

## A DEFINITION OF THE NEW WOMAN THROUGH MOTHERHOOD IN GRACE PALEY'S SHORT STORIES

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I would like to give you  
a different world, but the best I can do  
is to try to give you  
some of the truth about the world  
we do have.  
(Caroline Whitbeck, *Maternal Thinking*)

Grace Paley is not what can be called a prolific writer. In over thirty years she has produced three collections of short stories and a book of poems, faithful to her creed that "life is too short and art too long."

As she has always been an 'underground' writer, with a sort of elitarian audience, I find it useful to introduce her work and the quality of her writing briefly.

In 1959 she published *The Little Disturbances of Man*, where she established her peculiar narrative tone, her humorous witty voice recreating urban American idioms, embedded in a tragic structure. She set up her characteristic lower-class New York milieu which forms the background of all her stories, usually centred on the unexceptional lives of female characters.

*Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* appeared in 1974. The compressed, open-ended structure of these stories and Paley's elliptical style have gained her a reputation as a writer's writer.

She continued to explore the themes and the fictional possibilities of her two first collections in *Later the Same Day*, issued in 1985, where several of her characters appear, older but still outspoken.

Paley pays a great homage to the word. The act of saying, telling stories is a political act, because it implies the decision of illuminating a hidden life, of "be (ing)

on the side of the underdog,”<sup>1</sup> and in this perspective it makes justice to the world. Critics have often accused her of stuffing too much politics into her art, which ends up by being given over almost entirely to politicized themes. But her art and her involvement in community action, civil defence, pacifist and environmental activities cannot help being strictly linked, writing being part of her political life: “It certainly seems to me that both these forms of politics, the politics of ordinary life of women and men, and the organizational or activist politics, are more and more closely related.”<sup>2</sup>

Motherhood is Paley’s great theme. Women and children are the protagonists of most of her stories. In this paper I am going to focus on the writer’s peculiar notion of motherhood, how it shapes the lives of her women, moulding and determining their relationships with men, other women, the world itself.

The main character of Paley’s stories is not the middle-class American housewife, the stereotyped ‘mistress of the house,’ a popular cliché of American culture in the 1950s-1960s; on the contrary, it is the young, unwed, urban mother, the survivor of “families which have been reshuffled and revised because of the men who desert.”<sup>3</sup> We find her in the crummy kitchens of the New York apartment blocks, in the playgrounds of Lower West Side, surrounded by other mothers and children, “those round, staring, day-in and day-out companions;”<sup>4</sup> we see her struggling to rear her kids, actively engaged in Parents and Teachers Associations, petitioning City Hall to get better playgrounds. In spite of her single status, men being fleeting transients in her life, she is not alone: she is comforted and strengthened by the presence of other women, “co-worker(s) in the mother trade.”<sup>5</sup>

The centrality of mothers and children in Paley’s work is rooted in the writer’s biography. Since her childhood, Paley’s family life was not restricted behind domestic walls, but had its natural extension on the street; sitting on stoop-steps, crates or folding chairs, she used to share stories, gossip and apples thrown from upper windows with relatives and neighbours. As she says in an interview: “The idea that women’s friendships are new is weird to me; I don’t understand it... My mother and all those

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1. Shapiro, H. “Grace Paley: Art is on the Side of the Underdogs”, *MS*, 2 May 1974, p. 45 (interview).

2. Burns, Alan; Sugnet, Charles, *The Imagination on Trial: a collection of interviews*, London: Allison and Busby (US distribution by Shocken), 1981, pp. 123.

3. Mickelson, Anne Z., *Reaching Out: Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women*, Scarecrow Press, 1979, p. 227.

4. Paley, Grace, *Later the Same Day*, Penguin Books, 1987, p. 190 (first published in the U.S.A. by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985). Henceforth LSD.

5. Paley, Grace, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, Virago Press, 1979, p. 61 (first published in the U.S.A. by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974). Henceforth ECLM.

women, my aunts, they all hung out every Saturday talking and were such a comfort to one another and stuck by each other....”<sup>6</sup> She continued to be part of the same sort of collective family when, having a family of her own, she shared diapers and benches in the park with those women who lived in her own neighbourhood. Even if she was married, most of the women she knew were living without men and, as for the children, “Mostly nobody had fathers” (ECLM, p. 95). It is to tell about these women, about their condition of single parents, about the way they became friends through their children that she started writing her stories.

Faith, the recurring character through the three collections, sums up the characteristics of all these women. Some critics tend to identify her with her creator, because they actually have some similarities; yet, Paley herself has declared that Faith is not her alter ego, but an invented character that lived through experiences and situations similar to hers and her friends’. Faith appeared for the first time in “The Used-Boy Raisers,” included in LDM; in outlining her and the opening scene of the story, Paley had one of her friends and a real situation in mind: “When I first used her... she really is my friend, up to whose house I went... and I saw she was sitting there, and there were ‘two husbands disappointed by eggs’... a present husband and a former husband and they were both sitting there complaining about the breakfast.”<sup>7</sup> This friend, however, represents but the initial step toward a further evolution of the character, which gradually assumed features of other close friends; without typifying any of them in particular, it eventually developed into a collective embodiment of them all, Paley herself included.

We can reconstruct the facts of Faith’s life and the traits of her personality through the information scattered in the fourteen stories where she appears either as a protagonist, a narrator, or a secondary figure. We can retrace the invisible thread that runs through these stories, the ‘fabula’ lying beneath what can be called the Faith subnovel. Like Paley herself, Faith belongs to the second generation of American Jews; her parents, Eastern European immigrants, raised her “upon the liberalism and Zionism of the 1920s, the inspirational socialism of the 1930s, and the dreams of American prosperity and happiness of the 1940s.”<sup>8</sup> They defined themselves as idealists; they used to walk along the sidewalks of Coney Island distributing leaflets which spoke in the Yiddish voice: “Papa, Mama, what does it mean to be a Jew in the world

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6. Lidoff, Joan, “Clearing Her Throat: an interview with Grace Paley”, *Shenandoah*, Vol. 32, 3, 1981, p. 14.

7. *ivi*, p. 10.

8. Mandel, Dena, “Keeping Up With Faith: Grace Paley’s Sturdy American Jewess”, *Studies in American Jewish Fiction*, 2, 1982, p. 86.

today?" (ECLM, p. 40); an idealist and an activist is also their daughter, who now goes around with armfuls of political pamphlets crying out "U.S. Honor the Geneva Agreement" (LSD, p. 199). While they were engaged in keeping up Jewish consciousness and the role of the Jew in the world, Faith is questioning the nature of the role of Man in the contemporary world. Unlike her parents, Faith, nurtured as "an American child, free and independent" (ECLM, p. 80), has dismissed any attachment to Jewish law and tradition, as well as any concern about the condition of the Jews in Israel. She speaks as others from her: "I'm against Israel on technical grounds. I'm very disappointed that they decided to become a nation in my lifetime. I believe in the Diaspora... Jews have one hope only: to remain... a splinter in the toe of civilizations, a victim to aggravate the conscience."<sup>9</sup> Though oblivious of her Jewish past and roots, Faith is not unaffected by them. Her identity has been built upon the dual heritage of Jewish-American culture; Jewish secular sense of tragedy, endurance and responsibility blends with the peculiar creed on which The American Dream is grounded: optimism, self-reliance and the belief in man's infinite possibilities of self-assertion. That is how Faith develops her 'rosy temperament;' that is why, in spite of the decay of her city, she keeps holding to a strong urban commitment; deserted by husbands and lovers, she does not nourish bitterness or cynicism but, as a middle-aged woman, she can still write love poems. Consistent to her allegorical name, she is sustained by a persistent hope in a happier future and she does not allow any negative experience to overwhelm her, because "Rosiness is not a worse windowpane than gloomy gray when viewing the world" (ECLM, p. 174).

Faith is a mother and, together with her bunch of unwed mothers, displays all the implications that Paley attributes to this role. There is a first observation we can draw after reading the stories of the first two collections: the marked difference between 'mother' and 'father' culture, as it emerges from the analysis of the language used by these mothers; through it, they express their powerlessness in a world still ruled and controlled by men.

Let us examine, for example, the story "Faith in a Tree," contained in ECLM. It is a slice of urban life, an afternoon in Washington Square Park playground, as told by Faith who, in a rich play of dialogues, free direct speech, free direct thought, proves her inability to control and order the subject matter in her hands. She is unable to transform life into language, because her language is inadequate for a reality she cannot either define or dominate. She herself admits that: "My language limitations here are real. My vocabulary is adequate for writing notes and keeping journals but

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9. Paley, Grace, *The Little Disturbances of Man*, Virago Press, 1985, pp. 131-132 (first published in the U.S.A. by Doubleday in 1959). Henceforth LDM.

absolutely useless for an active moral life. If I really knew this language, there would surely be in my head, as there is in Webster's or the *Dictionary of American Slang*, that unreducible verb designed to tell a person like me what to do next" (ECLM, p. 85). Hers is a non-linear language that does not follow the cause-and-effect progression, but is based on absolute unexpectedness. Her personal digressions, the play of trivial questions to which she herself answers puzzle her interlocutors, who sometimes do not really understand her. When Alex Steele asks about Ricardo, her ex-husband, she replies with "her poetic language of self-expression,"<sup>10</sup> totally incomprehensible to the man; disappointed Faith can only read out the letter Ricardo sent her, which plainly relates his latest news. In other situations too, Faith has to face her impotence before listeners who do not understand her. I am referring to her son's teacher, who does not take her seriously when she enthusiastically shows one of Richard's poems; or Philip Mazzano who does not make out her need of "undying carnal love" (ECLM, p. 77); or Doug, the policeman, whom she is unable to speak out at; or her disapproving son Richard, who contemptuously criticizes her "all-the-time philosophies" (ECLM, p. 89). Mostly, Faith fails to establish a communication with the representatives of power (an executive director of a fund raising company, a teacher, a policeman), all embodiments of that reality she cannot reduce into comprehensible words. I agree with Joyce Meier who, in her essay "The Subversion of the Father," considers Faith's powerless and unique voice as opposing the naming, controlling, hierarchical voice of the Father. On a literary level, this means subverting a kind of narrative tradition where the artist, like God the Father, creates, dominates his matter, according to linear aesthetic codes; on an extra-literary plan, this implies the opposition to a system where the Father is in charge of the political, economic, socio-cultural power. Therefore, it is not an unintentional choice to endow mothers with this subversive voice: "Paley uses the cultural imposed mythos of women as child-raisers to reaffirm her own creative voice; she uses the voices of her mother-characters to undermine 'The Father,' and the mythos of the Father-artist as it exists in Western culture."<sup>11</sup>

The next common traits of Paley's women, strictly linked with their non-patriarchal habits of mind, are irony and cheerfulness. The expression of their attitude before a reality of which they do not possess any certainty, irony becomes a natural way of exorcising the dissatisfaction and frustration of a position they dislike.

Grace Paley is a feminist and her work mirrors her ideology, as she declared when interviewed on this point: "I'm a feminist and a writer. Whatever is in here comes

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10. Bruce, Melissa, "Enormous Changes at the Last Minute: A Subversive Song Book", *Delta*, n. 14, Mai 1982, p. 103. This monographic issue of *Delta* is entirely devoted to the work of Grace Paley.

11. Meier, Joyce, "The Subversion of the Father in the Tales of Grace Paley", *Delta*, cit., p. 122.

from the facts of my life. To leave them out would be false.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, she is not one of the radical feminists, she has never given way either to the excesses or the abstractions of the movement. And her women are feminists of the same kind, feminists by instinct: their witty, resilient voices are their powerful weapon of defence and offence. Secluded from the world of men, their lives pivoting around serving them, being deserted by them and rearing children, these women express their alienation through understatement. I’d like to point out a couple of passages, real jewels of Paley’s wit. In “The Used-Boy Raisers” (LDM), Faith appears in a condition of captivity within the boundary of domesticity; a quiet presence, she prepares the breakfast and listens to the conversation of her two husbands, the present and the former one, on a visit to his children. While they are engaged in ‘lofty’ conversations about religion and education, she takes up her needle-work: “The ranch house that nestles in the shade of a cloud and Norway maple, just under the golden script (God Bless Our Home)” (LDM, p. 128) is what she embroiders. No direct or embittered remark could have been more effective than her silent and mocking comment upon the restricted condition of the ‘realm of home’ with its implication, housework and childcare. Women are never resentful or acrimonious toward men, most of them self-centred and irresponsible; they reply to men’s direct and sharp verbal attacks in a wisecracking, oblique language, as the woman in “Wants” (ECLM), who describes the effect produced by her husband’s words as follows: “He had a habit throughout the twenty-seven years of making a narrow remark which, like a plumber’s snake, could work its way through the ear down the throat, half-way to my heart. He would then disappear, leaving me choking with equipment” (ECLM, p. 5).

Cheerfulness is intrinsic in the work of mothering. To rear a child first of all means preserving its life, protecting and defending it from countless external menaces, so that a mother is involved in a vigilant relationship with a world which is beyond her control. In such a situation, to be cheerful is a necessity, it means “to see a child hopefully and to welcome her(/his) hopes.”<sup>13</sup> This also means avoiding falling prey to excessive attention and over-protection. Faith and the other mothers perfectly embody this kind of maternal thinking, as we can notice from the most immediate appearances: they never shout anxious remarks and warnings, nor repeatedly run after their kids in fear that they can get dirty or hurt. Under the effect of the stress given to personal freedom and self-development, as it emerged in the 1960s, they sometimes go too far. Faith refuses to help Richard borrow a skate key from an unpleasant kid: “You want the skate key, you ask him. You have to go after your things in your life. I’m not going to be around forever” (ECLM, p. 93). When some circumstances make her see her son as the child he actually is, she painfully realizes “that I always treat Richard as though

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12. Gelfant, Blanche, “A Portrait in Collage”, *Women Writing in America*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1984, p. 288 (interview).

he's about forty-seven" (ECLM, p. 94). In these non-hierarchical relationships children are treated as peers, they often act as friends and advisors. Faith wakes them up at night back from a date to complain about it; or she explains the geography of New York surroundings to her two-year old son almost in scientific terms. These children often exhibit more common sense than their mothers; Richard warns Faith not to lose herself in abstract concepts; he cuts to size her enthusiasm for living in a poor, mixed neighbourhood, which she considers a good 'training ground' for her children, reminding her of the actual dangers: "All those guys got knives anyway. But you don't care if I get killed much, do you?" (ECLM, p. 84).

Not only do these children shake their mothers' sense of responsibility, but they are also the instruments of a process of deep change in them: from acquiescence to social commitment. If in the stories of the first collection the emphasis was on the 'little disturbances' that daily trouble men and women, the second collection celebrates those 'enormous changes' that Paley's women perform, educated by their "children's heartfelt brains" (ECLM, p. 100) to social and political consciousness. In "Faith in a Tree," deprived of male company and of the possibility to comprehend reality through man's ordained schemes, Faith is awakened to change by her son's bitter rage and criticism. He is strongly affected by the view of a parade against the Vietnam war and gets furious seeing that his mother and her friends do not take a clear stand before the opposition of the police. After this symbolic episode, Faith is determined to transform her life, starting to think "more and more and everyday about the world" (ECLM, p. 100). In LSD, this theme strikes as the dominant note and assumes a wider significance: the 'private' and the 'public' strictly coexist and mutually interfere. What Paley's women call 'our private troubles' are "the mistake of the World Trade Center, Westway, the decay of the South Bronx, the rage in Williamsburgh" (LSD, p. 87). These women are getting old; middle age is near. New incidents come to upset their existence; the loss and death of children, parents and friends add up to the economical troubles, the provisional relationships with men and the poor jobs that, for years, have filled their daily lives. Now, the present time, the disrupted 1980s, brings on new menaces, above all for their children. A deep concern for the unsafe, unpredictable lives of their sons and daughters, the so called "what's-to-become-of-them-theme,"<sup>14</sup>

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13. Ruddick, Sara, *Maternal Thinking. Toward a Politics of Peace*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, p. 84. This work represents a lucid study of the abstract and concrete thinking informing maternal practice and how this practice is governed by ideals of non-violence and peacekeeping. If Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* is the wideranging product of the feminist reflection on motherhood in the 1970s, Ruddick's work continues that reflection exploring different patterns from a new historical perspective.

14. Harris, Robert R., "Pacifists With Their Dukes Up", *The New York Times Book Review*, April 14, 1985, p. 7.

is the central issue in the entire last collection. Car accidents, drugs, dropping out are only a few of the many impending dangers, only a part of that world that Faith and her friends have been trying to change all these years. Nowhere else as in stories as “Friends”, “Anxiety,” “Ruthy and Edie,” “Zagrowsky Tells,” “The Expensive Moment” does motherhood emerge as a political issue, not merely as a private fact. For these women being a mother implies a strong commitment to the world; in giving birth and raising their children they are involved in a deep, doublefold responsibility both toward the world and toward their children themselves. First they engage themselves to educate, shaping their kids to the values of their social group, and at the same time they try to produce persons acceptable to the world. This point is clearly shown in the end of “The Expensive Moment,” where Faith discusses with a Chinese woman visiting the U.S. how to raise children: “Shall we teach them to be straightforward, honorable, kind, brave, maybe shrewd, self-serving a little? What is the best way to help them in the real world?” (LSD, p. 195). Secondly, they are responsible toward their children, trying to give them the best of the possible worlds (!). Under this perspective, the permanent threat to the children becomes a metaphor for the danger hanging over the whole mankind.

Thus, to welcome change is a basic trait of Paley’s female characters, grounded on maternal experience. Children grow, change and, like open structures, are subject to mysterious and irregular mutations; “they represent diffusion, moving out, the centrifugal motion of the world.”<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, in these stories, men, who are always leaving, moving, exploring exotic countries, “trying to get somewhere” (ECLM, p. 81), are unable to translate those external changes into inner modifications. Women, on the contrary, relegated within the narrow boundaries of home and playgrounds, live for change and openness. First bearing, then rearing a child leads a woman to an open disposition toward the Other, by this term intending both her child and other human beings. The acceptance of the other is perfectly shown by the sense of community and the recognition of difference of Paley’s women; they do not live motherhood as a private, personal experience, but they share it with other mothers. The special bond that unites a mother with her child does not make of them an isolated monad, but, just because it is common to other women and their children, it forms the fertile ground for close relationships to grow. Therefore, Paley’s children have another prerogative: they act as bridges among their mothers, they are the cement of many a longlife friendship.

The sense of community that animates these mothers has its deepest roots in the writer’s Jewish past. The peculiar history of this people, the consciousness of the isolation in the middle of other nations strengthened their internal bonds and stressed the importance of a communal life. Paley was fed on these customs and, as she declared

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15. Mickelson, *op.cit.*, p. 228.

in several interviews, she cleaved to these particular values of the ghetto milieu when, in her adult life, she continued to be part of a larger family: the group of women with whom she shared the daily experience of motherhood. "I still can't forget how much I learned about human life being not just with my own kids, but with other women and their children. I can never repay the debt that I have to the community of women with whom I raised my kids. I owe them a lot and they owe me."<sup>16</sup> And she endows her mothers with the same spirit. Delimited by their maternal chores within a precise role and a well-defined space, they form a world of their own, detached and different in traits and values from the rest of society where men, seen both as opponents and as objects of desire, make irregular sporadic raids. "'Women' said Grandma in appreciation, 'have been the pleasure and consolation of my entire life'" (LDM, p. 28). The simple words of the grandmother, the head of the matriarchal family in "A Woman Young and Old," sum up the essence of the subtle power which makes of them a privileged group: a rooted mutual attachment and sustainment.

In order to avoid over-sentimentalization and idealization of Paley's community of women, we must not forget that this special kinship springs out of the necessity to survive the series of painful events their lives are speckled of. Some critics stress only the latter aspect and, on account of their continual failures, do not hesitate to label these women losers. "These failures are Paley's people and the inhabitants of her stories, especially the mothers who sit lumpily on park benches... are going nowhere but home to kitchens of sour milk and roaches."<sup>17</sup> This is the conclusion we could inevitably draw only looking at the surface of these lives; on the other hand, we believe that what holds them "from sinking into the quicksand of their own misery"<sup>18</sup> is both the intratextual motif of the woman bond and the extratextual force of Grace Paley's art which, in telling these women's stories, "saves a few lives" (ECLM, p. 10).