightened by her experiences in Hollywood and the inequalities she witnessed particularly concerning laborers and blacks. This social awareness manifested in stories like "Clothe the Naked" in a more obvious and controversial way compared to the subtle satire masked by exaggeration and humor in early stories like "Arrangement." She found that her more political stories were not published unquestioningly by those who had sought her contributions in her early career, particularly Harold Ross at the *New Yorker*. Yet she insisted that they be published somewhere, and found other literary outlets that were willing to take them on, so that the social messages she felt strongly about would reach an audience with the potential to be influenced.
Chapter Three: Performative Gender and Social Expectations

In Dorothy Parker’s 1943 short story, “The Lovely Leave,” Mimi, the female protagonist, prides herself on knowing the rules of marriage in her society and she abides by them faithfully to keep her husband happy. Like many of Parker’s female protagonists, Mimi’s devotion to her culture’s gender rules causes her only frustration and unhappiness. Particularly in stories that feature a heterosexual couple, Parker creates women (and men) whose behavior is bound by the gender codes of their society. The women in these couples are so intent on performing their gender according to social expectations that honest, meaningful relationships with men prove impossible. Three of these stories published in different magazines in across three decades exemplify how, despite some political movements toward gender equality, few substantial changes were made in the messages to women about how they were expected to behave, particularly in romantic relationships. “The Sexes” (1927), “Here We Are” (1931), and “The Lovely Leave” (1943) demonstrate how women in specific historical contexts perform socially constructed gender roles that were endorsed by popular magazines.

As an early feminist writer, Parker’s stories anticipate the argument Judith Butler would later make in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”: that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 519). Parker highlights and, through stereotypes and exaggeration, criticizes socially constructed female and male behaviors and the socio-historical factors upon which those behaviors are contingent. The popular magazines where these stories were published played a significant role in perpetuating those behaviors, even the more liberal of them. Thus Parker’s stories are not merely entertainment; they are intended to
demonstrate to women their own complicity with the restrictive social standards endorsed by the magazines. As Suzanne Bunkers explains, “Parker’s satire obligates the reader to look beneath the surface of her sarcastic humor to the social criticism, criticism that should not be ignored” (161). Beneath the comic representation of the interactions between women and men lies Parker’s satirical criticism of the restrictive gendered behaviors reflected in the pages of women’s popular magazines and adopted by female readers.

The 1920s Jazz Age sent young women mixed messages about the kind of women men were seeking. Suffragists in an earlier period, such as Susan B. Anthony, used the idea of women’s inherent virtue to convince men that women could positively affect the morality of civic life (Parrish 138). Such an attitude emphasized the virtues of modesty, gentility and dependence through the early decades of the twentieth century. And although the suffragist movement gained women the right to vote, the 1920s saw a “retreat from progressive feminism” (152) as post-war American society sought to strengthen the importance of homemaking and child rearing as the primary occupations of women. Meanwhile, Hollywood films that portrayed more progressive images of women and the popularity of cultural phenomena like Jazz music and speakeasies transformed sexual expectations, fostering the ideas of increased independence for women and more sensual expressions of womanhood. Yet as feminine standards became more sexualized, Hollywood portrayals of women still represented “narrow feminine ideals” that upheld traditional emphases on appearance and beauty (150). The social rules resulting from these conflicting messages dictated that while women should expect to be dependent on men for their livelihood, they should not overtly express that dependence
and instead should appear to be independent and unemotional. Popular magazines also presented such conflicting messages about feminine behavior, both promoting traditional values while glorifying the ideal of the “modern woman.”

One of Parker’s early magazine short stories, “The Sexes” was published in *The New Republic* in 1927. From its beginnings in 1914, the editors of *The New Republic* “saw their magazine primarily as a means to achieve sweeping domestic reform” in many areas, including women’s rights (Wickenden 3). Considered throughout its history as one of the “serious magazines of opinion,” *The New Republic* has been both intellectual and influential (Tebbel and Zuckerman 203). Edward Zwick points out that in its early decades, *The New Republic* was “a liberal magazine, quite certain of its politics, less certain of its views on culture and the arts” (xxv). The literary editors “demonstrated a remarkable openness to contradictory or at least disparate visions,” creating a back of the book (the literary section) that was “freer, less predictable” than the non-fiction articles comprising the rest of the magazine (xxv). These qualities, and the magazine’s “unashamedly elitist and calculatedly impudent” editorial attitude that Parker was accustomed to from the *New Yorker* (Wickenden 3), made it a perfect venue for Parker to publish a story that set liberal ideas about the modern woman at odds with the reality of socially acceptable gender performance.

The generalizing title of “The Sexes” suggests that the story is going to reveal to the reader characteristics that are “universal” to the sexes. What Parker actually reveals are the stereotypical behaviors that men and women have internalized from messages about gender promoted in magazines. In the story, Parker satirizes traditionally feminine sentimentality and masculine emotional distancing of middle- and upper-class 1920s New
Yorkers by having the male and female characters awkwardly adopt each other's socially prescribed gender role in the beginning of the story and then revert to their socially appropriate female and male roles for a resolution that is comfortable, familiar, and representative of traditional, restrictive gender roles.

At the beginning of "The Sexes," the nervous young man offers his disinterested female companion a cigarette, establishing her as the type of young woman who was targeted by mixed social messages of gender expectations. In the 1920s, smoking, which had previously been considered a "sign of dubious character" for women, became a mark of sophistication and "was encouraged as a symbol of newly achieved equality" (Kyvig 163). The young man apologizes for only having a certain brand and asks if the woman has any of her own, again suggesting this young woman is independent and self-sufficient, putting the two on more equal footing than may traditionally be expected. His focus on brands also reflects the consumer consciousness of the era. As all modern women should, she has a preferred brand of cigarettes and can afford to buy her own, and she repeatedly refuses his offers to run out and buy some of her brand.

Her refusals, however, are spoken in what Robin Lakoff refers to as "women's language," or speech characterized by trivializing words, meaningless particles, and "women's" adjectives (48). Lakoff argues that social conditioning in the use of language creates an additional inequality for women both in the way they are taught to speak and in the way they are spoken about. Such women's language was also used by female magazine writers who felt the need to maintain a feminine style in order to be published in a predominantly male industry, so female readers would have been consistently exposed to what was considered appropriate female language. Throughout their
conversation about cigarettes, which gives the young woman a superficial appearance of equality with her partner, the woman’s frequent repetitions of, “Thank you ever so much just the same,” and, “Oh thank you, but I wouldn’t have you go to all that trouble for anything” (“The Sexes” 24), make her refusals ineffective in their use of women’s language that “submerges a woman’s personal identity . . . by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly” (Lakoff 48). Yet, even as the young woman conforms to the manners and pleasantries that society has provided her as a means of communication, the young man is frustrated by these behaviors, exclaiming, “Will you for God’s sakes stop thanking me?” (“The Sexes” 24). His repeated offers to buy her cigarettes are his way of fulfilling what society has taught him is his duty: to take care of the woman. Dealing with her refusal to let him accomplish this task is as frustrating as dealing with her apologetic, overly polite, “women’s” responses.

Both of them are confronting opposing gender expectations. He is expected to care for her, but she will not let him; she wants to be independent, but he insists on doing things for her. As an independent woman, she should refuse his offers, but the only language she has available to do so is weak and unassertive, placing him in a position to interpret whether she truly means what she is saying or is simply being coy. The couple’s quarrel invites the reader to consider that the young man’s persistent offerings to do the young woman a favor and the young woman’s equally persistent yet cautiously polite refusals are their ways of performing gender in the manner that magazines encouraged. Their behaviors are marked by a “stylized repetition of acts” that creates a gendered identity “tenuously constituted in time” because of its reliance on socio-historical gender expectations (Butler 519). As Andrea Ivanov-Craig explains, Parker’s parody is not
intended to simply ridicule stereotypical women; her satire “may also be understood to ‘transform’ our ways of thinking about gender” (232-3). Rather than consider gender a fixed, biologically determined imperative, as the magazines seem to, the reader must look beneath the stereotypes to identify the societal expectations advocated by popular magazines which manifest in so-called feminine idiosyncrasies.

While Ken Johnson argues that the anonymity of Parker’s characters “in both name and personality . . . heightens . . . the author’s thematic concerns about the horror of shallow self-understanding” (67), in the case of “The Sexes,” the characters’ anonymity and the story’s overly generalized title suggest the universality of socially constructed gender roles. After his gallant offers to get the woman cigarettes are rejected, the man puts himself in the vulnerable position of attempting to determine why the young woman seems upset with him. The ensuing dialog continues the reversal of traditional gender roles. The young man practically begs the woman to open up and share her feelings with him, a sentimental behavior that would typically be attributed to women. The young woman responds in a distanced and unattached manner, the way a man might be expected to shut down a woman’s emotional pleas. Their frustrating back and forth creates surface humor in the story:

“You know,” he said. “That’s the way you were talking over the telephone today, too. You were so snotty when I called you up, I was afraid to talk to you.”

“I beg your pardon, . . . What did you say I was?”

“Well, I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to say that. . . .”
“I’m not really in the habit of hearing language like that. I’ve never had a thing like that said to me in my life.”

“I told you I was sorry, didn’t I,” he said. “Honest, honey, I didn’t mean it. I don’t know how I came to say a thing like that. Will you excuse me? Please?”

“Oh, certainly,” she said. “Goodness, don’t feel you have to apologize to me. It doesn’t make any difference at all. It just seems a little bit funny to have somebody you were in the habit of thinking was a gentleman come to your home and use language like that to you, that’s all. But it doesn’t make the slightest bit of difference.”

“I guess nothing I say makes any difference to you,” he said. “You seem to be sore at me.”

“I’m sore at you?” she said. “I can’t understand what put that idea in your head. Why should I be sore at you?” (“The Sexes” 26)

Beneath the surface humor, however, is Parker’s representation and criticism of conflicting gender messages about female independence and passivity. In the pages of a liberal magazine, Parker is experimenting with what happens when men and women refuse to perform their gender as expected and instead adopt characteristics of the other gender, behaviors that might be considered more modern for their subversion of traditional gender stereotypes. The girl’s behaviors that frustrate the young man are reflecting the independent, self-sufficient attitudes of the 1920s modern woman, attitudes which were diametrically opposed to conservative notions of femininity. Yet her attempts to transgress gender expectations fail to establish any sort of equality between them;
despite the liberal messages of small circulation magazines like The New Republic, the gender rules imposed on women by 1920s society are both ambiguous and ubiquitous.

The conversation subsequently devolves into a pointless argument about who was ignoring whom at a party and why the man spent so much time talking to another woman. The details of their behavior at the party reveal that socially constructed gender codes dictated how each would perform his/her gender, causing confusion about their true intentions:

“Well, the minute you came in the room,” she said, “you started making such a fuss over Florence Leaming, I thought you never wanted to see anybody else. You two seemed to be having such a wonderful time together, goodness knows I wouldn’t have butted in for anything.”

“My God,” he said, “this what’s-her-name girl came up and began talking to me before I even saw anybody else, and what could I do? I couldn’t sock her in the nose, could I?” (27)

The woman’s response, “I certainly didn’t see you try” (27), adds humor to the situation—at least for the reader—but should not be interpreted as Parker merely mocking a petulant, jealous girl. Rather, the Florence Leaming exchange, which primarily considers how attractive the other woman is, demonstrates how much pressure young women feel to compete with other women for a man’s attention. During this argument, the woman attempts to maintain her air of unattached aloofness because she knows a modern woman should not let a man think she is too interested in him. The man is again put in the position of having to convince the woman that he is only interested in her and resorts to extolling the young woman’s beauty to do so: “Gee, you’ve got a pretty
nose . . . And beautiful eyes . . . and beautiful hair and a beautiful mouth. And beautiful hands. . . . Who’s got the prettiest hands in the world?” (28). Despite early attempts to redefine the behaviors expected of a woman and a man, the couple eventually return to performing their socially acceptable gender roles: the young man prefers this woman not for her independent, cigarette-smoking, easy-going nature, but for her pretty little hands and because she is the “sweetest girl in the world” (28). The woman, too, is more comfortable with this behavior because it reaffirms what she has been taught to believe matters to a man. She assures him she is not angry with him once he performs this traditional masculine behavior, thus righting their relationship according to traditional gender roles. Neither was comfortable with their attempts to redefine those roles and so they revert back to the behaviors that society dictates for their gender.

The characters' behaviors reflect wider social discomfort with women's attempts to move beyond conservative notions of womanhood. Even The New Republic, whose political stance was clearly liberal, continued to publish non-fiction articles that upheld conservative ideas about women's responsibility to the domestic sphere. For example, in the issue published the week after the one featuring "The Sexes" appears an article by Gretchen Mount titled, "Sales Resistance." The article is the first among the General Articles, preceding the verse and fiction that appear in the second half of the issue. In this article, the author introduces herself, stating, “I am Mrs. John Smith of the U. S. A.—the average housewife in that social class which politicians and preachers tell us is the backbone of the nation, the bulwark of civilization, the hope of democracy” (Mount 218). She goes on to describe her qualifications as an upper middle class housewife:
I do my own work and have a woman who comes in twice a week to wash and clean the house. I can play the piano mildly well, can hold my own at bridge, and am studying French. We subscribe to all the better magazines.

(218)

This description is intended to inform the reader that she is a model housewife who is substantially capable in more areas than just cooking and cleaning. However, her additional skills are also traditionally female occupations, and the struggle she outlines in the rest of the article indicates how firmly entrenched she is in the domestic realm. After detailing the numerous phone calls she makes on a typical day to various service people to ensure that her household runs smoothly, we learn that she is constantly interrupted by salesman who call and knock on her door. Her piano lesson is repeatedly disturbed but she explains, “I cannot muffle the door-bell because I am expecting Little John’s new pants to be delivered . . . I cannot muffle the telephone bell, because it might be Big John bringing a friend to dinner or something like that” (219). Her life is truly not her own; she is at the mercy of her husband’s and son’s needs and the endless parade of salesmen vying for her business. She enjoys the limited independence granted her to bring in someone to help with the housework, pursue personal interests (in between her domestic responsibilities) and even write and publish this article, yet conventional notions of womanhood still dictate her daily activities which are presented as activities she should take pride in doing well: “I only hurry a little faster [after interruptions], and am delighted to find, when the beds are made and the dusting and cleaning are done, that it is only 10.30 [sic]” (218). Her efficiency at housework is a source of pride and delight. The author effectively balances what she considers a progressive approach to being a
housewife with her conventional responsibilities as wife and mother because she does not attempt to stray too far from accepted gender expectations. In “The Sexes,” Parker presents this balance as a dilemma for the young woman because she wants to take her independence further but finds she cannot satisfactorily negotiate conflicting societal messages that encourage independence as long as a woman stays within her domestic sphere.

Herbert Croly, who was editor of The New Republic when this story was published, said of the magazine: “The whole point . . . is that we are trying to impose views on blind or reluctant people. . . . we throw a few firecrackers under the skirts of the old women on the bench and in other high places” (qtd. in Wickenden 3). Parker’s publication of “The Sexes” in the pages of The New Republic achieves this goal on multiple levels: she allows her characters a more modern performance of gender through the woman’s masculine distance and the man’s feminine sensitivity to ruffle the skirts of the old women, but the reversion to traditional gender roles at the story’s conclusion is meant to open the eyes of foolishly optimistic liberals who believe these traditional values can be easily changed. Parker’s simultaneous criticism of both restrictive gender roles for women and blind liberal optimism about an improving situation for women is emphasized by the story’s publication in The New Republic, which occupies a similarly ironic position as a liberal magazine within a social system—the media—that generally perpetuates traditional gender expectations.

A superficial reading of “The Sexes” that focuses only on the young woman’s apparently evasive and coy behavior fails to account for the broader cultural reasons for that behavior and the internalized expectations that both she and the young man have
about how each should act around the other. As Nancy Walker points out, American female humorists often create female characters based on unflattering stereotypes not to condone or promote those stereotypes but to subvert them: “By presenting the results of women’s cultural conditioning and subordination, America’s female humorists implicitly address the sources of women’s self-doubt, dependence, and isolation” (30, original emphasis). In “The Sexes,” the exaggerated failure of communication and the shallow focus on appearances that brings about resolution enable Parker to satirize a liberal view of gender roles that refuses to recognize the powerful effect of magazine advertising on gender performance, the kind of view promoted by *The New Republic*.

Parker publishes “Here We Are” in *Cosmopolitan* four years later, turning to the wedding night anxieties of newlyweds rather than the jealousy and confusion of a casual young couple. Since 1918, *Cosmopolitan* had been established as “the premier popular fiction magazine in the nation” (Landers 176) thanks to the strong editorial leadership of Ray Long. “Here We Are” was published in March, 1931, the same month that a profile of Long appeared in *Fortune* magazine which may have set in motion his resignation from *Cosmopolitan*. As one of the literary pieces selected by Long for inclusion in the magazine, “Here We Are” claims a respectable position among the “mainstream quality fiction” that Long insisted on publishing in the women’s magazine: “Most authors chosen by Long . . . were known to the public. Long infrequently showcased unknown authors in *Cosmopolitan*, instead relegating some of them to *Hearst’s International*” (177). According to James Landers, F. Scott Fitzgerald was one such author relegated to the lesser publication and Long considered Ernest Hemingway “unsuitable for affluent middle-class readers” (177). Three years prior, Parker had received the O. Henry Prize
for her short story “Big Blonde,” establishing her as a reputed figure not just in light verse and book reviews but also in literary fiction. Arthur Kinney calls “Here We Are” “one of Dorothy Parker’s half-dozen best short stories” (131). Its acceptance by the fastidious Long reflects her importance as a literary talent in her time.

Like “The Sexes,” “Here We Are” is primarily a dialog between a young couple, this one fresh from their wedding ceremony and on a train bound for their honeymoon destination. This couple’s conversation is also circular, unfocused, and repetitive, devolving into argument when they are unable to clearly and directly communicate their thoughts. The couple’s anxiety, evident in their conversation and argument, can be considered in light of the new theory of sexuality that had made its way to the United States and was gaining popularity by the 1930s. Freudian psychoanalysis established new ways of thinking about sex, sexual repression, and gender differences regarding sexual attitudes, none of which were very favorable to women. Yet many women, including Dorothy Parker, sought psychoanalytic therapy to uncover the subconsciously repressed memories that Freud theorized could cause a variety of neurosis. Freud’s notions about the hysterical woman are evident in the behaviors of the woman in “Here We Are,” whose anxieties about her new husband’s attraction to her are more neurotic in nature than those of the young woman in “The Sexes.” In Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex, Freud explains hysterical behaviors as “an instinctive flight from intellectual occupation with the sexual problem,” the sexual problem being “an exaggeration of the resistances against the sexual instinct which became known to us as shame and loathing” (542). In other words, as a woman reaches sexual maturity, her sexual desires become associated with feelings of shame and self-loathing. She represses those desires to the
point that they manifest in hysterical, non-sexual behaviors, particularly once she is married. During marriage, her sexual repression is constantly confronted by her husband’s sexual desires, causing intense anxiety, exacerbating the hysteria. In “Here We Are,” Parker presents a nearly hysterical bride and her similarly nervous male counterpart to satirize such anxiety caused by the pressures on women to reconcile their natural sexual desires with societal messages validating sexual repression: “The hysterical suffers from those rebellious, sexual desires that she repudiates: they are incompatible with her higher moral ideals” (Appignanesi and Forrester 399).

For the duration of their train ride to New York, the marriage consummation that will take place that night dominates the honeymooning couple’s thoughts. Their conversation revolves around the topic while never addressing it explicitly, and the couple’s anxiety about that first sexual encounter manifests in verbal ticks and repetitions throughout the dialog. Every time the man is about to mention it—“they say that girls get kind of nervous and yippy on account of thinking about”—he cuts off with a nervous, “I mean. I mean—” (“Here We Are” 128). His wife, on the other hand, avoids the topic entirely, instead discussing her bridesmaids’ dresses, her hat, and her chaste memories of visits to New York with her parents. Her speech is peppered with the repetitive phrase “sort of,” preventing her from ever making a definitive or assertive statement:

I guess I did feel a little bit funny. All mixed up, and then thinking of all those people all over everywhere, and then being sort of ’way off here, all alone with you. It’s so sort of different. It’s sort of such a big thing. (129)

The unassertive women’s language described by Lakoff is again used by Parker throughout the story to exaggerate the ideal of feminine passivity. The woman’s
preoccupation with “those people all over everywhere” focuses on the idea of “people all over the world, getting married just as if it was nothing . . . all of them, all over everywhere, doing it all the time” (“Here We Are” 126). According to Freud, problems in the marriage bed are the source of many women’s neuroses. The young woman thus has difficulty grasping the fact that so many women around the world would so willingly get married knowing their possible fate (according to Freud): to become a “cloistered virginal bride whose sexuality is brutally awakened by her husband, who then, either for reasons of his own impotence, or because of the contraceptive measures the couple are forced to adopt, fails to satisfy her and instead lays the foundation for her anxiety neurosis and her permanent frigidity” (Appignanesi and Forrester 398). If this is what the future holds for the newlywed couple, it is a wonder to the young woman that people are “doing it just like it wasn’t anything” (“Here We Are” 126). Of course, Parker’s subtle use of the double entendre “doing it” adds another Freudian layer to this virgin’s amazement.

Parker also creates a dialog full of Freudian hysterical tendencies as the couple attempts to have a conversation in which they negotiate, without ever mentioning, his sexual desires with her sexual passivity. For example, the woman spends a significant amount of time asking whether her new husband likes her hat, focusing his attention as far from her erogenous zones as possible:

“I guess I will take this darned old hat off,” she said. “It kind of presses. . .
Do you like it, sweetheart?”
“Looks good on you,” he said.
“No, but I mean,” she said, “do you really like it?”
“Well, I’ll tell you,” he said. “I know this is the new style and everything like that, and it’s probably great. I don’t know anything about things like that. Only I like the kind of a hat like that blue hat you had. Gee, I liked that hat.”

“Oh really?” she said. “Well, that’s nice. That’s lovely. The first thing you say to me, as soon as you get me off on a train away from my family and everything, is that you don’t like my hat. The first thing you say to your wife is you think she has terrible taste in hats.”

“. . . I only said—I said I liked that blue hat. I don’t know anything about hats. I’ll be crazy about this one as soon as I get used to it. . . . What do I know about women’s hats?” (“Here We Are” 129)

The comic effect of her hysteria allows Parker to satirize commonly held Freudian notions about male sexual obsession and female sexual avoidance, under the guise of discussing a hat.

Parker was well aware of psychoanalytic theory and Freud’s connections between sex and neurosis. Besides the fact that she underwent psychoanalysis on multiple occasions, she makes explicit references to Freud in the poem “The Passionate Freudian to His Love” and in the short story “The Waltz.” Her knowledge of Freudian theories and their popularity among the magazine-reading culture of New York City contribute to a deeper understanding of the ideas Parker draws attention to in “Here We Are.” We are not merely presented with a silly young virgin couple and their nerves about having sex; as readers we are asked to consider how the prominence of Freudian psychology created a culture that imbued both genders with performance expectations. This man—to be a
man—must be sexually aggressive. His wife—to be a woman—must be sexually passive. Their respective gender identities are “a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the [man and woman] themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler 520). Like the couple in “The Sexes,” this couple’s performance of gender has been constructed from a variety of socio-historical assumptions about men, women, and sex, the most prominent of which at the time emerged from psychoanalytic theory.

Today’s readers who are familiar with the late-twentieth-century version of *Cosmopolitan* may be surprised that a story which explicitly avoids mention of the word sex could possibly have found an audience in the publication that set the standard for discussion of taboo sexual topics in other women’s magazines (Landers 268). However, the *Cosmopolitan* of the first half of the twentieth century was a fiction magazine of women’s interest published under the auspices of a publishing company that sought to avoid risk and controversy. Long attempted to liven things up by publishing a non-fiction article in which the writer advocates for an unwed mother’s right to raise her child. The president of the publishing company, William Randolph Hearst, sent Long a telegram stating:

This article gives me cold chill. I think it will lose us many readers of better class. Don’t think it has any place in Cosmopolitan [sic] and if not too late will you please cut it out . . . I think it does not do any good to print articles that attract the more reputable and wholesome readers and then when we get them . . . offend them with articles of illegitimate child kind.” (qtd. in Landers 204)
Long responded that it was too late to remove the story and it is unknown whether the magazine sustained an angry backlash from its “reputable and wholesome readers,” but the incident reveals the publisher’s attitude toward material that would be considered offensive. “Here We Are” is publishable not only for its literary quality but also because Parker’s use of humor masks the satire: while the couple never talks about sex, sex is the only thing they are thinking about, and their excessive avoidance satirizes popular Freudian notions of sexual repression.

“The Sexes” and “Here We Are” involve intimate conversations between young couples with societal influences simmering just below the surface of their conflicts. In “The Lovely Leave,” published in 1943 in *Woman’s Home Companion*, Parker allows the social context to feature more prominently as the source of tension between another couple. She brings the outside world into the home, just as women’s magazines were commonly doing through their articles and advertisements in the war years. Mimi McVicker’s preparations for and reunion with her soldier husband, Steve, who will be coming home for a short leave, place the historical context explicitly at the forefront of the story; but like the other stories discussed, Parker’s criticism of the pressures of gender expectations are still subtle and have been overlooked by critics who focus on Mimi’s surface obsessions and superficiality. Mimi is performing the gendered behaviors she has learned from wartime American society’s targeted messages about femininity and women’s responsibility during war, especially those messages which were common in women’s magazines.

When Mimi learns in a too brief phone conversation that her husband will be home for a 24-hour leave, her emotions vacillate between excitement to see him, fear that
their time together will not be perfect, and jealousy that his war buddies know more about his current life than she does. The range of emotions she experiences is typical of the war bride, who was suddenly left as head of the household, desperately waiting for letters or a rare phone call from her husband. Although she can think of nothing but being with Steve again, she knows that he does not feel the same way. While they are on the phone, Mimi notices that “from back of him had come gay, wild young voices, voices he heard every day and she did not, voices of those who shared his new life. And he had heeded them and not her” (“The Lovely Leave” 4). This realization that Steve’s soldier buddies have replaced her as the most important influence in his life makes her determined that “there must be no waste to this leave” (4), especially as she recalls his last visit, which she believes she ruined because her expectations for the reunion were too high.

Parker skillfully captures the conflicting emotions experienced by soldiers’ wives, emotions she had keenly felt twice in her life: both of her husbands were sent overseas to fight in the world wars—Edwin Pond Parker in the first and Alan Campbell in the second. The pain of separation for Parker and other women was further complicated by invasive social messages that women must be strong for their men and that one of a wife’s greatest contributions to the war effort was a positive attitude. Magazine articles were full of advice on how women should behave around their soldier husbands: “And perhaps most important of all, don’t mope! . . . standing up to heartache and loneliness is your contribution to righting a topsy-turvy world” (Yellin 15, original emphasis). Women were inundated with such messages by a society that continued to validate women for maintaining appearances and repressing any emotional reactions to hardship. Through
Parker's narration, we glimpse those true feelings, but Mimi makes sure to never reveal them to her husband in letters or phone calls.

According to Mimi, there are rules that a woman must follow. She explains:

Never say to him what you want him to say to you. Never tell him how sadly you miss him, how it grows no better, how each day without him is sharper than the day before. Set down for him the gay happenings about you . . . Do not bedevil him with the pinings of your faithful heart because he is your husband, your man, your love. . . . You are writing to a soldier.

("The Lovely Leave" 6)

Mimi's pain and longing are evident in her list of what not to do. Like other stories Parker wrote in the 1940s, "The Lovely Leave" is not overtly funny. Rather than mocking the sentimentality of a selfish housewife, Parker is empathizing with the daily struggle of soldiers' wives to hide their emotions and stoically face the challenges that a country at war dealt them. American society, which historically had made sure that women were constantly reminded of their responsibilities in housekeeping and child rearing, now expected them to take up riveting and welding in the absence of employable males.

Francesca Cancian and Steven Gordon examined advice columns in women's magazines throughout the twentieth century and found that in the 1940s, articles in women's magazines emphasized the traditional female role. They observed that "while the labor-force participation of wives steadily increased, magazines advocated domestic roles for women, as did most elements of popular and elite culture" (334). By hiding her fears and loneliness from her husband and preparing for his comfort in their home during the visit, Mimi is performing her historically and socially determined female role. In Butler's
Dempsey 67

words, she is defined as a woman because she has “become a woman” by realizing herself “in obedience to an historically delimited possibility” (Butler 522). She is behaving in the way the magazines tell her a woman should behave in times of war. The social construction of gender is most evident in the fact that the expectations of women were so easily changed when men needed to go off to war and rather quickly changed back when they returned home.

Mimi’s preparations for Steve’s arrival further demonstrate her adherence to the wartime expectations of a wife. She buys a new dress she cannot afford, “black—he liked black dresses—simple—he liked plain dresses,” (“The Lovely Leave” 6) and a number of other items to improve the appearance of herself and their home. Throughout the war, women’s magazines like Woman’s Home Companion were full of advice on the best ways for a woman to accomplish all she needed to do in her man’s absence, and “of course, advice on how to look good through it all” (Yellin 25). Keeping up appearances went beyond avoiding sentimentality in letters and phone calls and included keeping up one’s own attractive appearance and that of her lovely home. While Yates dismisses Mimi as one of Parker’s “idle women” whose “possessiveness ruins what few hours she and her husband can have together” (Yates 268), he fails to recognize that Mimi’s apparently selfish behaviors are in fact the very behaviors that the magazines, posters, and war department are encouraging her to perform in order to keep her soldier satisfied. Kinney more acutely observes of Mimi and Steve:

She openly fears estrangement; he wants to savor, for a few moments, the creature comforts of a home bath. They feel and talk at cross-purposes; their language and behavior, acts and intentions are at odds. When Steve
leaves, Mimi is asked by a friend if the leave were lovely and she says it was—the first lie the war will cost her. (144)

Parker portrays the real impact of the war on women and men and the strain that enacting stereotypical gender behaviors puts on a marriage.

Eventually, Mimi breaks the rules by trying to explain her hurt feelings to Steve, exclaiming, “You don’t wonder what I do, you don’t want to find out what’s in my head—why, you never even ask me how I am!” (“The Lovely Leave” 11). Steve’s response emphasizes the cultural expectations that Parker is criticizing: “I didn’t have to ask you. I could see how you look. You look wonderful” (11). Mimi’s perfectly performed femininity eliminates the possibility that she can have a meaningful conversation with her husband about the war and its effect on their relationship. The superficiality and shallowness that critics like Yates and Emily Toth describe as the hallmarks of Parker’s prose are actually shown to be manifestations of cultural expectations that restrict women to limited definitions of female behavior.

With a circulation of around three million readers in the early 1940s, *Woman’s Home Companion* ranked as one of the top three most successful women’s magazines (Peterson 142). Mary Ellen Zuckerman describes the magazine’s emphasis on war preparation beginning at home even before the United States had entered the conflict, during which time, *Women’s Home Companion* “underscored the importance of women’s work in wartime. . . . In the first full year of war, 1942, war-related material took up about a third of the journal” (195). A regular column gave advice on healthful and economic meal ideas, the most practical clothing choices, and even wedding etiquette during wartime. The magazine was fully entrenched in war reporting, with a war
correspondent consistently on staff overseas, and even held a contest for the "best letters from soldiers at the front" (195). Publishing "The Lovely Leave" in *Women's Home Companion* was a shrewd decision on Parker's part. As Angela Weaver points out, "When magazines showed conflict and contradiction in social ideas about gender identity, Parker consistently sorted it out as an observer, identifying faults and problems with the constructions, especially those linked to magazine culture" (25). The plot of "The Lovely Leave" would have fit nicely with the non-fiction articles in *Woman's Home Companion*, and its subtle criticism of the magazine's wartime messages would have reached a wide, receptive audience. Parker serves as observer, reporter and critic of female wartime behaviors, offering female readers "The Lovely Leave" in sympathy with their struggle against conflicting gender expectations.

Although Parker may appear to offer no alternatives for women in "The Sexes," "Here We Are," and "The Lovely Leave," it is just those lack of alternatives to which she brings attention, using the magazine market as her platform. By situating her female characters' typically feminine traits in a historical context, satirizing the limiting behaviors these magazines model for women, Parker demonstrates that there are no alternative models available to them. Yet what the magazine culture has led women to believe is expected of them is unacceptable by any standards of equality or independence. As Butler explains, "the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such [stylized repetition of] acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (520). The humorous yet realistic depictions of stylized "feminine" behaviors in Parker's stories serve as "subversive repetition" of such socially constructed stereotypes; while
transforming the expectations associated with their gender is not possible for these women, Parker’s stories encourage the reader to consider the fact that such transformation is indeed necessary.
Conclusion

Parker’s literary output was substantial, but she was by no means the only female writer publishing humorous or satirical stories for popular magazines in the early twentieth century. However, there were few women before her time who were taking on the male-dominated magazine marketplace and using it to criticize social norms in the way Parker did. Part of this is due to the fact that while women had a limited publishing venue in women’s magazines of the nineteenth century, these magazines were united in a common editorial goal of promotion the “Cult of True Womanhood” (Endres xii). Writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Eliza Leslie, Caroline M.S. Kirkland, and Hannah F. Gould found voice in such magazines. Common forms available to female humorists in the nineteenth century were travel writing, letters recording the pioneer experiences of women, and plays, but often such writing was serious with a few touches of mocking humor added (Rather 6). Light verses were also popular among women writers, particularly as the magazine market expanded in the second half of the nineteenth century. Frances Whitcher’s dialect stories by “the Widow Bedott” were serialized in Neal’s Saturday Gazette to great success (Rather 8). Whitcher is generally considered the earliest female satirist but most women encountered difficulty—or perhaps were not interested in—making serious entry into such a male-dominated form. Their attempts were not supported by male writers who both feared and dismissed female contributions to literature, as evidenced by the often quoted Hawthorne who wrote to his publisher concerned that this “damned mob of scribbling women” was watering down the American literary scene (qtd. in Endres xii).
The launching of the “Big Six” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Woman’s Home Companion, Ladies Home Journal and Good Housekeeping, expanded the magazine publishing opportunities available to women. Increasing diversity in editorial stances on social issues emerged, and these women’s magazines were more committed to art and fiction than their predecessors that were mostly focused on housekeeping and fashion. Still, it was not until about the 1920s, when advertising rather than subscriptions became the financial backbone of popular magazines, that women began to find more solid ground as periodical contributors beyond magazines published specifically for a female audience. Tebbell and Zuckerman consider the 1920s through 40s—the period considered in this paper—a transition period for magazines that created the advertising-dependent popular magazine market that persists today. As the people responsible for furnishing the home and purchasing daily necessities (and luxuries), women were prime targets for advertising, encouraging magazines that were not written exclusively for women to begin including pieces of interest to a female readership to thus attract a wider range of advertising support. A 1928 analysis of “American Magazines To-day” in The Sewanee Review determined that there were 7,958 periodicals in circulation in the United States, more than three times the number of daily newspapers. The report concluded that “already magazines are exerting as much, if not more, influence than the newspapers” (Drewry 356). This is the market which allowed for the discovery of talented women poets and fiction writers like Parker and her contemporaries.

Parker occupied a unique status at the famed Algonquin lunches, presiding as the “Queen of the Round Table” over a group almost exclusively made up of men.
Throughout her career, she negotiated a delicate balance between her feminine social image and a perceived (or real) need to adopt masculine characteristics as a writer in order to be successful. Parker was not alone in this negotiation; to avoid the “scribbling women” stigma, female writers, especially those publishing outside of women’s magazines, often found themselves in such negotiations with gender expectations. Through poetry, women like Edna St. Vincent Millay, Mina Loy, and Marianne Moore, along with Parker, found outlets for their frustrations with gender expectations, frequently using traditional poetic forms to address concerns about societal expectations for women.

In the first half of the twentieth century, when Parker produced her most substantial output of short fiction, women were capitalizing on the expanding and diversifying magazine marketplace. An increasing number of women entered the ranks as editors, where some of them enjoyed significant influence over the selection of poetry and fiction that appeared in the pages of popular magazines, and not just women’s magazines. Willa Cather served as managing editor for *McClure’s* for five years, contributing a substantial amount of content often without attributing herself a byline. Katherine Angell\(^2\) was the primary fiction editor of the *New Yorker* throughout the 1930s, providing a forceful and intellectual counter balance to Harold Ross and James Thurber. As managing editor of *Vanity Fair*, Clare Boothe Brokaw\(^3\) infused the magazine’s articles and visuals with politics, shifting its focus toward the kind of advocacy journalism the magazine had avoided in the past. Edna Woolman Chase reigned at *Vogue*

---

\(^2\) Known as Katherine White after her marriage to E. B. White.

\(^3\) Known as Clare Boothe Luce after her marriage to Henry Luce.
for a remarkable thirty-four years with “high editorial competence and infallible taste” (Douglas 103). These women ensured a place for women in the upper ranks among periodical editorial staff but there is little indication that the appointment of a female editor increased the number of contributions by female writers that were published in a magazine.

Despite vying for space in the pages of magazines with men, a number of women were also publishing short stories during the years Parker was productive. In the 1930s and 40s, Kay Boyle’s fiction also showed signs of sociopolitical leanings and could be found in *Harper’s Bazaar, Scribner’s* and the *New Yorker*, like Parker’s. Although Boyle is now considered one of the best American short story writers of the century, at the time, the content of her work was dismissed as trivial, especially in comparison to male modernists like James Joyce and Ezra Pound. Dorothy West, also publishing in magazines and journals from the 1920s through 40s, focused on the plight of the lower classes and excelled in the short story genre (Champion 359). While Parker was publishing satirical representations of the middle and upper classes, West’s stories were more straightforward portrayals of the struggles endured by the economically disadvantaged. Edna Ferber, who occasionally dined at the Algonquin Round Table with Parker and the others, enjoyed success as a short story and novel writer. She also frequently used female protagonists in her stories, but her fiction usually highlighted a woman’s strength in overcoming the inequalities of her society, as opposed to Parker who typically highlighted women’s complicity in accepting social inequalities.

Anita Loos is probably the most comparable of Parker’s contemporaries. She too was known for her wit and satire, but she accomplished what Parker could not: she
published a novel, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which is what ultimately secured her reputation as a female satirist. Originally serialized in *Harper's Bazaar*, the tale of Lorelei Lee’s transformation from an innocent small-town girl to a Manhattan socialite quadrupled the magazine’s sales. In 1928, Loos followed the bestselling novel with a sequel, *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, in which she continued her satire of glitzy Jazz Era New York. In this work, Loos even pokes fun at Parker and her associates when Lorelei accompanies her brunette friend Dorothy for lunch at the Algonquin and observes what she sees as the pretentious genius of the gathered intellectuals. At the time of these publications, Parker was just beginning to dabble in political advocacy; her writing still mostly reflected her close associations with New York intellectuals and socialites, showcasing the humor and wit that made her famous.

Contemporary male writers did respect Parker’s talent in addition to her wit. Ogden Nash proclaimed, “To say that Miss Parker writes well is as fatuous as saying that Cellini was clever with his hands” (qtd. in Day 193) and Alexander Woollcott poetically declared her succinct writing was “so potent a distillation of nectar and wormwood, of ambrosia and deadly nightshade, as might suggest to the rest of us that we write far too much” (qtd. in Day 193). Woollcott praises Parker’s ability to pack much substance into few words, a quality that is overlooked by others—including Parker herself—who feel her career was lacking because she never wrote a novel. It is true that the biographies of many of the women above describe how these women started their careers with magazine publications and then moved on to publishing novels while Parker stuck with—and mastered—the short story form. Her collections of short stories and poetry were such profitable best-sellers that publishers continued badgering her to write a novel throughout
her most productive periods; but writing was a torturous process for the perfectionist and she never completed the one novel she started.

Despite the respect of her fellow male writers, from a critical perspective, Parker was never as well received as contemporary male writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway or Ring Lardner, despite the similarities in writing style and technique Parker shared with these men of the literary canon, many of whom were friends or close acquaintances of hers. Again, this could be due to the fact that these men went on to write some of the greatest novels of the time, propelling their literary fame beyond their careers as short story writers. However, recent feminist critics have also pointed to the categorization of literature about women’s concerns as trivial to explain the critical dismissal of Parker. Ken Johnson appropriately expresses dissatisfaction with this phenomenon:

Parker’s work has regularly been dismissed . . . on the basis of triviality, in content, style, and technique, usually with the implication underlying such a critique that the content, style, and technique of her contemporary male short-story writers are hallmarks of substance and depth. Apparently bullfights, African safaris, twisted-up expatriate writers in France, and ill-starred southern gentry and field hands serve as more suitable subjects for fiction than the lives of middle- and upper-class white urbanites, usually women. (65)

Rhonda Pettit provides another explanation in considering Parker in the context of the modernist movement, a time during which Parker wrote that lauded a style in which she did not. The popularity of modernism in the early decades of the twentieth century led to the dismissal of works that were considered sentimental, many of which were written by
women; the subsequent emergence of New Criticism as a prominent theory in literary analysis caused works that were grounded in a social or historical context to be overlooked if they lacked certain elements of style or technical structure. Parker’s writing exhibited both of these characteristics. As Pettit describes, “These critical sentiments—and I use that word deliberately—are part of an intellectual movement that will define modernism against a form of sentimentality perceived . . . as feminine and female-generated.” Because of the distinction made between female sentimentality and masculine modernism, Parker (and other women writers who chose women and women’s concerns as the primary focus of their fiction) was “reproduced . . . as a minor character in a well-known literary period, in effect reducing the author to an anecdote” (Pettit, Introduction, 18).

A significant fact about Parker, especially compared to her female contemporaries, is that her works have never gone out of print. Despite that—or perhaps because of their popular appeal—her short stories and poetry have not garnered the critical attention they deserve. Because a select number of her most popular stories and poems have remained in print and were anthologized, and because she continued writing until her death in the 1960s, she did not need to be re-discovered by feminist critics in the second half of the twentieth century the way other women writers of the early twentieth century were. Such re-discoveries often led to an outpouring of critical attention towards those writers. But, as Andrea Ivanov-Craig points out, the “popular reputation” of Parker’s work as “doubly trivial; ‘trivial’ because it is humor and ‘trivial’ because it concerns the lives of women” (233) overshadowed the fact that she could accurately and insightfully pierce the hypocrisy and inequity of social standards in her day. Her light
verse and more humorous stories are the ones that are most often published and studied, positioning her as the humorist she spent most of her career trying to move past.

As early as 1934, Parker claimed, “Why, I’m not even an amateur humorist . . . I am very serious and quite hurt when people laugh at some of my most earnest endeavors” (qtd. in Day 112). Barry Day suggests this statement in itself “sound[s] like a clever line” (112) and it may well have been to some extent; but the seriousness of her earnest endeavors like “Song of the Shirt, 1941,” “Clothe the Naked,” and “The Lovely Leave” indicate an intent to move beyond humor into the male-dominated arena of ironic social criticism. She refused to see herself as a satirist, claiming, “They’re the big boys” (qtd. in Day 112), but such a comment was likely prompted by her low self-esteem and the internalized social messages that women’s writing simply was not as important as men’s. The current study of her short fiction within the context of the popular magazine market demonstrates otherwise. As recently as 2000, James Ward Lee concluded that “The final critical word is not in on Dorothy Parker” (275). Thus, the current study is essential to the re-examination of Parker’s works that critics like Pettit, Bunkers, and Ivanov-Craig have begun, all of whom urge others to follow in elucidating Parker’s important role as an early feminist and insightful social critic.
Works Cited


NEW YORKER. 28 FEB. 1925. MICROFILM.

PARKER, DOROTHY. “ARRANGEMENT IN BLACK AND WHITE.” THE PORTABLE DOROTHY PARKER. ED. MARION MEADE. NEW YORK: PENGUIN, 2006. 19-23. PRINT.

---. “A CERTAIN LADY.” DOROTHY PARKER: COMPLETE STORIES. ED. COLEEN BRESEE. NEW YORK: PENGUIN, 1995. 33-35. PRINT.


---. “HERE WE ARE.” THE PORTABLE DOROTHY PARKER. ED. MARION MEADE. NEW YORK: PENGUIN, 2006. 125-34. PRINT.

---. “THE LOVELY LEAVE.” THE PORTABLE DOROTHY PARKER. ED. MARION MEADE. NEW YORK: PENGUIN, 2006. 3-18. PRINT.


PETERSON, THEODORE. MAGAZINES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. URBANA: U OF ILLINOIS P, 1964. PRINT.


